



# Violence and Vice

## (Vengeance and Venom #3)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I came back different.

Not born, but made. Stronger. Sharper. Maybe I should be devastated by the choice that was made for me. Instead, I feel powerful. Capable. Invincible.

But nothing about this new life matters if I can't find Ares.

He's unraveling—slipping into darkness, losing time, and leaving blood in his wake. The man I love is becoming something monstrous, and no one knows how to stop it.

But I swear I will. Even if I have to tear apart everything else in my life to bring him back.

New enemies are closing in, and the streets I've always called home are starting to feel like a targeted minefield as history repeats itself. This world is so much bigger than I ever realized, its shadows darker, its origins more sinister. But it's the betrayals that cut the deepest—the ones I never saw coming.

In a blood-driven system of power, politics, and predators, love may not be enough to save us all.

**Total Pages (Source):** 40

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The hunger is instant. Ruthless. Overwhelming.

It crashes through me, a force of pure, primal need, obliterating all other thoughts, all other sensations. My throat is raw, aching, as if I've been screaming for hours. My stomach is a void, a black hole demanding to be filled.

My eyelids snap open.

The world is crystal clear, every detail so sharp it almost hurts. The air hums, vibrating against my skin, and I can hear someone breathing. No, two people. Both heartbeats are fast, scared.

I push up and?—

It's like my body isn't mine because everything feels... different.

My balance is perfect, my limbs strong, precise, but there's something foreign about them—like I haven't quite settled into my own skin.

What the hell? Why do I feel like this?

My eyes shift when I notice something red on the floor.

That's blood.

There's a smear of it leading up to this table. There are droplets of it leading back to the door. There's tons of it coating the table I'm lying on.

Fuck, it's everywhere.

The metallic scent coats the back of my throat. It's on my hands, drying in deep, crusted layers, seeping into my fingernails.

I glance down.

A handful of scattered, bloody teeth lie in the mess. My teeth, I realize, and a sick shudder rakes through me. My fingers brush over my lips before my tongue cautiously slides over the teeth currently inhabiting my mouth.

Fangs.

Holy shit, those are fangs pressing against my tongue.

The hunger tightens in my gut.

"Lana."

I forgot I wasn't alone. My eyes rip across the room, and there, I find Florence and Clementine.

Florence takes a step back, away from me, and that move alone sends the warning bells in my brain crazy. Clementine immediately places herself between me and her wife.

"Here, Lana," Florence says, her voice shaking, and I realize what that is in her eyes: fear.

And it's directed at me. I realize why when she holds something out.

The moment I see the familiar sight of a blood bag, my nostrils flare, and lava coats my throat.

I lunge forward, only it's more like I teleported across the space.

One second, I was standing beside a metal table in the center of the room, and the next, I'm across the space, ripping the blood bag from Florence's fingers.

Before I register anything that's happened, I bite into the plastic casing. Sharpened, elongated teeth sink into it, and a cool, thick liquid gushes into my mouth, staining my lips.

A moan works its way up my throat as I suck. I squeeze too hard, and the bag pops, most of the dark red liquid spilling over my chin and my hands, splashing on the floor.

An annoyed huff comes out of me, sounding feral.

"Lana," Florence says. My eyes rip up to her, and she's extending another bag to me, Clementine still placed strategically between us.

I snatch it in the blink of an eye and bite down on the plastic once more. I'm more careful this time, measuring my grip on it, pacing my strength.

I draw from the bag. I suck the cold, metallic liquid down my throat, and I feel every inch of my stomach when the liquid hits.

And the moment it does, something in my body...

quivers. I feel this surge. It's like adrenaline and peace and purpose course through my veins, pounding through my heart, filling every bit of my brain.

Another moan leaves my lips as I tilt my head backward, letting the incredible sensation wash over every inch of me.

I feel amazing.

I feel capable.

I feel fucking divine.

The emptied blood bag drops from my hand to the floor.

I take in a deep breath, sorting through all the different smells.

Fuck, it's like I'm on massive sensory overload.

I can't take everything in fast enough, yet I know it's only been...

fifty-one seconds since I opened my eyes.

But the smell... It's sterile, like medicine and bleach.

There's also the scent of animals—rats. I smell skin, and shampoo, and perfume.

I smell exhaust pumping through the ventilation system, though it's faint.

I smell... New York City. I smell... everything.

My eyes slide open, and it's like I've needed glasses my entire life but never knew it. Now I've suddenly got them, and I can see everything . Every speck of dust floating in the air, every fingerprint on the glass, every single scuff on the floor.

My vision is crystal clear, the entire world around me in incredible detail.

“How do you feel, Lana?”

My eyes rip over to the two women staring at me with wary anticipation. And where adrenaline was raging through my body just moments ago, now I feel equilibrium settling in my veins.

“What the hell happened to me?” The words come out a little raspy but with a profound clarity, with a new kind of... authority.

Clementine glances at Florence, her expression worried and a little doubtful.

“I’ll explain it all,” Florence says, and there’s a mix of fear and excited curiosity filling her eyes. “But first, I need to know. How are you feeling? Thirsty? Stable?”

I want to scoff at that last question, but considering everything that’s happened in the last few moments since I woke up, I guess it’s reasonable.

“I’m not thirsty,” I say, going with her very literal questions, taking things one at a time. “Which doesn’t seem right. I’ve seen Ares drink four of these things at a time. One and a half, and I’m good?”

A little smirk starts pulling at the corner of Florence’s mouth. “You’re not a Born, Lana.”

And it all starts hitting me like tidal waves.

“You turned me,” I say. Despite the rising torrent of emotion inside me, my voice is smooth, strong.

Florence doesn't blink. "You were going to die. I couldn't let that happen. The damage... what Giovanni did... the hospital wouldn't have been able to fix that. But regeneration is the basis of what I created."

The breath exhales out of me.

Fuck. I almost forgot. It almost seems like a distant memory, yet it's right there, playing out in my mind. Giovanni gutted me in retaliation for what Ares did to his son. He split me open like an animal. And Florence—Florence made a choice.

She saved me.

"So, what am I?" I ask, needing some kind of clarity. I need her to say it.

I can feel the evidence in every inch of this new body. But I need her to say it.

Florence's expression settles into something calm and confident, just like she always is. "You're the first of your kind, Lana. A Made vampire."

Maybe I should feel anger. Fear. Doubt.

I didn't make this choice. I never said yes. And now I'm something entirely different.

Instead, I feel... invincible.

I look down at my hands, flexing my fingers. I swear, there's power humming through my veins. My entire body feels as if it's buzzing with energy, like something coiled and ready to release.

A Made vampire.

Holy shit.

“How do you feel?” Florence asks again.

I glance around the lab like it holds the answer to her question. The damage is horrific. The metal table I was lying on is bent; there are blood-streaked surfaces, the remnants of my shattered body still littering the floor. I realize then that the lab smells like death. My own death.

But my eyes slide closed, and I focus my attention inward.

This feeling. Oh, this feeling...

“I feel...” I run my tongue over my teeth again. It’s so strange that even my teeth are different. My canines are sharper, more elongated. Not as dramatic as Ares’, but certainly not what they were before. And they aren’t retracting—yet another thing that is different from the Born.

A slow, wicked smile pulls at my lips. “Amazing.”

Clementine relaxes, just slightly, as if a little convinced that I’m not going to attack the love of her life. Her eyes still blaze brilliant yellow, though.

Florence lets out a breath. It isn’t quite relief, but not exactly fear, either.

Movement across the space catches my eye, and I note the massive mirror across from me. Neither Clementine nor Florence stops me as I cross to it.

The reflection that stares back is mine—but not.

I tilt my head, studying myself. My hair is the same. My skin has the same golden



undertone—but it's flawless, smooth. The little scar that used to be above my left eyebrow is gone. I glance down at my hands and realize every single scar that used to be there is gone as well.

Regeneration. The basis for Florence's madwoman concoction.

I look back up at my reflection. My lips are still full, but when I part them, sharper, more pointed canines greet me. My teeth generally look different, and I realize they literally are. I lost all of them in the transformation process. These new teeth are all sharper, more deadly.

But as I look over myself, I can't see any other new physical differences. I imagine tearing through evil flesh, picture drinking blood, anything. But my eyes don't flare red or yellow like the Born or the Bitten. They're still my own natural shade of mahogany.

"You're still you, Lana," Clementine says. There's such compassion in her voice. "Just... upgraded."

It almost feels ludicrous for her to say that when I feel like this. When I feel so raw and primal and perfect. But as I look into my eyes in the mirror, I search for her. Lana Kincade. Vengeance.

And there, I see her.

I am still in there.

I drag my gaze back to Florence. "Where is everyone? This place wasn't so dead when you gave me the tour."

"Thankfully, everyone had already gone home for the day," she answers, her gaze

darkening slightly. “I’ve given everyone a mandatory day off tomorrow, just to be safe.”

“Wait, it’s still Monday?” I gape, shaking my head as I blink hard. “How... how long was I out?”

Florence folds her arms and steps out from behind Clementine, apparently assured I’m not going to attack her and try to drain her of blood. “Two hours.”

I blink again. My body has completely rebuilt, like every inch of me has been burned away and reformed into something wildly superior. I was human. I died. And in two hours , I became something else entirely.

Two hours to rewrite my future.

Two hours to become... this.

“That sounds fucking impossible,” I say honestly.

That familiar smirk forms on Florence’s lips. “Told you I was making a better vampire. No more lifetime to grow a Born and a four damn day long Resurrection process. Two hours, Lana.”

The woman standing before me has always amazed me. That doesn’t change now. But I realize the power she holds, the wild things she’s capable of.

All she needed was two hours to make me into the first of my kind, a Made vampire.

“How in control do you feel?” Florence asks as she takes just one step toward me. There isn’t a trace of fear left in her eyes.

I straighten, standing a little taller. I scan myself internally, searching for any feral urges, any desire to grab her and drain her blood. There is no rage, no cloud of confusion. I feel grounded. Aware. Ready.

I lift my chin. “Completely.”

That smirk pulls on her mouth again. “Good.” She steps closer. “Now, we have to figure out how to save Ares from himself.”

My stomach knots as it all comes rushing back to me. Ares’ odd behavior. His losing periods of time. And the revelation that he’s been killing New York City’s vampires without even realizing what he’s doing.

Fuck.

That is the man I love. The man I love killed Felix. Beth. Mike. Tom. And Giovanni’s son—the man who has lost himself to some monster within his own mind.

I let out a slow breath.

My mind is clearer than it’s ever been. My body is a weapon now, far beyond what it’s ever been capable of. And if Ares needs saving...

I will tear the world apart to bring him back.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

From my pocket, my phone buzzes. It's so normal, so mundane, it feels impossible or ridiculous considering all that's happened. I pull it out, checking the notification.

It's the camera at the house. My heart jumps into my throat as I click on it.

He's a bit of a blur, but that's definitely Ares walking into the penthouse.

"Ares is at home," I say, immediately stepping toward the elevator. "Do you have anything that can maybe knock him out? If we can put him out, we can contain him until we can fix him."

My step stalls for just a moment. I realize that I do, in fact, have something that can knock a vampire out. The dart that Elle gave me when I went to visit her in Boston. It's tucked away in our penthouse.

"A heavy enough dose, and I think most sedatives can take even a vampire down," Florence says as she turns in the lab, pulling a fridge open. She pulls out a syringe. "Even if it's short term, it's better than nothing."

Problem there is that you have to get close enough to a vampire to stick them.

Elle was smart, making her version into a dart. I might not have a blowgun to fire it, but I can throw it well enough.

"Come on," I say as I press the button for the elevator. "We've got to get there before he can leave again."

“Lana, are you sure you feel okay?” Clementine asks warily.

She’s staring at me with doubtful eyes. “I was totally out of control for three solid weeks after I was Bitten and transformed. Every Born I’ve ever met was at least a week until they had a handle on themselves. It’s been twenty minutes, Lana.”

I stare into the eyes of the most compassionate and calm woman I’ve ever met. I see fear there. Alarm. Concern.

I take a moment and search within me. Do I feel out of control? Do I feel like I’ll be a danger to anyone outside?

The honest answer is no.

“I don’t know what it feels like to wake up as a Bitten,” I confess, holding her gaze. “I don’t know what it’s like to be a Born. But Clementine, I promise you, if I was doubtful about how I felt, I’d beg you to lock me up. I just feel like a damn superhero version of me. I feel amazing.”

Florence steps beside Clementine, sliding her hand into her wife’s. Clementine still looks incredibly worried as she looks into Florence’s eyes. But at the steady expression on Florence’s face, Clementine lets out a little breath.

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open. We step inside, and Florence swipes her badge for it to take us to the ground level.

Just then, my phone dings again. I’ve missed a call. I hold my phone to my ear to listen to the voicemail.

It’s Lazlo, our doorman, letting me know that Ares has just walked in. The man’s a saint. I didn’t give him any details about why, but I’d begged him to call me if he saw

Ares, and he has.

I slip my phone back into my pocket and anxiously, eagerly wait as the elevator ascends.

It feels like it takes three hours, but really, the journey takes about fifteen seconds.

Finally, the doors slide open, and the three of us step out into an empty lobby.

Considering the twilight lighting outside and the fact that the lobby is empty, everyone has gone home for the night.

Florence heads straight for the door, and we all step out.

Of course, there is a slick white SUV waiting at the curb.

I haven't met Florence's driver yet, but of course, she, too, has one.

"Lana, this is Kat, Kat, this is my sister-in-law, Lana," Florence gives a quick introduction as we slide into our seats and buckle up. Considering how indestructible I feel, though, a seatbelt seems laughable.

"Lana," Kat says with a nod just before she merges into the light traffic.

"Nice to meet you," I say distractedly.

Being in this small space, suddenly I hear heartbeats.

I feel surrounded by them. I heard them earlier, but now that we're in such a small space, they sound so damn loud.

Florence's sounds different than Clementine's.

It must be the difference between a Bitten and a human.

Kat's heart sounds like Florence's. Guess she's human.

It's fucking wild that I can hear that difference now.

"Any ideas how we fix Ares?" I ask as we roll through the city.

Florence rubs two fingers over her lips, thinking as she looks out the window. "It would help if we had any understanding of how this happened. You really don't have any ideas other than someone did this to him?"

I shake my head. "This happened before with the Steele family, and there were essentially no leads as to what caused their uncle to snap like that. I've gotten one confirmation that there are others out there who can do...

supernatural things. They have abilities.

So, yes, I believe someone did this to Ares. But I have no fucking clue who."

Florence worries her lower lip, mulling this over. "We're definitely getting outside of my realm of knowledge. I think we're going to have to bring in your other friends."

Meaning the Barons.

When we're a block and a half from the penthouse, I get another camera notification. Only when I open it up, I don't see anything. Just the empty hallway outside our home.

Fuck. What does that mean?

Finally, we roll up to the curb, and Kat stops right in front of the doors. All three of us pile out of the vehicle, and it's everything I can do not to sprint inside.

Just as we step into the elevator, I get yet another notification, but before I can even get it to open and load, the doors slide open on my floor.

We step out, and I find Sysco standing at my front door. He looks back at us as we step out of the elevator.

"Where the fuck have you been, Lana?" he demands, his tone angry and terrified at the same time. "I've called about fifty times, and texted you just as many times. You?—"

He stops short when I get within five feet of him. He stands a little straighter. His eyes narrow. I see his nostrils flare as he scents the air.

"What the fu?—"

"We have to see if Ares is still inside," I cut him off, dreading what I think might be coming. "I got a notification he went in just a little bit ago. If he is, we're going to try to knock him out. You willing to help us?"

I don't really ask it as a question. It's more of a desperate demand.

Sysco presses his lips into a thin line, then nods at the door.

I pull my keys from my pocket and unlock the door, stepping inside with wild nerves.

"Ares?" I call out as I step into the entryway. My newly enhanced ears strain,



listening for any sounds, any signs. I step into the living room, my eyes sweeping for tattooed flesh and dark, wicked eyes.

But I don't see him.

"Ares?" I call out again as I step into the hall. But as my hearing casts out, as it listens for any sounds, I get absolutely nothing back.

I dart for our bedroom. Nothing has been disturbed. But when I enter the closet, I smell him. Wealth and danger in the most intoxicating musk. And in the hamper, I see the pants he was wearing when I picked him up in Queens.

"He was here," I say as Sysco steps into the bathroom behind me. "Just a minute or two ago. We barely missed him."

"How can you tell that, Lana?" Sysco asks, and there's something almost accusatory in his tone.

I look over my shoulder at him, nervously trying to gauge what his reaction will be. His eyes are a little feral, a little wild, a little confused, a little scared.

"Lana," he says, almost a warning.

"Just let me check the cameras again," I say as I step around him and walk back out into the hall.

As I head for the dining room, where Florence and Clementine wait, I pull out my phone.

There are movement notifications from when Sysco showed up, just ten seconds before the three of us women arrived.

I click the one I got when we were still in the car.

There's a little blur of black clothing in the bottom right corner. I missed that before. But there's nothing more than that.

"He left in a fucking hurry," I say as I extend the video to Florence. She swears under her breath. Sysco steps up, and I show him the video. "This had to have been only two minutes before you got here."

"Shit, Lana," he says, shaking his head in worried confusion. "If I'd been looking up, I probably would have seen him leave the building. What the fuck is happening to our boy?"

Our boy.

Those words practically make me cry.

Sysco has Ares' back.

Will he still have mine when I give him the answers to the questions I haven't let him ask?

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But we need a plan for when we catch up to him."

"I think knocking him out is still a good option," Florence says as she pulls the syringe from her pocket.

"Agreed," I say, picturing Elle's dart that's hidden in the guest bedroom.

I don't know if I dare say anything about it.

Everything about Elle is fantastical, but her stories and secrets are also dangerous to her and her growing family.

Sometimes, secrets are not ours to tell.

“Ares obviously isn’t in control. And if he tries to fight us, he’s a capable man. It wouldn’t be easy.”

“We’ll need to contain him after,” I add. “This might not be a quick fix. It won’t be a quick fix since we don’t know what the hell happened to him. So, once we knock him out, we need to lock him up somewhere.”

“How do you lock up a Born?” Clementine asks doubtfully. “When they can break through chains, burst through walls, how do you contain that kind of vampire?”

“Harry,” Sysco says, his gaze growing heavier, darker. “He had some serious enemies a few years back. He needed information. And he needed somewhere to lock them up. Harry has a place in one of his properties, designed specifically for a Born.”

I raise an eyebrow at that. Every single vampire I’ve met has a fascinating backstory I know very little about.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

“You trust Harry with this, though?” I ask, knowing it’s a hard question. “I definitely like Harry enough, but I’ve only known him for a few months. What do you think?”

Sysco takes a moment to consider it, holding my gaze. But he nods. “Harry’s a good guy. And he likes Ares. He understands there’s nuances to life. We can trust him.”

“You’re sure?” Florence asks, concern etched into every inch of her expression. “This is my brother we’re talking about. I don’t take any uncertainty when it comes to my family.”

Sysco meets her gaze, his eyes narrowing for a moment. His eyes flick to me and then back to Florence. Oh shit. He’s piecing things together. “I’m sure,” he says with confidence.

“Can you call him when we’re done here?” I ask, relying on Sysco completely in this situation.

Sysco simply nods. “Are we going to talk about it now? Because I’d really like to know what the fuck happened to you, Lana. And is it because of Gio?”

I feel it like a change in air pressure—the whole atmosphere of the room changes in an instant.

Once more, I look back at Florence. How the hell do we proceed?

We protect those we love, and I don’t know what the consequences of outing Florence might be.

What she's doing is groundbreaking, yes.

But it's also wildly experimental. Who knows the long-term consequences.

And I don't know how the hell the rest of the Born are going to feel about it.

"Don't look at her, Lana," Sysco says, his tone warning. "Tell me why you smell different. Tell me why your heart is beating differently. Tell me why you're talking differently. Tell me why you look just a little bit different. Lana."

My eyes slide back to Sysco. His expression isn't vengeful. It isn't suspicious.

It's worried.

It's scared.

Sysco has my back. I just have to trust that.

"It is because of Gio," I say, honestly.

And, as I begin, Clementine steps closer to Florence, her stance shifting a little more protective.

It feels wrong that my hands aren't shaking a little, that they aren't sweaty.

I'm nervous to tell Sysco the truth. But my body functions completely differently now.

"I think you were trying to call me to warn me that Gio knew that Ares killed Luciano?"

“I did,” Sysco confirms. His name had displayed on my phone at the same moment Gio showed up at the Hunt house. “He was spouting some crazy shit. Said he was going to even things out.”

I swallow once and nod. “He tried. He showed up to Florence’s house, where I was, and he said ‘a love for a love.’ He gutted me. Sliced me from the throat down before plunging the blade into my gut.”

A curse slips from his lips as his eyes slide down to my stomach. But when he doesn’t see any kind of damage, they rise back up to meet mine with confusion.

“You know my family has had a pharmaceutical company for ages,” Florence says.

Her voice shakes a little, but she pushes authority into her tone.

She is ever the confident boss. “We conduct all kinds of research. When I was holding Lana in my arms, watching the life fade from her eyes, while I was trying to hold her intestines inside her body, I knew I could not let her die.”

The moment hangs suspended for a bit. Florence is extremely good with words and fantastic at painting a picture. I felt something bulging out of me. I knew I was losing a lot of blood. But the thought of my literal intestines falling out of me, of Florence trying to hold them in... it’s... visceral.

“What did you do, Florence?” Sysco says, his tone turning accusatory.

“Do you really want all the answers?” I ask him, taking a step in his direction.

“Sysco, I’m not going to let you touch Florence or Clementine.

What’s done is done, and I’m alive because of it.

If you hear the answer, you're accountable for the information.

You'll be sworn to secrecy. Do you really want all that, Sysco? "

My whole body is humming with the importance of my words. Sysco holds my gaze the entire time, never once looking away.

"I trust you, Lana," Sysco says, emphasizing that it's me he trusts. His eyes flick up to Florence for a moment, evaluating everything I just said. "If you're cool with all of this, I promise I will be, too. But don't leave me in the fucking dark. I want to know."

I hold his gaze again for a solid minute, evaluating the man. I'm not one who trusts easily or quickly. People are generally unreliable. People lie. People are selfish. People let you down.

I've only known Sysco for two months. But in that amount of time, he's always had my back. He's always had Ares' back.

So, I'm going to trust him.

I give Sysco the simplified version of the truth.

I tell him Florence took me to her lab. Florence explains what she's been studying; how she's been working to create a biological vampire.

She explains the ultimate regeneration process.

And I see it as Sysco starts piecing it all together. The fact that I'm now a vampire.

But an entirely new kind.

When we're finished, Sysco just stares me down. He chews the inside of his lip. He blinks three times. And then he looks over at Florence.

"You just went and made a whole new kind of vampire?" he asks, his tone a little deadpan.

"I did," Florence answers. Her tone tells me she's not backing down, and she won't be intimidated.

Sysco's eyes slide over to me. He looks me up and down, but there's nothing sexual about it. He's taking in all those little differences he noticed immediately. He's evaluating the reality that's right before his eyes.

"Always knew you were meant to be one of us," Sysco finally says. "Just never thought it was fucking possible."

A relieved laugh chuckles out of me. A smile cracks on Sysco's lips, and he steps forward, pulling me into a massive hug. "Ares is going to lose his damn mind when he finds out. For good and bad."

"Yeah," I say with a pained chuckle of my own. I hug Sysco tighter, so damn grateful for this wildcard man who has become one of my very best friends. In fact, all my best friends are in this room with me. "But we have to find him first."

Sysco releases me and backs away two steps. "With how stealth Ares is being, we're going to need some more help. We're going to need to give a heads-up to any other vampires we know to be on alert. We're going to have to tell Harry too, Lana. We need his help."

I nod and swallow nervously. "If you could tell immediately that something was different about me, he will be able to as well. But not Cliff. I don't trust that little



shit.”

“Me either,” Sysco admits, which makes me smile. “But Lana, before we meet with Harry, you need to think about what you want to happen with Gio.”

My brows furrow.

“He tried to gut you, Lana,” Sysco points out, arching a brow at me. “His intent was to kill you. If it wasn’t for this mad scientist here, we’d be planning your funeral. So, you need to think about what you want justice to look like.”

My eyes flick to Florence and Clementine, who have been mostly silent observers the last few minutes. “It’s fair,” Florence says, nodding. “But if you ask me, the answer is pretty obvious. The man was out of his fucking mind. He kicked in my front door. He did the deed and ran.”

I swallow and feel my brain spinning with the possibilities.

Giovanni Bosco is a family man. He’s been with his wife, Francesca, forever.

She now looks old enough to be his mother, and Gio isn’t young looking.

They have eight kids together. When Francesca couldn’t have more herself, they had a surrogate help them out.

Gio killed me because he was avenging his son, Luciano. Ares killed Luciano.

What’s fair in this situation? Everything was done out of love, followed by vengeance. I’m familiar with both emotions.

I don’t have an answer in this moment, so I just nod my head.

“I’m calling Harry,” Sysco says as he pulls out his phone. “You feel good enough to go to a meeting? No primal urges to drain half the population?”

I shake my head, once more doing an internal survey of how my body feels. “I feel just fine. Amazing, if I’m being honest.”

Sysco shakes his own head, laughing. “Wild. I tore through eight people in my first week after Resurrection. A couple of bags, and you’re satisfied?”

“She’s going to have to drink every day,” Florence points out the difference, my disadvantage that kind of cancels out the other option, in my opinion.

Sysco shrugs at that. “Better than killing people when you’re not meaning to. ‘K, I’m calling Harry.”

Sysco wanders down the hall as he presses the phone to his ear.

“Your friend is... surprising,” Clementine says, keeping her tone low. “I think most anyone else would be freaking the hell out hearing there’s a new kind of vampire.”

“He’s a good guy,” I answer, nodding. “He’s been a good friend to me, and to Ares. We can trust him.”

“I sure hope so,” Florence says, eying Sysco. I can tell she’s trying to overhear his conversation, but I’m sure she can’t. I, however, catch every word. Sysco is simply telling Harry that they need to meet, and it’s urgent.

Sysco hangs up just a few seconds later and walks back toward us. “Harry can meet in an hour. I vote we go look for Ares while we wait.”

“That sounds perfect,” I say with a nod. “Florence, Clementine, you’ve had a hellish

evening. I'll stick with Sysco. You guys should go home."

I see conflict in Florence's eyes. She wants to keep control over the situation. She always has her fingers on everything. But she's human. The only one in the room now. And she looks like she's barely staying on her feet.

"Fine," Florence concedes, even with her chin lifted. "I'm going home to take a shower and a nap. But then I'm headed out to look for Ares too."

I give a nod. "Thank you. Both of you. I appreciate everything you did for me."

"It wasn't even a thought," Florence says as she steps forward and wraps her arms around me in a hug. She presses a kiss to my temple. "Love you, Lana."

"Love you, too," I say, and it feels like my entire body warms with the words.

Clementine hugs me next, telling me to be careful and to take care. And I watch as they walk out the front door.

"So, that's Ares' sister," Sysco says as he keeps looking at the closed door. "I see it."

"Oh, shit, sorry," I stutter. I didn't even consider the fact that they'd never met.

"Yeah, Florence and her wife, Clementine."

"I got that much," Sysco says with a chuckle. "Now, you have got to shower and change before we leave. I'm not looking to get arrested as responsible for how you look."

For a moment, I look down at myself in confusion. Oh yeah. My shirt is sliced, and I'm covered in my own dried blood.

“Got it, give me ten minutes,” I say as I stride down the hall and shut the bedroom door behind me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

We don't find Ares in the grand total of thirty minutes we have to look for him.

Neither Sysco nor I are surprised.

When it's two minutes until the time we're supposed to meet Harry, Sysco and I ride the elevator to the thirtieth floor in one of the most beautiful buildings I've ever seen in the city.

Considering how much of Augustus's wealth Ares inherited, he is the richest of the Barons now.

But if I had to guess, I'd say Harry is probably the second richest. But he's also the least likely to flaunt it.

We step out of the elevator and are treated to a spectacular view over Manhattan.

A wide stretch of windows span out in front of us.

Before it is a smattering of comfortable chairs and end tables, the decor elegant and subtle.

To the left and right, there are doors to individual offices.

As we walk into the space, the door to the corner office opens, and Harry waves us to come in.

Here we go , I think to myself when Harry's eyes narrow as I approach, then they

drop down the length of me, studying, questioning.

“This floor is empty except you?” I ask, even though I hear no sounds of life. It just might take me a few hours to settle into trusting these new, enhanced senses.

“It is,” Harry confirms as the three of us step into the office. Harry closes the door. “Have a seat.”

I’ve never seen a more masculine and moody office in my life.

Everything is dark colors and deep wood.

All of the furniture is black with burgundy accents.

A professional decorator was obviously paid handsomely to coordinate the space to such perfection.

It’s almost obsessively clean. I don’t detect a speck of dust in the whole place.

It fits Harry Kim perfectly.

There is a large desk to the right, the city as a backdrop beyond it.

To the left, there is a larger conference table that can seat ten.

Before that is a cozy seating area with two black leather couches facing each other.

I head to one of the couches, and Sysco sits beside me.

Harry hardly takes his eyes off me as he sits across from us.

“I know we haven’t known each other that long, Harry,” I say, diving right into it. “But I’ve come to consider you a friend. I feel like you can be trusted. Am I right in that?”

Harry is ever the picture of cool and collected, and that doesn’t change.

He just blinks at me, composed. “I guess you, Ares, and Sysco are about as close as I have to friends. If you’re asking for trust...

” he hesitates, mulling over what he’s about to say.

“I can’t promise blanket statements for every single action.

But based on what I know of you, our past history, yes. You can trust me.”

I nod just once. I swallow, gather my courage, and begin. “This started with Ares,” I start, carefully wading into the deep end. “Something is wrong with him. And it led to... what you’re seeing.”

So, together, Sysco and I explain what has been happening with Ares.

His odd behavior. His disappearances. Harry listens, affirming that he has noticed the oddity of Ares’ action as well.

I share the details; what I’ve seen, considering Ares and I live together.

I tell Harry about the phone call I received when Ares needed me to pick him up in Queens and that he had no idea how he’d gotten there.

I see things clicking into place as we explain.

Sysco explains what happened after Ares left their meeting last night. How he tailed Ares, how Ares intentionally tried to lose him, like he was being sneaky.

And we finally reveal how Ares killed Luciano.

How Gio figured it out.

How he arrived at Hunt house. How he gutted me, intending for me to die.

And I confess Florence's decision. What she's been studying. How she used me as a guinea pig. And everything I've experienced in the last few hours since waking.

I explain that I'm the first Made vampire.

"And that brings us to tonight," I say in a big exhale, feeling mentally exhausted, doing this twice in just a few hours since it happened.

"Tonight?" Harry asks, the first true show of any kind of shock. "Lana, how long ago did this... transformation happen?"

My eyes flick up to the clock hanging on the wall. "Well, Gio first gutted me about six hours ago, but from when I woke up after the injection to now? It's been about... three hours."

"Holy shit," Harry says, and I've rarely heard the man curse. "You really are something different. You're so... calm. I think I killed three people the first twenty-four hours after I Resurrected."

"That's what I said," Sysco says, with that slightly manic smile of his. "Fucking crazy, isn't it?"



I turn my thoughts internally once more, evaluating if I feel the desire to tear into any necks.

Nope.

“I feel fantastic. No thirst. Just... great,” I say, getting a little tired of explaining this part.

“But Harry, I think you understand why we’re putting a lot of trust in you with all this information?

This is potentially dangerous. For extremely obvious reasons.

And not just dangerous for me or for Florence. ”

“For the whole damn world,” Harry finishes for me.

I nod. “This doesn’t have to be some paradigm shifting event.

It’s just me. Florence was desperate. But she’s not looking to do anything else with it, not any time in the near future.

It’s just me ,” I emphasize every word. “So, I hope we can just move past this part. Harry, we need your help with Ares.”

“I haven’t seen him or heard from him since our meeting,” Harry says. And I’m so damn relieved when he leans back on the couch and crosses one ankle over the opposite knee. It’s as if I can see his acceptance of all this crazy.

I nod. No contact is exactly what I expected.

“We’ll be searching for him,” Sysco explains. “When we find him, we’re going to knock him out, and then we’re going to need to contain him.”

“You want to use my vault,” Harry concludes immediately.

Sysco nods. “No safer place in the city to keep him until we can figure out how to fix him.”

“Of course we can use it,” Harry says, and I breathe a little breath of relief.

Not that I expected him to say no, but this all just could have gone so fucking sideways.

“But it doesn’t do us a whole lot of long term good if we can’t figure out what, or who, broke Ares. Have you run a timeline on it all yet?”

“Honestly, not really,” I reply. “It’s all been such a whirlwind, and we only realized there was actually something wrong less than twenty-four hours ago. I’ve been a little preoccupied in the meantime.”

Harry stands and crosses to what looks like a giant TV to me, but he presses a button, and it gets this weird, gray glow. He retrieves a marker from a drawer and writes **TIMELINE** across the top. It’s some kind of fancy, glowing whiteboard.

“Last night Ares was in Queens and took out Luciano,” Sysco begins. On the board, Harry writes the date, Queens, Luciano.

“The day before, I found a bloody shirt stuffed in the garbage, and Ares told me he couldn’t remember what he’d done that day,” I say, my stomach twisting with all of this damn uncertainty.

Harry notes it on the board. Victim?

“Wednesday was the day Ares ditched us at breakfast,” Sysco brings up. “Remember, he got some kind of notification, got all weird, and took off?”

“What happened the rest of that day?” Harry asks me as he makes notes.

“Nothing that I know for sure,” I say, running my brain through the rest of the day. “He was gone all day, but I didn’t hear of anything suspicious.”

“Cliff called us in for that meeting,” Sysco continues. “When he told us that Mike and Beth had been killed. That was Monday.”

Harry adds their names to the list, dating the event.

“I went to Ares’ office that day as well,” I add. “The secretary said something about their accountant not showing up and that it was weird. When I checked with James yesterday, he said Tom hadn’t been into work since that day.”

Sysco swears under his breath and shakes his head.

Harry adds Tom’s name to the list, as well as the day.

“Who else am I missing?” I say aloud, wracking my brain for more. Surely there must be more. Shit, I hope there isn’t more.

“Felix,” Harry says as he writes his former employee’s name down, adding yesterday’s date.

Damnit. I forgot about Felix.

“I can’t think of anyone else,” I say as I rub my eyes.

How can I be so tired and not at the same time?

“Was there anything else that happened prior to this?” I ask as I blink my eyes back open and scan the board.

“Anything that seemed suspicious? Any other deaths you heard about, or other people missing?”

“I couldn’t get ahold of Cliff this morning,” Harry says as he looks back at me and Sysco.

My stomach drops out. A curse slips over my lips.

“Fuck,” Sysco joins my sailor language expression hour. “Ares has been annoyed as hell at Cliff for a week. You think Ares got to him? A Baron?”

“Sounds like it doesn’t matter what someone’s title is,” Harry points out. “If he’s not in control, he’s not in control. He could just as easily come after me or you next, Sysco. Not sure about you, Lana, considering you’re a... Made.”

“Shit, I didn’t even think about that,” I say. “He isn’t just picking people he doesn’t like. You two are in as much danger as Cliff.”

“Hold on,” Sysco says as he pulls out his phone. Since he’s seated next to me, I see him pull up Cliff’s name. He hits call and holds it to his ear.

It doesn’t even ring. It immediately goes to his voicemail.

“Shit, Ares might have killed Cliff,” Sysco says with wide eyes. “We probably better

go check his house and his office.”

As in check for a body.

Fuck.

As much as no one seems to like Cliff, do any of us really think he needs to die?  
More than anything, I don't want to see more blood on Ares' hands.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

“What about Giovanni?” I ask, feeling something coil in my stomach. “Has anyone heard anything from him since he came after me?”

Sysco’s eyes darken as he looks at me. I can see in his expression the answer he’s settling on as to what Gio’s fate should be for coming after me. “No.”

“There hasn’t been a reason to talk to him,” Harry says, even as he pulls his phone out. He taps on the screen a few times and holds it to his ear. He waits a few moments.

“Gio,” Harry says, and my heart about jumps into my throat. “Just checking.”

Harry immediately hangs up. “He’s alive.”

“He won’t be the second Ares hears what he did to Lana,” Sysco points out.

I might not get the chance to decide what Gio’s fate should be. Ares will indeed go after Gio the moment he knows what Gio did to me.

“Do you know what you want to have happen with Gio?” Harry asks. His tone drops lower, more serious. He fixes me with those dark eyes, and I see an openness there. He, like Sysco, is leaving it up to me.

I shake my head. “I don’t know yet. I really haven’t had two seconds to actually think about it. It’s kind of complicated. But, Sysco, you’re right. When Ares finds out what he did...”

“So, the options are, do we give Giovanni the chance to leave town before Ares gets wind of it?” Harry says. He’s always so logical, so damn smart. “Or do we let nature run its course?”

I nod, agreeing with his presented options. “I need some time to think about it.”

Harry nods. “As little credit I give to the Barons, there is a little bit of a purpose. Big decisions come to a vote. Things that affect our city. If Cliff is dead and Giovanni’s fate uncertain, Ares is off the rails, that leaves just Sysco and myself.

When it comes to things like this, there can’t be just two. ”

“I vote Lana as a Baron,” Sysco immediately catches onto the direction Harry is headed. “Baroness? No, Baron.”

“I second the vote,” Harry says, a small smile pulling at his lips. “Congratulations, Lana. You’re equally one of us, now.”

Holy shit. My head spins. What the hell just happened?

Did... did Harry and Sysco really just make me a New York City Baron? Just like that?

“Are you serious?” I blink. “You want me to be a Baron? I... I don’t own a fucking thing in this city.”

“Not all about ownership, Lana,” Sysco says with a smile. “It’s about doing what’s best for New York. You’re fucking smart.”

“We don’t just want you to be a Baron,” Harry says evenly. “You are one now.”

Ares has always believed in me. Don't let that crown ever slip. You're Lana fucking Kincade. Don't ever let the world forget it. It's something he's said to me over and over. There isn't a chair at any table in this city you don't belong at. Ares has believed in me and my power from the get-go.

But these other powerful men, these billionaires, these immortals, they believe in me, too.

"Thank you." The words come out a little breathless and a little shocked and confused. "You two are crazy. But thank you for trusting me."

"Been too much of a sausage fest for too long anyway," Sysco smirks. "Welcome to the team."

I bow my head slightly as I feel my face flush, filled with an overwhelming amount of appreciation. "Thanks. Back to the timeline?"

"I can't think of anyone else who is dead or missing," Sysco says, immediately locking back into the task at hand.

Whiplash. I have fucking whiplash. When we started this discussion, I was just Lana, a newly Made vampire. Now, on the other side of it, I'm Lana, New York City Baron.

"I can't either," Harry says. "And I feel like Ares was perfectly normal at the meeting we had when he told us about Augustus. Which was..." he taps the marker against his palm while he thinks.

"Three weeks prior. I didn't see him in between that time.

So, it comes down to you, Lana. When did you notice him starting to act weird? "



I cross one leg over the other, leaning back into the couch, digging into my brain. Which is so different now. I feel like I have so much more space in my brain now. Everything feels sharper. What Florence has done to me is wild.

“Honestly, that day we found out about Mike and Beth, and even Tom, he seemed fine,” I conclude. “But we know that he’d killed them that day. So... I don’t know. I would almost say that whatever happened to him had to have gone down that day, or maybe the day before.”

“What else did Ares do that day, or who did he talk to or interact with?” Harry asks as he folds his arms over his chest.

I blush as I think back on what happened right before. “He was with me the night before. Earlier than that, he’d been at work. So, he would have seen any of his regular team he saw every day. But I know he was with me for at least part of the night.”

“You can spare us the details,” Harry says flatly.

I blush harder.

“He was gone in the morning, though. He’d left sometime before I even woke up.

Ares went to talk to my former best friend,” I say, shaking my head.

I’d forgotten about that until this moment.

And I realize then that Harry and Sysco know nothing about Ophelia.

So, I give them the rundown of how she was taken by Augustus, how I’d been looking for her.

How Ares found the record, and after he rescued me, Ares and I went looking for her.

I tell them about her absolute freakout when she realized Ares and I were together. How she'd rejected me. How our friendship is utterly ruined and over.

"Sounds like this woman really hates vampires," Sysco says as he raises an eyebrow.

"But she's just some woman," I say as I shake my head. "It doesn't even make sense that she could do this."

But something prickles at the back of my scalp. I shove it down, though. There's just no way. Ophelia is just a person. There's no way she could be responsible.

"You're sure?" Sysco asks, staring at me.

"It doesn't make any sense," I shake my head, dismissing it. "But I'll keep thinking about it, see if I can think who else Ares talked to that day."

Sysco doesn't seem convinced, but he looks away from me and back to the board.

"I can't think of anyone else Ares might have taken out.

Seems pretty clear it's only been a week since whatever it was happened to Ares.

I think, for now, we hire some people to look for him.

Probably not the smartest thing for me or you to go looking for him, Harry. "

"I know three PIs," Harry says, raising an eyebrow at Sysco's idea, like he's surprised with Sysco's solution but agrees with the plan. "And two bounty hunters. I'll give them a call."

“I only know one PI,” Sysco confirms. “But I know some... other people who tend to be good at tracking down individuals.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean? I’ve always kind of thought Sysco looked like he came from the wrong side of the tracks, but he kind of confirms it a little with that statement.

“Well, I don’t know anyone like that,” I say, rolling my eyes at these ridiculous billionaires and all the money they can throw around.

“But I don’t think I’m the kind of vampire Ares is trying to track down, so I’m going looking for him myself.

Harry, can you text me the address of the vault in case I find him? ”

Harry nods, his arms still crossed over his chest.

“Anything else?” I ask, feeling myself reaching my mental limit with all of this. Even though there’s so much more room in my brain right now, I feel... burned out. Overdone. I need two seconds to breathe by myself.

“Not sure there’s much more we can do at the moment,” Harry concludes. “We just need to find Ares. And keep thinking of how this might have happened to him.”

“I will,” I nod affirmatively. I rise from the couch and take three steps toward the elevator. “Thank you, both of you, for everything you’re doing. Thank you for trusting me, for your understanding.”

“We got you, Lana,” Sysco says with a small smile. “Glad to have you officially on the team.”

“It just makes sense, Lana,” Harry adds, and nothing in his expression says he’s lying.

I give them one nod and step into the elevator.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The penthouse is eerily silent when I step inside. The space feels familiar but distant, like stepping into a memory instead of reality. Nothing has changed—but I have.

I fucking hate that I know I'm by myself. That Ares isn't here. That once again, I'm on my own. I push the thoughts aside. If I don't, I just might start drowning.

Now that I'm alone, now that the damn world has paused for two seconds, I feel... me.

And everything feels so damn different.

I walk slowly through the living room, dragging my fingers along the leather of the couch, the polished edge of the kitchen counter.

Everything feels changed. More tangible.

I can hear the faint hum of the refrigerator, the shift of air in the vents, the distant buzz of traffic from below.

My senses stretch out, reaching further than they ever have before, like I can feel the heartbeat of the entire city.

I make my way to the bedroom, my movements smooth, effortless. Too easy. There's no sluggishness, no tension, just raw energy coiled beneath my skin, waiting to be unleashed. My body feels primed, honed to perfection.

And yet, it still doesn't feel real.

I step into the bathroom and, standing in front of the mirror, I take myself in.

I don't look that different at first glance.

My reflection stares back at me with the same sharp eyes, the same dark hair tumbling around my shoulders.

But then I look closer. My skin is flawless , every scar, every mark I've carried for years wiped away like they never existed.

I run my fingers over my forearm, expecting the familiar ridge of an old accident.

Nothing. Just smooth, untouched flesh. I'm only 24, so I don't really have any wrinkles yet, but my entire face is so damn smooth I almost look like glass.

My muscles are subtly more defined, not bulky, but sculpted like my body has been streamlined for power. I've always been fit, but this is something... more.

And then, there are my teeth.

My tongue flicks over the points of my fangs. Somehow, they fit perfectly in my mouth, no aching, no unnatural shift when I bite down. They belong.

I exhale sharply, gripping the edge of the vanity. And even though I'm still looking at myself, I feel like my brain is slowly detaching. Dissociating. Because my eyes trail downward to my stomach. And I remember exactly what happened.

Giovanni tried to kill me. He sliced me open—left me dying. I should be dead. My own insides had been spilling out of me, and there was no coming back from that. No hospital, no surgeon, nothing could have saved me.

Except Florence.

Florence made a decision that no one else could. She took the risk. She turned me into something entirely new. The first of my kind. An experiment.

I squeeze my eyes shut, the weight of it pressing down.

Fuck. How do I even feel about this? Everything hasn't stopped moving since I opened my eyes, and I haven't really had a chance to catch my breath and feel my way through it.

I'm not human anymore. I'm... I'm the only one of my kind. I was the guinea pig. Things could have gone so damn wrong, but Florence had to just act.

My eyes open, and I stare back at myself.

I'm a total unknown. Am I truly immortal like Florence believes?

Florence seems to think I could get staked and still survive; the regeneration of her science is that strong.

But what if? I feel like a giant what if right now.

What if I change more than Florence expected?

What if my body keeps adapting? What if there are more side effects she hasn't discovered yet?

I blink at myself in the mirror and take in a steady breath.

It doesn't matter. What's done is done.

And I'm alive.

And more than that—if Florence is correct, I now have something I didn't before: time.

Ever since I realized that I love Ares, I feared the one thing I could never change. Ares and I were never going to have forever. I was mortal, and he wasn't. Even if we had a lifetime together, I know it with every damn bone in my body—it would never be enough.

The way I love Ares, the way he's come to inhabit every inch of my soul, the way he's rearranged my DNA with my need for him? My mortal days would never be enough, even if I lived to be a hundred years old.

But all that's changed.

If Florence is right, now I have forever.

I won't waste a second of it.

I'm going to find Ares, and I'm going to fix him.

A knock at the door breaks my thoughts. On instant alert, I cross the penthouse with quick strides, ready to fight or contain, depending on who it is.

I pull the door open, and about the last person I expect to see is Florence.

"Hi," she says as she pushes her way into the apartment, ever confident, ever bossy.

She's carrying a cooler, her expression carefully neutral, but I can see the tension in her shoulders. She sets the cooler down on the kitchen counter, and for a moment,



neither of us speak.

“I gave the other scientists in the lab the day off,” she says finally, her eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“I was worried at least one of them would show up anyway. We’re all a bunch of workaholics.

Thankfully, they stayed away.” There’s something a little uneasy in her eyes, and that’s a rare sight.

“It just feels... wrong, off, to have anyone else in that space after everything that happened. But they’ll never know. ”

“Good,” I say simply. I can only imagine the implications if anyone found out what she’d done. I’m no scientist, but I imagine doing something as reckless as what Florence did wouldn’t be received well.

Florence watches me carefully. “How do you feel?”

I straighten, testing the weight of my own body, the hunger in my belly. “In control.”

She exhales, nodding. “Good. Because now, we have to figure out how to save Ares. I can’t stay. I’m meeting with a private investigator. I thought they could help find my brother.”

I smirk at that. “Between you, Sysco, and Harry, we’ll have half the city looking for Ares. They’re talking to their own PIs as well. Harry even has two bounty hunters lined up.”

“Good,” Florence says. “We’re going to need all the help we can get.” She steps for

the door, hesitating just before she walks out. “I’m sorry, Lana. I am. That I made such a monumental decision for you. But I’d do it again. The Hunts do anything for the people they love.”

Before I can respond, she slips out the door, closing it with a quiet click.

Florence rarely makes apologies. She rarely makes mistakes.

And I don’t know that either of us truly views her decision as a mistake.

Not when the other option was death.

But once I’m alone again, something within me stirs.

The hunger starts as a slow pulse in my gut. Subtle, creeping, but insistent. My throat feels dry, my mouth tingling with the need for something more. It’s been hours since my last taste, and my body knows it.

The cooler sitting on the counter is like a beacon. My eyes slide to it, and somehow, I just know exactly what’s inside it.

With steady but greedy hands, I swing open the lid, and exactly as I knew there would be, there are a dozen bags of donated blood inside.

I grab one of them, barely hesitating before I rip it open.

The second the blood touches my tongue, relief crashes through me.

The liquid spreads down my throat, filling my veins, settling the restless energy vibrating in my limbs.

It's like pouring gasoline on a dying flame—it roars back to life, strong and steady.

Holy shit. It's amazing how this feels. How... perfect I feel. Like nothing could ever go wrong, like nothing could ever touch me. I feel like a fucking demi-god.

“But this is every day now,” I say to myself as I look at the empty bag.

Every. Damn. Day. I will need to drain one of these bags.

And it hits me like a bolt of lightning.

Or I could feed live.

There's a reason for these sharpened teeth. Just like I've seen Augustus do, just like Lawrence did to me, I could sink these fangs into someone's neck and draw out their blood.

Holy fucking shit.

The reality of it hits me in the chest.

I am a vampire.

A vampire.

Me.

Lana Kincade, soon to be Lana Hunt, is a vampire.

If I were the me of two days ago, I would feel a spiral coming on. Humans can only take in so much at once before there starts to be adverse side effects.

But I'm not human anymore.

Still, I don't want to dwell on something that's already said and done.

So, my eyes turn to the windows that look out at New York.

Somewhere out there, Ares is lost. Alone.

Hunting.

I set my jaw.

I'm coming for him.

And I won't stop until I find him.

I retrieve Elle's vampire toxin dart she gave me. I hid it in the guest bedroom, and it's still there when I dig it out. I tuck it into my pocket, making sure it can't fall out.

It's fucking ridiculous, but as I walk to the door of the balcony, I feel this insane confidence. I feel a sense of urgency. And why bother with the elevator, the lobby, when I'm ready to go right now?

I climb onto the ledge, and I leap from the balcony.

A wicked smile pulls at my lips as I land effortlessly on the sidewalk. I stand straight, assessing my body, checking for breaks, for fractures, hell, for bruises. But there's nothing. I feel as fantastic as ever.

It's a good thing it's only an hour until dawn, the time when the city is the quietest. As I look up and down the street, I don't see anyone who might have witnessed me

doing something that should be impossible.

I step forward and blend into the dark.

The city feels different now.

The cool dawn air slides over my skin, crisp and refreshing, but it doesn't sink into my bones the way it used to.

I walk through the brightening streets of Manhattan, moving effortlessly, as if my body was built for this—because it was .

I have never felt safer in my own skin. My movements are fluid, every step precise, like I've always known exactly how to move.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I pass through the quieter edges of the city, where the river laps against stone embankments, the rising sun casting long shadows across the wet pavement.

As the day breaks, I direction for buildings I know Ares owns.

I do believe he was still working over the last week, taking care of everything Augustus left on his shoulders.

Maybe there is still some logic in him and he will show up to work.

But as I ask at one building and then another, no one has seen Ares. I head to his office, but no one there has seen him either.

So, I keep looking.

Noon comes and goes. I don't find Ares. The hour creeps past dinner time, and I still find no signs of him.

He's not answering his phone, it goes straight to voicemail, obviously dead.

Evening sets on the city, and still, I can't fucking find Ares.

Darkness descends on Manhattan, but I continue my search.

The South Street Seaport is mostly deserted this time of night. The historic buildings, once lively, now stand as dark silhouettes against the skyline. It feels like the perfect place to hunt for a ghost.

Ares is looking for other vampires to kill. It's the only conclusion I can come to. Felix. Beth. Mike. Luciano. All vampires. All people that Ares has ripped apart, even if he has no idea he did it.

So, where else might he be looking for other vampires?

The only other vampires I know are Sysco and Harry, and they're well aware of the danger they're in. Where else is Ares going to look for other vampires?

Dammit. And James, Ares' assistant. I need to warn him to stay far, far away from Ares.

And Clementine. But I trust Florence will keep her safe at all costs.

But as I search for Ares, as I comb through every street I can think of, something prickles along the back of my neck.

I feel eyes on me in the dark.

I hear the sounds of breathing, faint, but there.

I realize I'm not alone.

A prickle of awareness climbs up my spine, a whisper of instinct. Someone is watching me.

I stop in my tracks. The air around me stills. I listen.

I turn my head slightly. "You can come out," I call out, even as every muscle in my body tenses, ready for anything.

There's silence for five whole seconds. Then, from the shadows, a figure steps into the dim light.

Giovanni.

His dark eyes rage with conflicting emotions—confusion, paired with disdain. He studies me, his expression twisting.

He knows what he did to me. He knows I should be dead.

"Impossible," he breathes, his gaze dragging over my body. Sizing me up. Looking for proof that I'm real.

I tilt my head. "Nice to see you too, Gio."

His lips curl back, a flash of sharp teeth. "No. It doesn't... There's no possible way. I gutted you." His voice is raw with disbelief, but fury swells beneath it like a tide ready to break.

Fuck. Oh, fuck. This is about to get bad very quickly. And this isn't just going to be some little scuffle, either.

My stomach tightens. I don't flinch, but the memory flashes bright and brutal—Gio's blade slicing through me, the sickening heat of my own blood pouring onto the floor.

Gio's gaze narrows, suspicion darkening his features. "What deal with the devil have you made? What demon stands in front of me now?"

"Considering what we are, I wouldn't have pegged you for the type to believe in the devil or demons," I say. And I really shouldn't bait the man, but suddenly, I'm feeling a little salty. Guess that's what happens when the man who tried to kill you



comes back with an attitude.

My words leave him looking more confused than ever when I say the word we .

But the look on his face shifts, the darkness in his eyes doubling.

He takes another step closer. "One of my people said they saw you today," he growls, stepping even closer.

"I told them that was impossible. I guess now I get to kill you twice.

I think it fair for the brutality Ares used on my Luciano. "

The air between us turns razor-sharp, and he moves, his eyes flashing brilliant red.

Fuck, vampires are fast. Gio lunges quicker than a striking snake. But now, because of his actions, I see every movement, I calculate every step he takes .

I can feel it humming beneath my skin. My new body is electric. Precision-forged.

I duck low under the arc of his swing, pivot off my back foot, and slam my elbow into his ribs. The blow lands clean—I feel the impact in my forearm—but it's like hitting stone. He barely flinches.

He snarls and backhands me.

I twist with it, absorb the momentum, let it carry me into a shoulder roll. My boots scrape the damp pavement. I come up crouched and launch forward, feinting a jab before driving my knee up into his gut.

This time, he grunts.

“What the hell are you?” he growls, voice breathy.

I grin. “Stronger than I used to be.”

He lunges, grabbing me by the throat. I drive both thumbs into the soft tissue just under his jaw, and when his grip on me loosens, I wrench free. I twist, catch his arm, and throw him over my hip in a clean judo toss. He crashes to the pavement but rolls with it, back on his feet almost instantly.

Then he grabs something from the ground.

A rusted length of rebar. Bent at one end. Jagged.

“Seriously?” I breathe.

He swings it with both hands, and I’m too close — it slashes across my side, tearing through my shirt, biting deep.

I stagger back. Pain flares hot and sharp. I feel the metal dig into my ribs, feel it tear the muscle, even graze bone.

But almost as soon as I can even register the pain, it’s gone.

I blink down and watch in morbid fascination as the wound begins to knit itself shut right before my eyes. Muscle fiber coils back into place. Skin stretches, seals. There’s not even time for blood to spill.

Oh, hell yeah.

Giovanni sees the miracle as clearly as I do. His eyes widen. “What the hell?”

I shrug my shoulders back, squaring off with him. “Gio, you have to stop and talk to me. What Ares did... he had no control. He isn’t himself right now.”

“I saw the video footage with my own two eyes! I watched Ares do it!” Gio bellows as he lunges forward again.

Rage distorts his face. He roars and lunges again, his strikes wilder now, desperation in every movement. I evade, ducking under his attacks, moving like I was born for this.

But he’s relentless.

A fist connects with my jaw. My head snaps sideways, pain ricocheting through my skull. He’s stronger than I thought—his hits carry decades of experience. I stagger back, barely dodging his next strike.

“Gio, please, stop this!” I yell, feeling desperate. I know I can protect myself. I know he’s going to have a very, very difficult time killing me. But fuck, I don’t want us to beat each other to a bloody pulp. I need to get him to listen to me.

But he simply snarls and spins to face me again.

I lunge again. Low. Fast. I drop into a sweep and take his legs out from under him. He crashes hard, and I don’t give him a chance to recover. I’m on him in a blink, straddling his torso, fists driving down into his face.

Left. Right. Right again.

I feel cartilage crunch beneath my knuckles.

He growls, shoves up with both arms, tries to throw me off. I roll to the side and

come back with a hook that sends him into the alley wall.

Brick shatters behind him.

He's furious. Feral.

He lunges, claws out, but I drop under him, grab the back of his knee, and slam my palm up into his sternum as I rise. The force lifts him off the ground, just a few inches, but enough to stagger him.

Gio's foot catches the back of mine, pulling my leg out from under me. He takes his moment and, with a snarl, he plows into me, sending me skidding across the pavement on my ass.

My hand whips out to stop the impact. Something beneath it rolls, and my fingers close around it. The very same rebar Gio sliced me with.

And, as we skid to a stop, as Gio's fangs extend and he aims for my neck with a feral snarl, I react on instinct.

With deadly force, I shove that rebar deep into Gio's chest.

There is a sickening snap. And then the sound of something wet and soft being pierced.

Giovanni's body goes rigid. His dark eyes widen, something like disbelief flickering in them. At the same time, both our eyes slide down to the metal rod sticking out from his chest—right where his heart is.

I scoot back from beneath him as he kneels, looking down at the damage.

Giovanni tries to suck in a gasp, but the sound is wet and fractured. He blinks once, the look on his face stunned.

And then his body loses strength, and Gio slumps forward, falling flat on his face. The rebar pierces through his back as his own bodyweight drives it deeper.

His skin turns ashen. His chest does not rise and fall with breath.

Dead. Giovanni is dead.

Silence crashes down around me.

My hands are still curled into claws, shaking. My breath comes in sharp bursts. The scent of blood clings to the air. I stare down at his lifeless body, at the way the fight drained from his limbs in an instant.

I killed him.

I killed him.

Shit.

Oh, shit.

A wave of nausea surges up my throat. My pulse races.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't trying to kill this man. I just wanted him to stop. I just needed this to stop.

I stumble back, my mind spinning. Giovanni was powerful. Respected. An important man. A Baron.

And I just ended him.

My body still thrums with the high of the fight, the overwhelming power humming beneath my skin. But inside, something tightens. A pit forms in my stomach, something between horror and inevitability.

I'd never killed anyone as a human. But in just over twenty-four hours of being a vampire, I've ended a life.

Shit.

Shit.

Something stings the backs of my eyes.

Sirens sound in the distance, instantly ripping my eyes to scan the surrounding area. It's doubtful they're for me; there's no one around to witness what I've just done, and there are sirens going off all the time in the city.

Still, I need to move.

But I can't just leave him.

Panic claws at the edges of my mind, but I force it down. If the police find Giovanni, if they identify him, this becomes an investigation. The last thing we need is for any of us Barons to get tied to this death in any way.

My gaze snaps to the Hudson River, dark and endless beyond the South Street Seaport. No. That's too final. His wife— his widow —his other children, they're all going to want to bury him.

I inhale sharply, my senses hyper-attuned to everything around me—the sharp bite of blood, the weight of Giovanni’s lifeless body, the city pressing in.

I have to move fast .

I crouch and lift him effortlessly, my new strength making it easy despite the literal dead weight.

The sight of his slack face sends a fresh wave of nausea through me, but I push it down.

I carry him into the shadows, sticking to the darkest alleys, weaving through back streets until I reach a small, secluded parking garage.

No cameras. No foot traffic. I set his body down carefully behind a row of construction equipment that is so filthy and dusty, I would guess it’s been abandoned.

I kneel beside him, patting down his pockets with steady hands until I find his phone. My stomach twists as I hold the device up to his face, unlocking it with his own lifeless features.

The screen opens. It’s easy enough to navigate to his contacts. There, at the top of his favorites list, is Francesca’s name.

I tap her contact and type.

Your husband is at this location.

I send a pin along with the message.

I feel like I should say more. Give an apology, explain. But inciting Francesca to

retaliation isn't a good idea. Giving her any kind of indication as to who did this and why doesn't do anyone any true good.

The moment it sends, reading delivered, I drop the phone onto his chest. I straighten, pulling my own phone out from my pocket. I stride off into the shadows as I start a group text to Sysco and Harry.

I swear I tried to stop it.

Gio came after me again. We fought, and he wouldn't fucking listen to me. I was defending myself.

My hands feel like they should be shaking as I type out the multiple messages, but my new Made form holds me steady.

Gio is dead.

I took care of the body.

Fuck. I can't believe I just typed out those words.

Ten seconds later, Sysco simply replies with expletives, following it with another text asking if I'm okay.

Harry's response is simple.

I trust you did what you had to do.

My life is so off the rails right now.

I just confessed to killing a man, and these two incredibly powerful, incredibly



important men have simply given me their support.

Because I'm one of them.

What fucking alternate universe am I living in?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I spend the entire night looking for Ares.

I swear, I have to walk thirty miles, maybe more, in the twenty-four hours I search.

I try calling him fifty times. It goes straight to voicemail every single time.

I text him about a hundred times, but none of them say delivered.

It's obvious Ares' phone is dead. How far gone is he now?

Over the last week, he's definitely acted weird.

There's been the times he can't remember what he did.

But he's always had moments of himself. He's come home.

He's spent time with me. He's still been him.

But it's been thirty-something hours since I last saw him, and Ares hasn't been logical enough to plug in his phone?

He hasn't tried to contact me or anyone else?

Just how bad is it now?

Damn. I don't want to know, but I have to.

The Wall Street district, mid-town, Harlem.

I swear, I search the entirety of Manhattan.

But he could be anywhere now. He has his motorcycle.

In the few minutes he went back to the penthouse, he probably grabbed his wallet, so he has money now.

I should have thought to check for that while I was at home.

What other vampires does Ares know?

Is Harry next? Sysco?

The sun has just broken over the horizon, and I should be absolutely exhausted, but I'm not.

I've been darting around this city literally for twenty-four hours.

My legs should be on the verge of collapse.

But I feel just as fine as when I left the penthouse.

But the sun is coming up, and the streets are getting busier and busier.

There's a slight burn in my throat now, though. It's been just over twenty-four hours since I last drank. I need to go home soon, because for the very first time, as I look around at the people bustling around me, they smell good.

Really, really fucking good.

I notice pulses. In necks, at wrists. I can hear their hearts beating.

I turn a corner, aiming myself back for the penthouse. But as I walk down the street, it feels familiar. I realize why when I look up and see Ophelia's building just down the block.

My chest tightens as I remember the last time I was in that building. How thoroughly she rejected me. How she all but spat in my face. It didn't matter how I tried to reason with her. It didn't matter how I explained.

She sat in that beautiful apartment, and she judged me. Judged Ares. Someone she wouldn't even give a chance.

My feet suddenly falter. I come to a stop right across the street from her building.

Ophelia's beautiful apartment.

I stare at the building, scraping my eyes over it. It's damn near brand new. I wouldn't call it upscale, but it's definitely nicer than most of the itty-bitty shitholes on this island.

Ophelia never should have been able to afford it.

But she'd somehow sweet talked the landlord into giving her a killer deal.

Ophelia walked into the top law firm a month ago and got a job she was under-qualified for, when they weren't even hiring.

My breath catches in my throat.

Something sharp bites at the backs of my eyes.

Ophelia has always had a way with words. She so often has been able to get what she wants. Not always. But often.

Fuck.

Ares went to see Ophelia the morning everything went bad.

Ares told me that Ophelia had tried to talk him into leaving me. He'd said hell no.

She couldn't talk him into that.

But what did she talk him into doing after, and how did she make him forget it?

I stalk across the street, barely dodging the traffic.

Two different cars honk at me, but I don't even look in their direction.

My eyes stay fixed on the building ahead of me.

My fingers clasp around the door, yanking it open.

I crack the button to call the elevator as I slam it.

Heat is practically radiating off me as I rise to the nineteenth floor.

I know she's home. As I step in front of her door, I can hear her moving inside. I smell her perfume before I even touch the door handle—a sharp, floral scent that always seemed too sweet for who she really is.

And I don't bother knocking. I twist the doorknob, easily breaking it when it's locked, and shove it open.

Ophelia yelps from her kitchen, where she's seated at the bar, eating breakfast. She backs away in a hurry, tipping the barstool over.

"Lana?" she barks in fear and annoyance. "What the hell?"

"What the hell indeed," I snarl as I step inside. I shove the door closed behind me and stalk across the space, stopping just three feet away. "Did you know you can do this? That you could twist and manipulate him?"

But she doesn't answer immediately. When I zero in on her, her eyes are searching me in confusion.

She sees it.

She doesn't know what she's seeing, but she knows something is wrong. Her eyes flicker over me, trying to pinpoint what's changed. I watch the way her breath hitches, the way her pulse jumps at her throat. I don't speak. I don't have to.

I close the door behind me.

"Did you always know?" I demand again, my voice low, measured.

Her eyes don't meet mine, they continue studying me. "Know what?"

I take a slow step forward. "That you can influence people. That you can make them do things."

A beat of silence hits as heavy as an anvil. She blinks, too fast, and finally, her eyes meet mine. "What are you even talking about?"

I can hear her heart hammering. I can smell the adrenaline rolling off her in waves.

My anger stirs deep in my chest, curling like a living thing.

"Don't play dumb with me, Ophelia," I say. "You've always had a way of getting what you want, haven't you? The job, the apartment, the favors—people just listen to you, don't they?"

She swallows, the look in her eyes shifting to steel. "That's just called being persuasive."

"No, it's not," I say, voice sharp. "Ares hasn't been acting like himself for a week. We don't know what he's been doing. Do you? "

Her face drains of color.

She knows.

Her fingers twitch at her sides. I take another step forward, slow and deliberate. She instinctively takes one back.

"Ares came home with blood on his hands." My voice is quiet, but each word is razor-sharp. "We've been getting reports. Vampires in this city—dead. Did you make him do it, Ophelia?" The last few words come out as an accusatory whisper.

Her mouth opens, then snaps shut.

The silence is deafening.

My nails bite into my palms. The anger is rising now, swelling in my chest, pushing at the edges of my control. A new kind of anger—deep, instinctual, edged with hunger. It's not just fury. It's predatory.

She sees it. She feels it.

And something new stirs inside of me. My nostrils flare as her scent hits me. Not the scent of her perfume. Not her laundry detergent. Not her shampoo.

Fuck. I smell her blood .

And it smells divine.

My mouth waters.

My stomach clenches.

I can see her pulse in her neck, the rapid beating of her heart as it pushes blood throughout her body.

Shit.

No, Lana.

I blink, tossing the unexpected instinct out of my head.

No.

Ophelia shakes her head rapidly, oblivious to the moment that just happened. She steps back until she nearly trips over the edge of the coffee table. "Lana, they shouldn't even exist. What they did to me, to you?—"

"What Augustus did to you," I cut her off coldly. "What one man did to you."

"And what do you think the others would do?" she says coldly as she backs right into



the couch. "I had to protect you too, Lana, even if it's from yourself, because you're too close to it all."

"What you did is worse than anything any of the others ever did. People are dead now, Ophelia." My words fall like anvils from the sky, their impact crushing to both of us.

"And why were you so angry about what Augustus did to you? Because he took away your free will. But look what you've done now.

"I shake my head in disgust. "You used Ares. You took away his free will. Because he never, ever would have done this on his own. So, how are you any better than Augustus?"

Her mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

I watch as the weight of my words settles on her shoulders. The shock, the slow unraveling of the truth, the way she's starting to understand.

"Ares will have to live with this forever," I say, my voice like steel. "That's on you , Ophelia."

She trembles, just slightly, but I see it. Her fingers tighten into fists. She's trying to hold onto her justification, trying to grasp at some sliver of self-righteousness. But I see the cracks forming.

I take one last step toward her. She has nowhere left to run.

"Did you always know?" I demand. "That you could do this?"

Her lips part. A heartbeat passes.

Then she exhales, barely a whisper. "I've never really known . It doesn't always work. Just... sometimes people listen to me."

Fuck.

Fuck.

"How long?" I ask, my words so quiet, they sound absolutely deadly.

She quivers as she looks back at me. The terror in her eyes makes her look manic. "It started when I was sixteen."

My stomach twists. And I remember the last time I was in this apartment. Ophelia's tone suddenly changed. She'd grabbed me, and she'd begged me to leave Ares, to forget about him. I hadn't even considered it for a second.

Ophelia had tried to influence me. But it didn't work.

"How often do you do it?" I ask, low and dangerous.

She doesn't answer.

And that tells me everything I need to know.

I take a slow breath. My hands unclench. The room is thick with silence, the air charged with something electric and raw. Ophelia stands before me, shoulders hunched, face pale, her whole world unraveling into blood-stained chaos.

Good.

She should feel this. She should live with it.

“Who helped you?” I ask, my words ice cold.

Ophelia’s face turns white. I smell the sweat prickling her skin. “How do you...”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

My expression sours. “Because something like this has happened before in this city, before—right around the same time you were born. And I didn’t connect the dots before, but you told me that not everyone in this city is so enamored with the vampires. Who helped you, Ophelia?”

Something hardens in her expression. I see something different there. Defensiveness. Protection. She shakes her head. “You’ll never get to her. It would literally be impossible.”

“Ophelia!” I bark, feeling my veins flare hot.

That hunger in my blood grows a little more insistent.

“Don’t you fucking get it?! This mess you’ve made, there isn’t any coming back from it.

There is no hiding from it. There is no manipulating it.

Do you not understand that the death toll is rising?

Do you understand that whoever you’re protecting is responsible for the death of at least five vampires?

That now you have five deaths on your hands? ”

“Lana,” Ophelia says my name, a terrified, overwhelmed whisper.

My nostrils flare as I smell her again. The copper racing through her veins. The rush of her blood through her body. My mouth salivates.

Fuck.

This is what Clementine was so worried about. What Sysco and Harry were so impressed over. I feel it sparking. The hunger. The craving.

I need to get out of here, soon. I need to get something to drink before I do something I can't come back from.

But I don't have time to drink.

Now, I need to fucking fix this.

"You're going to fix Ares," I say, my voice quaking with rage. "I am going to find him, and you are going to fix what you broke."

Ophelia's eyes are swimming now, but the tears don't break. She shakes her head. "Lana, I don't... I can't..."

My blood goes cold. I take one more step toward her, only two feet between us now. "You don't what?"

She may be three inches taller than me, but I've never felt more confident in my stature, my body. I feel ready to tear the world apart, and Ophelia will not get in my way.

"I don't know how to undo it," she admits, fear shaking her every word. "I... I've never tried."

“Well, there’s no time like the present,” I say.

My hand snatches out, and I grab her arm.

“You know what fucking sucks? You were once the person I trusted most. And now I don’t even trust that you won’t run.

You can hate me all you want, but you’ve really left me with no choice.

You’re coming with me until you fix Ares. ”

“Lana, let go of me,” she snaps, trying to yank out of my grasp. But it’s almost laughable. My grip doesn’t loosen even a hair. My fingers tighten around her arm. “Fuck, ow! Lana!”

I pull my phone from my back pocket and dial Billings. Ophelia lets out a string of curses, trying with everything she’s got to yank out of my grasp.

Billings answers after two rings. “Miss Kincade.”

“I need you to pick me up. You still have my location?” I ask, getting right to it.

“I do,” he says, and I hear the phone shift on his end, as if he’s pulling me up right now. “I can be there in two minutes. I’m close.”

“Perfect, I’m in a hurry,” I say, relief coursing through me. “See you soon.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Ophelia snarls as she tries yet again to yank away from me. She’s going to be horribly bruised later.

“Trust me, it feels like shit to go there, but you don’t have a choice anymore,” I say,

disgust transforming my expression as I look at her, our faces only a foot apart. “Scream while we head downstairs, and I will put you out. You know I can.”

She does, indeed. It’s how we met. Ophelia came to my self-defense classes. She’s seen me demonstrate knocking an attacker out without causing damage.

She goes white. “So, it’s really come to this? It’s really gotten this bad. Over him? A vampire?”

“He is my fiancé,” I say darkly, my tone confident. “He’s the best person I’ve ever met. The person I’ve felt the safest with. The one who would do anything for me. And I will always choose him. Come on.”

I march us to the front door. I lead us through, never loosening my grip on her. And Ophelia must sense it, my newfound strength. That something is different. Because she doesn’t make a peep as we head to the elevator, then ride to the ground level.

By the time we walk outside into the busy day, Billings is parked at the curb. I guide Ophelia to the door, open it, and push her inside. I climb in after her, dropping hard into the seat, and lock the doors.

“Give me just a second, Billings, I need to call Harry for the address,” I say as I pull out my phone. “If she tries to run while I call, catch her.”

Ophelia looks at me with absolute terror.

“Yes, Miss Kincade,” Billings says in that deep voice, not an ounce of hesitation. His eyes fix on Ophelia’s reflection in the rear-view mirror.

I hold my phone to my ear, and Harry picks up after just one ring.

“You’ve found him?” he asks without greeting.

“No,” I answer simply. “But I have the person who did this to him. I need her contained until we get Ares. I need the address for the vault.”

Harry rattles it off to me, and I repeat it to Billings, who immediately sets out in that direction. “I’ll meet you there,” he adds.

“See you in twenty,” I say. “Could you do me a favor and bring me something to drink? It’s about to be a problem.”

He hesitates for just a second. I don’t blame him. I’m something new, and we’re all learning as I go. “Sure. See you soon.”

I end the call.

I look over at Ophelia, who is staring out the window, shaking her head. “Can you even see and hear yourself, Lana? Do you realize how much of a stranger you are now?”

Anger rages through my veins. All of this, and she’s going to try and make me feel bad? “Right back at you, O.”

She gives a humorless chuckle. “Guess this is just life? It grabs you around the throat, forces you to make decisions you never thought you’d make. And suddenly, you don’t even know who the hell you are.”

I settle back into my seat, clenching my jaw. I don’t want to hear shit from her right now.

“You could fix all this, you know,” Ophelia says. “Just forget all of this, La?—”



“Nope,” I bark, my voice like a razor slicing through her manipulation.

I launch sideways before she can get the words out—the words she’s trying to use to influence me. My seatbelt’s already off, and I surge across the narrow space between our seats, twisting my body like a viper striking.

Her eyes flare wide just as my right arm snakes around her neck.

I tuck the crook of my elbow tight under her chin, my forearm pinning her throat, my bicep pressing firm against one carotid artery while the inside of my forearm crushes the other. I lock my left hand behind her head and press, forcing her skull forward into the hold.

She jerks beneath me, elbowing wild—but she seems to forget everything I taught her in class. She’s not a fighter, not really. But I was raised in a ring.

“Billings, don’t stop driving,” I bark as I tighten my hold.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” he replies, though his eyes flick to the rearview mirror with concern.

Ophelia wheezes, her legs kicking, one heel slamming against the center console. She claws at my arm, fingernails digging into my skin. It’s desperate. Panicked.

“Go to sleep,” I mutter as I keep my grip.

My heart thunders, but my mind is clear. Keep the pressure. Don’t crush her windpipe. Don’t let her talk. Just hold.

Five seconds.

Her struggling weakens.

Six.

Her limbs twitch like dying wires.

Seven.

Her body goes limp.

I hold for one more beat to be sure.

Then I ease her down into her seat, guiding her head gently against the rest.

“Dammit,” I breathe harshly, brushing hair from her clammy face. She’s breathing, just unconscious.

I slide back into my seat and breathe deep, adrenaline fading, my hands buzzing. I can still feel the shape of her neck against my arm, the tremble of her fear, her desperation to get the words out.

I warned her.

I can’t let her hurt anyone else. Not ever again.

The silence after is deafening.

“Seems a lot has happened in a very short span of time,” Billings says from the front seat. My eyes rise to meet his in the rear-view mirror.

“The whole of reality has shifted,” I reply simply.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

We cross the Brooklyn Bridge, and the GPS hooks us around toward the water. We pass shipping yards, a pier, and warehouses. And finally, Billings pulls up to the curb in front of a brick building that is about as nondescript as I could imagine.

Just as Billings holds the door open for me, a sleek black car parks right behind us.

There is a terrifying looking woman with dyed purple hair at the wheel.

But Harry immediately exits the back seat and walks to my side as I open Ophelia's door, catching her before she can slump to the concrete and get a concussion.

"This is the one who did this to Ares?" Harry asks, observing as I scoop Ophelia into my arms. It's insane how easy it is now to carry someone who weighs more than me and is taller than me.

"Unfortunately," I admit as I follow him to a steel door. I expect him to dig in his pocket for keys. Instead, he presses his palm to a black square to the side of the door. A moment later, there's a beep, and I hear the lock unlatch.

Harry is definitely the most high-tech of the Barons.

He pulls the door open for me, and I step inside.

It's dark, but my eyes adjust rapidly. There are stacks and stacks of boxes, the space feeling very much like a warehouse or storage facility. But Harry walks past all of it, pushing back into the maze of cardboard. We walk past a set of stairs that rise up into the three-story building.

I know it when I see it.

There, in the middle of the building, is a steel box.

It's so plain yet intimidating all at the same time. There are shiny steel walls all around, and facing us are two heavy duty doors. Once more, Harry presses his palm to a scanner, and a moment later, the door clicks as it unlocks.

Harry pulls the door open, and my heart drops when I take in the prison cell.

There's no other way to describe it. The walls inside look exactly like the outside. Shiny steel. There is a twin-sized bed against one wall. There is a small bathroom in one corner. There's a shelf against another wall that has some non-perishable goods, and a microwave on a tiny countertop.

I have to contain Ophelia. I don't trust her with a single bone in my body that she won't run now that the truth has come out.

But I feel fucking awful locking her up. She spent two months locked beneath a mausoleum. This prison is certainly a million times better than that one. But still.

I'm locking her up again.

Hopefully, it's only for a few hours, maybe a few days at most.

And unlike when Augustus took her and sold her, this time, Ophelia is here because of her own actions. She made Ares kill people.

Fuck.

It's all so fucked up.

I lay Ophelia down on the bed, my stomach twisted in knots.

“This is her?” Harry asks, studying Ophelia. “Your old best friend?”

I nod. “Guess I owe Sysco an apology. He seemed to see it the moment I told you both about her.”

“Sometimes we’re too close to situations to see the whole picture,” Harry says as he takes a bag of blood from his pocket and hands it to me. “Don’t be too hard on yourself for not wanting to think the worst of someone you once loved.”

“Thank you, Harry,” I say, truly appreciative of his understanding.

I bite into the bag, draining it down. It coats my insides, cooling my body.

I feel that shift inside, the one like my entire body is being lit up by divine electricity.

My eyes close for a second as the wave of perfection washes over me.

“Good stuff?” Harry asks.

I open my eyes to see him studying me with one raised eyebrow. His look is inquisitive, but a little perplexed. “It should be disgusting, but somehow it’s the best thing ever.”

He gives a small half smile, one that says he understands.

I eye the man beside me. “Why don’t you seem surprised by this? The fact that Ophelia could make Ares do all this? It’s still shocking the hell out of me, and I’ve had a few days to process the idea that there are other supernatural... beings out there besides vampires.”

Harry's eyes slide over to me. "America is still such an infant in so many ways. A couple of supernaturally gifted people got caught, and they hunted them down, plus a bunch of innocent people. But back home in Korea, there are shaman who are well known."

I arch an eyebrow at that.

"Are you really all that surprised?" Harry asks. "All the stories. All the legends."

"My awesome American education didn't cover much of Korea's witch history."

"They prefer the name mudang . Witch is too Americanized," Harry says, cracking the first joke I've ever heard from him, even though it's not really a joke.

I chuckle and shake my head. "The world just keeps spinning further into insanity," I say. "I never?—"

Ophelia stirs on the bed, a groan coming from her throat. She rolls over on the bed, a curse coming from her lips as she stretches her neck. I'm sure she's damn sore.

"Don't try that again," I warn her. She was trying to talk me into leaving Ares when I knocked her out.

Ophelia jerks up in the bed, shoving herself across it, getting as far away from me as she can. Her gaze rips around the room, and I see it as she begins realizing where she is and what this all means.

"I need to know exactly what it was you told Ares to do," I say, using every bit of my willpower to stay composed. I want to have a full-on tantrum. I want to go all WWE on her ass. The amount of rage I feel in this moment is astounding .

“What the fuck , Lana?” Ophelia snarls, her gaze fixing on me again. And as we stare at each other, that is absolute hatred she’s broadcasting at me.

“I’m not playing games, Ophelia,” I say, taking a step closer to her.

She eyes me warily, but she doesn’t have anywhere else to retreat to.

“This could have gone very differently, but now we’re all dealing with the consequences of your choices.

I’m really, really losing patience. So, tell me. What exactly did you tell Ares to do?”

“Fuck you,” she says in a breath, glaring daggers at me, but her curse comes out a little breathy and scared.

Harry takes a step forward. I see his eyes flash red, and two little indents form on his lips as his fangs extend.

But he doesn’t freak out. He doesn’t snarl at her.

In fact, he keeps his hands tucked in his pockets.

He steps to the edge of the bed. He leans forward.

Those glowing red eyes of his stay fixed on Ophelia as he leans in, his face only a foot from hers.

At Harry’s approach, at his very obvious vampiressness, Ophelia quakes.

“I am not a person who likes messes,” Harry says.

His voice is deadly calm. “In fact, before I Resurrected, I had some pretty severe OCD. And while I never received a diagnosis, if I had to guess, I’m on the spectrum.

I really, really don’t like when people make messes.

I really don’t like when they mess with shit they shouldn’t touch.

So, Ophelia. I need you to tell us exactly what you told Ares to do. ”

Ophelia’s entire body shakes. Her eyes are bloodshot. I can smell the perspiration on her skin. She’s breathing so hard and so deep, I hope she doesn’t pass out.

“I told him vampires shouldn’t exist,” she says, her words rough and difficult to understand with how bad she’s shaking. “I told him to kill every vampire he knows in New York.”

A curse leaves my lips, even though it’s exactly what I was expecting.

“What else?” Harry asks, his voice low and icy calm.

My stomach drops out. No. There is nothing else. That alone is horrific enough. There can’t be anything else.

But as I look at Ophelia, I see what Harry sees. She’s holding something back.

And from the way the terror on her face deepens, I know it’s going to be bad.

Ophelia’s eyes slip from Harry’s to fix on the surface of the bed. “I told him to kill every vampire he knows in New York and, when he was done, to kill himself.”

My stomach disappears. My world tilts on its axis. All the oxygen in the room



evaporates.

A curse slips from my lips. I turn from the vault, and my feet move before my brain can process everything I just learned.

“Ares!” his name rips from my lips as a scream as I dart back out into the city.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I burst out of the building, slamming the heavy door shut behind me, leaving Ophelia in the cold, sterile darkness with Harry.

This fear—this unrelenting panic—feels worse than anything I’ve ever experienced.

Ophelia told Ares to kill himself. I can’t think of any other vampires Ares knows except for Sysco, Harry, and James. Does Clementine count as a Bitten? Fuck. My fingers lace into my hair as I look up and down the street. How many vampires are left before Ares tries to hurt himself?

“Damn you, O,” I curse as panic stings the backs of my eyes.

I sprint through the city like a woman possessed.

My body, still unfamiliar with its newfound power, moves faster than I ever have before, but it’s not fast enough.

The streets blur around me, pedestrians dodging out of my way, honking cars skidding to halts as I cut through traffic like a reckless specter.

All the while, my sharpened eyes scan faces, searching for the one and only one that matters to me.

I shove through a crowd at an intersection, ignoring the shouted curses that follow.

My mind is a chaotic mess of terror and rage.

He's out there, somewhere, alone and hunting, teetering on the edge of something I can't let happen.

The image of him—his beautiful, unbreakable body mangled and lifeless—flashes through my mind, and a strangled sound escapes my throat.

No. Fuck no, I will not let that happen.

My stomach twists violently. The air feels too thick to breathe.

How could she do this? How could she play with his mind like this, with his life?

How do relationships break so wholly that she could do this to me?

Once upon a time, Ophelia loved me, and I loved her.

But now she can take no thought to tell the man I love to end his own life.

What it would do to me if Ares were dead...

The Ares I know, the man I love, is still in there. But he's drowning, lost in a compulsion that isn't his own. And if I don't reach him in time, he will finish what she told him to do.

I push harder, my feet barely touching the pavement as I scan faces. Where would he go? If his phone is dead, I can't track him that way. He hasn't gone home. He isn't at the office. He's been hunting vampires, but there's no pattern—no clear logic to where he'll be next.

Think, Lana. Think!

This racing around is pointless.

I realize it and slow in an instant. If Ares is hunting vampires, he's not wandering around in the daylight on the streets. Ares is smart. He's purposeful. I'm never going to just spot him on the sidewalk.

In desperation, I circle back around to the simplest solution.

I grab my phone and open our text thread, my fingers shaking as I send another message:

Where are you? Please, Ares, answer me.

I hit send and wait, but I don't expect anything. For two days now, my messages have gone undelivered, as if he's been in some kind of black hole, unreachable. I don't expect that to change now, but when I glance back at the screen, my heart leaps into my throat.

Delivered.

Holy shit. The message went through. My hands fly across the screen as I immediately open our location sharing. It loads for half a second—then his location pings.

Harlem. He's moving.

Ice crashes through my veins. Sysco owns a massive portion of Harlem. Ares is hunting vampires.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Ares is going after Sysco.

My fingers tremble as I click on Ares's contact and hit call.

It rings once. Twice.

Then, unbelievably, Ares picks up. "Vengeance." His voice is low, rough.

"Ares," I breathe, my voice barely above a whisper, my grip tightening around the phone.

I nearly collapse in relief at the sound of him, but something is wrong. He doesn't sound like himself. There's a strange emptiness in his voice, like he's locked onto something, fixated. Hunting.

I swallow hard and force myself to sound steady. "Ares, where are you?"

He doesn't answer immediately. I hear the faint sounds of the city in the background, but his breathing is steady, measured, too calm. That's what terrifies me the most.

He doesn't answer me, like he's hardly paying attention. "Ares!"

He makes a little hmm sound, acknowledging me, but not actually answering.

And an idea strikes me. I have to change my approach. I have to reach a deeper part of Ares.

I let desperation bleed into my voice, every ounce of it genuine. "Ares, I need your help." My voice shakes, I let emotion saturate my words. "There's this man following me. Where are you?"

The other line goes quiet, the whisp of air halting, as if he's stopped in his tracks.

"Where?" His voice is sharper now.

There he is. The Ares I know.

"Third and ninety-ninth," I say, breathing hard, like I'm walking. I pick the address knowing it's roughly the halfway point between us. "Ares, hurry!"

"I'm on my way, Vengeance," his promise comes through. "Stay somewhere public, don't stop?—"

The line goes dead.

I look at my phone, confirming the call has dropped. "Fuck."

I don't know what to think about that, but I get moving. I have nine blocks to go, and Ares is faster than I am.

I pull my phone out again and press it to my ear.

Sysco answers on the second ring.

"Ares is hunting you. Get somewhere safe, now."

A curse, then rustling as if he's already moving. "I'll handle it."

"No." My voice is firm. I dart around a crowd of people on the sidewalk, stepping out onto the road even though there isn't a crossing sign. A car honks at me. "I think I have him distracted. Let me handle it. Just stay the hell out of his way."

“Tell me what’s going on,” Sysco says, his tone frustrated and angry at the same time.

“Ares finally charged his phone,” I explain. “I tracked him. He’s in Harlem. He know any other vampires in Harlem besides you?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Sysco admits with a sigh.

“He was definitely hunting you,” I say with a nod as I cross another street. “I got to him first, he’s coming to meet me now. I just thought I should warn you.”

A pause. “You sure you can handle him?”

No. Not if he’s fully gone. Not if he’s already too lost in Ophelia’s command.

But I have to believe that I can reach him. That, for me, he really will show up.

“Yeah,” I say, speaking it aloud so it can become true.

“Fuck, Lana, be careful,” Sysco says.

“I will,” I say as I cross the last street. “I’ll call you back when it’s over.”

I hang up as I round the final corner, approaching the alley. It’s quieter here, the sounds of the city fading just a little. My pulse is too fast, my mind spinning.

I don’t know what condition Ares is in. I’ve seen him with blood on his hands, with his shirt torn and bloodied, even shirtless because he had to dispose of it. And if Ophelia told him to end himself when he was done taking out as many vampires as he could...

I don't know if he's still capable of seeing me, even. And what if... what if I'm still enough of a vampire that it triggers his instinct, and he tries to hurt me?

No. Fuck, no. I believe it with every bone in me: Ares would never hurt me.

Ares would come for me. I know that. Even like this, with his mind twisted, his body driven by the unnatural force of Ophelia's command—he would always come for me.

That's why I played dirty.

This is the only thing I can think of that might break through the haze of his killing instinct. If Ares still has any piece of himself left, if there is still even a shred of the man I love inside him, he will fight through anything to get to me.

Just as I reach the middle of the alley, the most private spot, I hear footsteps. Slow, deliberate. A shadow moves at the edge of the alley.

Then Ares steps into the dim light.

My heart about erupts with relief. It's only been two days since I last laid eyes on him, but so damn much has happened in that time that it feels like an eternity.

And the last few hours have been some of the most panic filled of my life once Ophelia revealed the fullness of what she told Ares to do.

He's not covered in blood, but he looks...

wrecked. His clothes are torn in places, dirt and grime staining his shirt.

His knuckles are raw, scraped. His face is drawn.



He's wearing sunshades, yet even through them, I can see there are dark circles beneath his eyes like he hasn't slept in months.

Something about his posture sends a deep chill down my spine.

I want to say he looks like he's been in a fight. But he hasn't. The tells aren't there.

This is the result of his own mind.

A wave of nausea rolls through me.

Ophelia's command is working.

For a terrifying second, I don't know if he recognizes me. His stance is tense, his chest rising and falling with slow, controlled breaths. A hunter measuring the moment before the kill.

I fight to stay still, to not show an ounce of fear. "Ares."

His fingers twitch at his sides. His head tilts slightly, as if listening.

The wind shifts, and I see the second it happens—when my scent reaches him. His entire body locks up. His expression flickers, for just an instant, from cold emptiness to something uncertain.

"Lana," he says hoarsely.

"Yes," I whisper, stepping toward him carefully, like I'm approaching a wounded animal. "I'm here."

His brow furrows slightly. He sways where he stands. "You...called me."

“I did,” I say as I take a step toward him. He’s studying me with such confusion. He knows me, I can see it in his body, he knows me. But his mind... Fuck. He’s so far gone. He looks ragged. He’s been running himself into the ground.

What if he hadn’t charged his phone? What if I couldn’t find him today? What would have happened tomorrow?

Would it have been too late?

I can’t think about that right now. It doesn’t matter. He’s here.

I take another step toward him. His nostrils flare as he scents me. There’s something that shifts in his eyes. Maybe he can sense my change. His eyes roam over me, searching for an answer.

But he doesn’t strike. He doesn’t turn and run.

I stop right in front of him, and I reach out, taking his hand in mine.

“I need to take you home,” I say as those hazel eyes burn into mine. He stares at me with such intensity, as if wracking his brain for who I am and what I mean to him. I lean forward, pressing my forehead into his, willing it to all come back to him.

“You’re still in there,” I murmur, barely above a whisper. “I know you are.”

His breathing is wrong. Too measured. Too much like a man on the edge of something final.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, right before I jam the dart into the side of his neck.

Ares’ entire body stiffens. His eyes instantly flare brilliant red, and black veins fan

out from them, spreading over his face.

His mouth parts in shock, his hands twitching as if reaching for me, and then, in the span of a heartbeat, his knees buckle.

He spasms in pain, a muffled cry escaping his lips.

Shit. Shit. No. I didn't know this would be painful.

After everything he's already been through, the last thing Ares deserves is pain.

But it's too late. His body spasms once more, and finally, he drops. I catch him before he can hit the ground, sinking down with him, cradling him against me as his body goes slack. His breathing evens out, his face smoothing into an unnatural stillness.

A breath shudders out of me, half relief, half fear. I have him. I finally have him.

Fuck. I honestly wasn't sure I'd ever get him back. And for a minute there, I couldn't stop playing out the worst possible ending to this in my brain.

But he's here, in my arms.

Finally.

I pull my phone from my pocket with shaking hands and dial Billings. He picks up on the first ring.

"I need you to pick us up. Now."

"On my way to your location." He doesn't ask questions.

I send a quick text to Sysco and Harry.

I have Ares. Meet me at the vault.

Then I sit there, kneeling on the dirty ground of the alley, holding Ares against me, feeling the slow, steady rise and fall of his chest. I push the damp strands of hair out of his face, my fingers ghosting over the bruises and cuts marring his skin. He looks... broken. Fractured.

I finally have him back.

But can I fix him?

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

B illings carries Ares with his hands under his armpits.

I have hold of his ankles. Together, we shuffle into the warehouse as Harry holds the door open for us.

We navigate our way through the maze of boxes, and finally, Harry scans his hand for the second door to open the second vault.

We lay Ares down on the bed, and I take care to straighten him out, cupping a hand on his cheek.

Fuck.

He's so beautiful. Yet right now, he looks so damn broken. And the person responsible for breaking him is in the vault right next to this.

I hear the scuffle of footsteps and glance over my shoulder to see Sysco walking in, Harry on his heels.

"Thanks for saving my ass," Sysco says, eying Ares as he lies in that bed. "I'm honestly not sure I could have taken him if he'd gotten to me."

I don't say it aloud, but there's no way Sysco could hold out against Ares. While Sysco is very tall, about two inches taller than Ares, Ares has to have about twenty or thirty pounds of muscle on Sysco. Sysco wouldn't have lasted long.

"It was just damn lucky timing that Ares finally charged his phone," I note as I sit on

the bedside and look down at Ares' face.

"I've tried calling and texting a million times, but it's been dead.

When I tracked him..." I shake my head. When Ares finally comes back to himself, it's going to be horrific.

But if he came to and also realized he'd ripped apart his best friend...

I couldn't let that be on his conscience.

"Looks like he's already been in a fight today," Sysco notes, his eyes scraping over the state of my fiancé.

"With himself," I say, my words coming out hoarse. "There were two parts to what Ophelia told him to do."

"Kill every vampire he knows in New York City," Harry continues for me when my throat feels too tight to keep going. "Then to kill himself when he was done."

Sysco curses, the look in his eyes darkening. His hands curl into fists. "Ares? What the fuck could she have against him? I mean... he saved her. And Ares is the fucking best. Why..."

"Hurt people hurt people," I say quietly, brushing my fingers along Ares' cheek. And I can't help it. I lean in and press my lips to it next, then press my forehead against his, praying for everything to just go back to the way it was.

Sysco curses again, glaring daggers in the direction of the other vault.

"How long until he wakes up?" Harry asks.

“Hours,” I say. Elle wasn’t very specific when she gave me the dart with her vampire toxin. “But I see no harm in getting Ophelia to undo what she did while he’s still out.”

Harry nods and walks out of the vault. I hear him open the one next door, and a few moments later, he reappears, Ophelia at his side.

She’s stiff as can be, her shoulders shrugged up to her ears. She looks terrified. Her eyes whip around the room, going from Ares’ unconscious form, to me, to Sysco. She eyes him warily, taking a step away from him.

“Look, I’m not going to lay a hand on you, but this is some serious bullshit you’ve pulled,” Sysco says.

He doesn’t look away once, his eyes intense and a little crazy.

I’ve always thought of Sysco as a wild card, and he just reaffirms it to me every day.

“You’re gonna fix what you did. Because Ares didn’t fucking deserve this. ”

Ophelia steps sideways, away from Sysco, and doesn’t say a word.

“Do you see him?” I ask, my blood turning boiling hot. “He looks like he’s fucking decaying , Ophelia! This is the person I love with every damn fiber of my being. And you’ve turned him into something that he isn’t. And I’m about to lose him. Ophelia. Fix. Him. Now.”

She’s shaking from head to toe. Her eyes are bloodshot, and fear is consuming every bit of her. Harry places a hand on the small of her back and pushes her forward. He doesn’t push hard, not at all, but she stumbles forward.

I shift on the bed, scooting to the side so that she can see more of him.

She takes another step forward, her eyes locking on him.

I watch her face as she approaches. There's wariness.

She can see the injuries on him. I can practically see her thoughts spinning on it all.

But I also see something like disgust in her eyes.

"Fix. Him," I say darkly as I stare at her.

Her eyes dart to me, and it's me she steps sideways away from this time.

I don't even fucking care anymore that she's afraid of me.

"I... I don't know how to undo it," she says, her words rough.

"How did you tell him to do it before?" I prompt.

"I just told him," she says. "And touch. It seems more likely to work if I'm touching the person."

Ares will still be out for hours. But I grab his hand and hold it out to Ophelia. It dangles, limp, just like he was dead. And I hate it.

The look on Ophelia's face tells me that with everything in her, she does not want to touch Ares. But my eyes narrow at her, and she steps forward. She takes his hand in her trembling ones.

"Stop killing vampires," she says, looking down at his unconscious form. "And don't



hurt yourself. Go back to the way things were before we last spoke.”

She lays his hand back on the bed and backs up a step.

“That’s it?” I question, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t know what else you want me to do, Lana,” she says, a little attitude rising in her tone. “That’s how I did it. I don’t know what you’re expecting me to do when he’s not even conscious.”

I glare at her, hating that this is where we are, and knowing it will never, ever go back to the way it was between us. I could never forgive her. And she so obviously has lost every ounce of respect for me.

The sound of footsteps approaching draws my eye to the doorway. Five seconds later, Florence steps into the vault, followed by Clementine.

The moment Florence lays eyes on Ares, she sucks in a ragged breath through her nostrils. Her face pales. She tries very, very hard to keep her expression composed.

She takes it all in. The cuts on him, the bruises. The furrow between his brows. Even unconscious, he doesn’t look at rest.

Florence’s eyes flick up to meet mine. "Thank you, Lana," she whispers, voice thick with barely contained emotion. "Thank you for finding him."

“Always,” I assure her, a solemn vow.

Clementine watches the scene observantly, assessing every movement, every moment like it’s all made of glass.

Which it is.

Florence's eyes flick over to Ophelia, and she's always been a smart woman. Florence immediately figures out that it was Ophelia who did this to her brother. Something shifts in her expression.

Before I realize what's about to happen, Florence crosses the vault toward Ophelia and slaps her across the face.

The crack of the impact echoes through the vault.

Ophelia staggers back, her hand flying to her cheek, her eyes wide with shock. A startled scream escapes her lips.

"You did this to my brother," Florence says, her voice quiet but cutting like glass.

"You turned him into a weapon and pointed him at people you decided should die. And then you told him to end his own life. The self-righteous are always the worst people in this world, and you've placed yourself in their ranks, you selfish coward. "

I've never seen Florence like this. She's always been powerful and intimidating but gentle, warm. But right now, she looks like she could kill Ophelia herself.

Suddenly, Ares stirs, and all our attention snaps back to him. A low, guttural sound escapes his lips, his fingers twitching.

We don't have time for speeches for justice.

"Everyone out," I order. "Sysco, Harry—wait outside."

Sysco looks like he wants to argue, but one look at Ares, and he just nods. "We'll be

right outside."

Florence hesitates. "Lana, you should?—"

"I'm staying."

She clenches her jaw but doesn't fight me on it. A moment later, the heavy vault door shuts with a loud clang. It's just me, Ophelia, and Ares now.

Ares' breathing is ragged, his muscles tense as he fights consciousness. Then his eyes snap open.

My stomach drops.

His pupils are blown wide, his expression feral. He lifts his head, sniffing the air, his gaze snapping toward the vault door. "Sysco," he breathes. "Harry."

He moves, a blur of power and instinct, lunging for the door. I barely get out of the way in time. He slams his fists against the metal, the impact shaking the entire vault. His growl is animalistic, violent. He's not thinking—he's acting purely on the command Ophelia planted in his head.

Fuck. Oh, fuck, it didn't work, not even a little bit.

"Ares!" I shout, standing and taking a step toward him. "Look at me. Please, look at me."

He doesn't. He doesn't even register my voice. He rakes his nails down the metal door, fingers splitting open from the force, but he doesn't stop. Blood smears against the surface, but he doesn't react to the pain. He just keeps going, desperate to rip his way out.

"It didn't work," Ophelia whispers. Her voice is small, shaking. "I—I don't know how to undo it."

Rage surges through me. "Try again!" I snarl. "You don't get to say you don't know. You did this, so fix it!"

She stands there for a moment, her back pressed flat against the farthest wall.

She's shaking from head to toe in terror.

But she takes two breaths before she steps toward Ares.

She grabs his hand as he tries once more to claw his way through the steel.

"Ares, listen to me. You don't want to do this.

You don't have to do this. I'm telling you—stop! "

For a second, he freezes. His glowing red eyes turn on her, nostrils flaring. Then his lip curls. "Ophelia. You hurt Lana," he growls, voice thick with disgust. "She didn't deserve it."

Ophelia flinches like she's been struck. She drops his hand when Ares lets out a roar and slams his shoulder into the door. I hear a snap as his collarbone buckles. His body is wrecking itself, but he doesn't feel it. He doesn't care.

"Focus, Ophelia," I say through clenched teeth. I feel like I'm on the verge of a panic attack. Watching the man I love unravel is horrific. And there's nothing I can do to help him right now. "Try harder."

"What do you expect me to do?" Ophelia asks, annoyed and scared. "He's acting like

a fucking lunatic.”

“Because you made him that way!” I snarl. “Try again!”

Ophelia’s jaw clenches, and her eyes shift back to Ares. “You’re going to hurt yourself, so stop it, now! You don’t have to do this anymore, Ares. Just stop.”

But Ares just pounds his fist into the door, screaming for Sysco like he’s possessed.

Fuck.

He’s going to tear himself apart. I can’t let him hurt himself.

I don’t hesitate. I pull the dart from my pocket, praying it has enough toxin left for a second dose, and lunge. Ares barely reacts before I jam it into his neck.

His entire body jerks. He gasps, glowing red eyes locking on mine for just a second—just long enough for me to see a flicker of recognition. The black veins sprout around his eyes, and he spasms in pain, a cry escaping his lips. Then he collapses.

I drop to my knees beside him, my breathing ragged, my hands shaking as I push his hair back from his face.

Tears slip down my cheeks.

I finally have him back.

But how the hell do we fix him?

“Lana, I...” Ophelia starts. She stares at Ares with wide, terrified eyes, tears

glistening in them. “I didn’t...”

“You didn’t actually think about what you were doing to him?” I snarl as I glare at her. “About the fact that he is an actual person? That there would be consequences to taking away his free will?”

Her eyes meet mine, and tears slip down her face.

I wait. I wait for her apology. She should be really damn sorry.

But she never says the words.

“Try again,” I snap. I haul Ares back to the bed, and I don’t give a damn that she’s seeing my newfound strength. I just don’t fucking care what she thinks anymore, and I’m not even going to bother explaining. Me being a Made is her fault, too—a direct consequence of her decision.

Once he’s positioned comfortably in the bed, I take his hand and hold it out to Ophelia again.

She swallows once, noting the blood that is smeared over his hand. The split where he broke the skin is slowly knitting itself back together.

She takes his hand, his blood staining her own. She stares at him for several long moments. She lets her eyes slide closed and inhales a slow breath.

“Ares, forget everything I told you to do. You don’t need to kill any more vampires. You don’t need to kill yourself. Things need to go back to the way they were before.”

I inhale to speak, but suddenly, the door of the vault swings open.

“We’ve got a problem to deal with,” Harry says, his eyes dark.

I glance up at Ophelia, but Harry isn’t waiting. He grabs her wrist, his touch gentle, and he leads her out of Ares’ vault and out to the other one. I look down at my fiancé’s sleeping form once more, but nothing has changed. So, I climb to my feet and walk out after Harry.

He’s just closed Ophelia back in her vault when I step outside. He pushes the door to Ares’ vault closed, and I look from Harry to Sysco, to Florence and Clementine, searching for the answers as to what’s going on.

“My security team just alerted me about a couple of vampires who have been in the city for a few days,” Harry says as he slides his hands into his pockets.

“Okay, why is that weird?” Florence questions, her brows furrowing.

“They just asked to meet with the Barons,” he says.

That grabs my attention. Nobody really knows about the Barons. It’s not exactly public knowledge that vampires exist in the first place. But that there is a board of powerful vampires in this city? The Barons don’t advertise their existence.

“We kind of have a lot of shit going on,” I point out.

“I’m aware,” Harry says, his tone slightly deadpan. “I’d ignore the request normally, given what else is going on. But they’re from Chicago.”

I wait for him to explain further. But he doesn’t. “And?” I encourage.

“When it comes to supernaturals from Chicago, I don’t ignore them,” Harry says.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

We end up at Harry's building, one we've met in before. We take the elevator up four floors to that elegant room with no windows. It's weird, going to a Barons meeting without Ares. We've always been a team. We've gone through all this together. But now I am one of them, all on my own.

Sometimes life is so damn wild.

Clementine practically forced Florence to go home with her. There was nothing they could do to help at the moment. They were only in danger of getting in the way. I saw them off with the promise to call when anything changed with Ares.

When we walk into the meeting, my eyes immediately go to the two figures across the space.

A man, tall, strong, tattoos rising from the knuckles of his right hand, all the way up his arm and reappearing on the side of his neck, quite similar to Ares' tattoos, except his left arm is clear of ink.

Then, there is a woman with him. She's not very tall, probably two inches shorter than my own short frame.

But the striking thing about them is that they bear identically white hair. It's hard to describe. It isn't like the white of age. It's just pure and blinding. I'd almost wonder if they were siblings with how identical their hair is, but it's literally the only thing about them that looks similar.

"You asked to meet with us?" Harry asks, getting straight to business, as I'd expect.



“You know, we’re pretty used to big cities. Chicago isn’t small. But New York is really damn big,” the woman speaks up, and somehow, she sounds exactly like I expected. Spark and sass. “So, it seemed wiser to work smarter, not harder.”

Harry raises an eyebrow at the crass and bold woman. “Names might be a good place to start.”

“Sorry,” she says with an amused chuckle. She steps forward, extending a hand. “Juliet De Luca. And my husband, Roman.”

“For real?” Sysco asks with a smirk. “Roman and Juliet, married in real life?”

“In the flesh,” Juliet says with a smile that nearly rivals Sysco’s. She shakes his hand, then turns and shakes mine.

“Harry Kim,” he introduces himself as Roman shakes his hand. There’s something wildly evaluative in Roman’s eyes, like this guy should be on a SEAL team, not doing whatever it is he’s doing in our city.

“Sysco,” my friend introduces himself, though he doesn’t offer his last name.

“Lana,” I take cues from Sysco as I shake Roman’s hand. He studies me with vivid, powerfully blue eyes. Yikes. The man is intense.

“Shall we sit?” Harry asks, extending a hand toward the couches. Juliet nods and sinks onto one, Roman sitting beside her. He’s stiff, vigilant, prepared.

I thought Ares was intense, but he’s a golden retriever compared to Roman De Luca.

I take one couch, sitting beside Sysco, and Harry takes the third.

“You asked to meet with us,” Harry says, taking lead in an uncertain situation. “I’d like to know how the hell you even knew about the existence of the Barons. We don’t exactly advertise.”

Juliet leans back into the couch, crossing one leg over the other. There’s something relaxed about her, or maybe it’s confidence. Like she’s untouchable. Like she doesn’t have anything in the world to worry about. And maybe that’s because of her German Shepard husband beside her?

“My best friend, Elena Godfrey, has been doing business in New York for years,” she says. “She met some asshole named Augustus who bragged about being a Baron, said he ran this city.”

A sound of disgust comes from my lips. “Did he try to proposition this Elena?” I ask.

“He did, actually,” Juliet says, raising an eyebrow to accompany her disgusted smirk. “Said he’d prefer she were human. Said all kinds of other disgusting things. I take it you know Augustus?”

“Knew,” I answer with a sneer. “He was going to be my father-in-law. My fiancé took him out for some other disgusting behavior.”

“Glad to hear Karma is still doing her job,” Juliet replies. “Though, I’m kind of surprised Elena didn’t take him out herself. She’s never had much tolerance for dicks like that. Anyway, that’s how we knew about the Barons. I take it that’s what the rest of you are?”

“We’re missing one other, maybe two, but Cliff’s whereabouts are unknown at the moment,” Sysco answers. “But you’ve got the rest of us.”

“Interesting how things seem to stay consistent without any kind of communication

about it,” Juliet says, and it looks like she’s fighting a smirk.

“Juliet,” Roman warns.

“They’re practically the same,” Juliet counters her husband.

“Don’t,” he says, unconvinced by his wife.

I raise an eyebrow. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell us about your secret council of vampires in Chicago.”

Roman’s look is deadly serious and utterly annoyed. But I just smile and shake my head.

“Look, we can all keep our cloak and daggers, but how about we get down to the reason you asked to meet with us,” I press on. “We were kind of in the middle of something.”

“I like her,” Juliet says as she holds my gaze. “You’re different, which is good, and exciting. And you don’t beat around the bush.”

“A few years back, we had an issue in Chicago with a necromancer,” Roman says, taking control of the conversation before I even have a moment to process what Juliet said. The man is even more direct than I am.

“Excuse me?” I blurt. I blink at the beautiful man with white hair and icy blue eyes twice. “Did you just say necromancer?”

“I did,” Roman confirms. Sysco swears, but Harry doesn’t seem bothered.

Not much rattles Harry. “He brought a really bad man back from the grave in

Chicago. Wrecked a lot of havoc. It was all under the direction of someone else, someone worse. In the end, we caught the bastard and determined that he didn't deserve to die. But we banished him."

"From the entirety of the United States," Juliet fills in details. "We told him if he ever returned, there would be consequences."

Roman crosses one ankle over the opposite knee. "I have an extensive security team in Chicago, but my network runs... wider than the city. A week ago, facial recognition scanners picked up his face at JFK. A day later, we caught him on some cameras in Manhattan."

"When you say necromancer, do you literally mean someone who brings back the dead?" Sysco asks. I can see his thoughts spiraling. "Like, they were in the grave, heart stopped, dead?"

"I mean, Markus Lontoc brought back a man who had been dead for five years," Juliet says, her expression hardening. "The man was bones and some hair. And then he was a fully restored man capable of horrendous things, same as he was before he died."

"Holy shit," Sysco breathes, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Any idea what he's doing in New York?" Harry asks.

"We haven't been able to get much of any footage of him," Roman admits. "I can't just hack into every camera in the city. But the little bit I've been able to get ahold of, it seems like he's looking for someone."

"Someone alive?" I question. "Because Manhattan isn't known for its graveyards. Bodies get hauled off the island elsewhere. There isn't enough room to bury people

here.”

“We don’t know yet,” Roman says. “Like I said, we’ve been unable to get too much footage. Markus has had some suspicious ties in the past. Run with some shady people. We were hoping you might have some ideas what he might be up to.”

“There’s plenty of despicable people in this city,” Sysco says, shaking his head. “You’re talking way too general right now. We’re going to need more to go off.”

“I know,” Juliet says with a nod. “It’s not much. But Markus has to know that he’s putting his life at risk. We made the ramifications of him coming back into the country pretty clear. So, if he’s willing to risk it, it isn’t for something good.”

“We were hoping that we could get your help, your cooperation, in finding the necromancer,” Roman says. I can tell he doesn’t like asking for our help. But I also see it in his eyes: he is not in his own city, and he knows it.

There is only one of us who can really help out with this, and Sysco and I both look at Harry at the same time.

Harry is quiet, evaluating Roman and Juliet. He isn’t one to show his cards too quickly. He’s cautious. Measured.

“What will this necromancer’s consequences be once you’ve got hands on him?” Harry asks.

Not what I was expecting.

“That’s for us to worry about,” Roman answers cryptically.

“Who in this city do we have to worry about being brought back from the dead?” I

ask, turning my brain back through the possibilities.

“Only about a thousand mobsters, crime bosses, and assholes like Augustus,” Sysco says in a deadpan tone. “And who knows who else we don’t know about. It’s New York City. There’re eight million people who live here right now. And who knows how many bodies are hidden on this island.”

I don’t much like those possibilities. “What if it isn’t nefarious? I mean, I can think of some people I would want brought back, and they’re good people.” My entire family is dead—Mom, Dad, my baby sister. I’d do just about anything to bring them back.

“Don’t go down that rabbit hole,” Juliet warns. Her eyes flick over to me, and I see something chilled in her eyes. “It will drive you crazy, and only break your heart.”

Clearly, Juliet had the same thought at one point, and was let down. Who did she lose?

“Markus needs to be dealt with,” Roman warns. “I don’t expect you to reveal all of New York’s shit to us. Chicago can’t explain all of ours. But I hope you can trust us when we say it’s not good that he’s in your city, snooping around.”

The three of us are quiet for several beats.

It’s a lot to process.

By the day, we’re getting confirmation that there are other beings out there who have supernatural gifts.

They’re good at hiding. While vampires are pretty easy to classify, you’re either Born or Bitten, with the oddball exception of me, a Made; these others can be, well, just about anything, apparently.

So far, I've heard of a lightning wielder. Now Ophelia, with her influence. And a necromancer.

Holy shit.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The world is so much bigger than I ever thought.

“We can go to my main office,” Harry says. “I have access to cameras. It’s up to the others if they want to do the same, but I’ll give you access to all the cameras at my properties. Plus, I have access to some other networks. We’ll do what we can to catch this necromancer.”

“Thank you,” Roman answers, and he sounds sincere.

“I’ll get you access to mine as well,” Sysco takes Harry’s lead. “Though I’m not as techy as Harry is, so you won’t get as much coverage.”

“We appreciate anything you can give us,” Roman says with a nod.

“I’d give you access to the Hunt and Lonan properties, but my fiancé, the one who owns it all, is a little indisposed at the moment,” I say, trying to keep my cards close to my chest. When it comes to protecting Ares, I will always exercise caution.

That gets me an evaluative look from our white-haired newcomers. But neither says anything to that.

“We thank you for the cooperation,” Roman says. “If you don’t mind, could we handle this as soon as possible?”

Harry and Sysco exchange a look. This is all really up to them. I can’t help them out in this situation. But we were literally in the middle of something. And who knows how long we have until Ares wakes again. I want to be there when he wakes up. That



doesn't mean Harry or Sysco have to be, though.

"I can give you an hour," Harry says. "No more than that, though. Not right now. As we said, we've got some things going on."

"I'll take what I can get," Roman says with a nod.

"Let's go," Sysco says, apparently willing to operate in the same timeframe. "Lana, we'll meet you back at the vault."

"All right," I say, standing with the others.

"Mind if I hang out with you?" Juliet asks, to my surprise, as we all head toward the elevator. "I'm not a whole lot of help to Roman when it comes to this stuff."

"I guess," I answer cautiously. I'm really not sure what to make of this woman. But we all file into the elevator and ride the few stories back down to ground level.

The moment we step out, all four of them slip on specialized sunshades. Out on the sidewalk, Roman pulls Juliet into his arms, pressing a kiss to her lips. "I'll see you in an hour," he says, and it sounds like a vow.

Damn.

I blush a little and look away. Is this how other people feel when they see Ares and me together?

"See you soon, Lana," Harry promises, and his words sound pointed, as if he's reiterating to Roman that there is a short time frame he's committing.

"See you in an hour," I say, nodding to the three men as they walk away.

Juliet and I set out in the opposite direction. I'm not exactly going to walk all the way back to Brooklynn, but we might as well head in that direction.

"You all are awfully active, considering it's the middle of the day," Juliet notes as she squints against the bright light.

"I take it Chicago operates more fully during the night?" I question.

She nods. "I mean, things still come up, and we deal with shit during the day, but we're definitely more nocturnal there."

I nod. "I'd never really thought about it before, that we're pretty flexible here."

"Especially you," she says pointedly, looking over at me.

I'm not wearing any sunshades. I don't need them. "Let's just say it's better if you don't ask too many questions." I raise an eyebrow.

She smirks at that. "Story of my life, babe," she says without skipping a beat. "Trust me, I know a little about not asking too many questions."

I find a smile tugging on my own lips. I can't quite figure Juliet out, but there's something kind of... familiar about her. And I think it's a little bit of myself I see. "There's definitely something up with Chicago, isn't there? But for some reason, I feel like you wouldn't tell me."

Suddenly, lightning flashes through my brain, and I stop in my tracks. Someone bumps into me from behind, granting me a curse, but I don't even notice.

"Chicago," I breathe as Juliet stops and looks back at me with confusion. "Fuck. Ophelia is from Chicago."

Juliet studies me with wary eyes, but she doesn't hide it well. She's keeping something from me. She knows something, but she doesn't know how much I know either.

"I'm just figuring out that there are other things out there besides vampires," I blurt, instantly in a hurry to explain so that I can ask.

"The necromancer, a lightning wielder, an influencer, and I'm not talking about the social media kind.

There... are there a lot of other kinds of supernaturals in Chicago? "

Juliet's expression is filled with caution. I see a million thoughts roll through her eyes.

And that is answer enough for me. I won't make her say it. I won't make her betray her city.

"Look, I'm going to extend some trust here," I say, talking rapidly.

I start walking again, and she follows by my side.

"My fiancé hasn't been himself for a bit now.

He's been doing... dangerous things he would never normally do.

Turns out my former best friend, who really, really hates vampires, did something to him.

She somehow used this supernatural influence she has on him and made him do these things against his will.

And I just remembered that Ophelia is from Chicago. ”

Juliet takes a second to process this information. I glance her way to see her gaze fixed on the crowd ahead, but she’s not really seeing it. She presses her lips in a thin line, debating something. “What’s her last name?” she finally asks.

“Bennett,” I answer. I’ve thrown all caution to the wind. I’m putting way too much trust in this woman I just met, but desperate times make people desperate.

Juliet pulls a cell phone out from her back pocket. She taps the screen a few times, then holds it to her ear. She waits three seconds before someone picks up the other end.

“Sigrid,” she says. There’s a comfort to the way she speaks. Whoever she’s talking to, they’re close. “I’ve got a question about someone. Do you know of any Bennetts?”

There’s a few moments of silence while Juliet listens to the woman on the other end.

“Does the name Barbara Bennett sound familiar?” Juliet asks me.

“I’m pretty positive that was Ophelia’s grandmother’s name,” I say, and my heart rate doubles.

Juliet relays this information to Sigrid and continues to listen for a minute. “How about an Ophelia Bennett?” Once more, she listens. “Okay, thanks. Love you, too.”

Hmm, maybe this Sigrid she was talking to is family.

“Okay,” Juliet says as she steps down the sidewalk, resuming our walk. “Sigrid knew Barbara before she died, and yes, it sounds like she did have a supernatural gift. Did

Ophelia's mom or dad have a gift too?"

I shake my head. "I mean, Ophelia obviously never mentioned anything about gifts. Her mom was an addict who died when Ophelia was little. Her dad was a drunk who was never around. Ophelia's grandmother raised her for a while, but it wasn't a great situation.

She never mentioned if her grandmother was particularly influential. "

Juliet shakes her head. "It doesn't work that way," she confesses. "You don't necessarily get the same gift your parent had. In fact, it doesn't really ever happen that way."

She's revealing so damn much without really saying the direct things. But holy shit. It feels like my brain is expanding by the second.

There are supernaturally gifted people out there, and it tends to run in families.

And apparently, there are more than a few of them in Chicago.

"Have you heard of someone who could do something like this?" I ask, speaking faster by the moment as my hope and excitement build. "She just tells them what she wants or what she wants them to do. She said it tends to work better if she touches them."

"Not exactly, but similar," Juliet admits.

She cringes a little, as if realizing how much she's revealing by the minute.

"Please tell me you're a good person because somehow you've got me blabbing about things I never talk about, and I really don't want to have to kill you.

This shit... it's important. And really secret. ”

I shake my head. “I have no desire to expose whatever secrets Chicago is keeping, so long as you're not doing shady shit there. I just want some help fixing my fiancé.”

“Ophelia can't just undo it?” Juliet asks, looking over at me.

I shake my head. “Not so far. But when we said we were in the middle of something, we were literally in the middle of this shit. Ares has kind of been on the run for the last few days, and I finally just caught him and brought him to where we can contain him. So, we were just testing if she could undo what she did. But she's never tried to undo anything before. ”

“Shit,” Juliet says, raising her eyebrows. “This sounds like a damn mess.”

“They haven't stopped happening lately,” I say through gritted teeth.

“I know a little something about that,” she says, and I can just hear it in her tone—she does in fact know.

“Do you think you could help me?” I ask, hoping and praying she'll answer yes. “So far, you know a whole lot more about this stuff than anyone else, including the person who did it. And I'm feeling really fucking desperate.”

Juliet looks over at me, caution in her expression. But I see it there. She's a good person. Complicated? Yes. But somehow you can just tell sometimes when someone is a person who is good at their core. And I can tell that about Juliet.

“Just, try not to ask me too many questions, okay?” she says, the conflict in her tone obvious. “You get me talking too easily.”

“I’ll try,” I say with a smile tugging at my lips. “But don’t expect me to be very successful.”

Juliet just chuckles at that and follows me down into the subway to head back to Brooklyn, where Ares is waiting in the vault.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

Ares is still unconscious when Juliet and I arrive back at the vault. Thankfully Harry thought to add me to the biometric scanner before I left earlier; otherwise, we would have been sitting on our asses outside waiting for him to get back.

I close the heavy steel door behind us, the familiar chill of the vault crawling up my spine.

Juliet walks beside me like this isn't weird, like this maze of boxes hiding a vault isn't just a little crazy.

She carries that kind of effortless, contained chaos—like she's constantly holding back a wicked punchline or something far more dangerous.

The monitor outside the cell shows that Ares is still out cold. I hate seeing him so damn still, almost like he's dead. But I guess it's better than the alternative of him raging so violently to escape that he injures himself. His chest rises and falls in a slow, shallow rhythm. My throat tightens.

“Home sweet dungeon,” Juliet murmurs behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see her already stepping toward the second vault. She tosses me a look. “You mind if I chat with your girl? See what's ticking in that morally gray mind of hers?”

I nod for her to go ahead, barely trusting myself to speak.

As Juliet's footsteps echo throughout the warehouse, I fold my arms and study the screen.



Ares looks like a shadow of the man I love.

Paler than he should be, smears of dried blood all over him, dark circles beneath his eyes.

There's a gash above his brow, half-healed.

Bruising on his arms. All self-inflicted.

He'd been clawing to get out of here, and he hadn't even felt the damage he was doing to himself.

It's hard not to let the what-ifs take over my brain. What if Ophelia can't fix him? What if I'd been too late finding him? What if Ares had gotten to Sysco? What if, what if, what if.

I press my forehead against the monitor and close my eyes.

What does a future look like for him like this?

He'll wake up and feel the weight of everything.

Every life lost at his hands. The guilt will bury him alive.

I can feel it—like a storm cloud waiting to crack open.

Ares has always carried more weight than is his burden to carry. This might be too damn much.

But it won't matter to him unless Ophelia can fix it

Fuck. I hope Juliet can shake something loose in her. I hope she can tap into some underutilized part of Ophelia's messed up brain and help her figure out how to unravel what she twisted. I'd offer up my own mind if it meant saving his.

I flinch as the door to Ophelia's vault opens again.

"...how many times did you do it?" Juliet's voice is casual, even.

"I told him once," Ophelia replies, annoyed sounding. "It's not like I kept repeating it."

Juliet hums, unimpressed. "One time's enough when you're a loaded weapon."

"You don't get it, you're fucking one of them. You're all dangerous. I wasn't just going to do nothing."

There's a pause, then Juliet's voice, low and sharp. "And what exactly do you think you are?"

Silence.

There it is. Juliet has given it a name, what Ophelia has become. Her ability to influence is dangerous.

Ophelia never looks my way. I don't know that we can ever look each other in the eyes again. She keeps her gaze firmly on the floor.

"I really didn't mean for it to go that far," Ophelia mutters. "I guess I just didn't picture it so literally, or I thought he'd kill a few, maybe enough to scare others into leaving."

“You thought you could play god.” Juliet’s tone is flat now, no sarcasm, no humor. “You don’t undo this with a heartfelt apology. People are dead , and there are consequences to shit decisions. Messing with someone’s mind...” Juliet shakes her head, her disgust obvious.

More silence. Then Ophelia, quieter. “I don’t know if I can undo it.”

I want to choke. I want to throw up. I want to scream. I really fucking want to punch Ophelia.

Juliet clicks her tongue. “Well, sweetheart, it’s time to get experimental.”

Ophelia turns in my direction, though, really, it’s more just toward the door. Her eyes flick up to me, but never actually meet my gaze. I place my hand on the scanner, and the door to the vault unlocks.

Maybe I should worry about letting her in that prison cell with Ares. His blood is still smeared over the walls, and there’s still damage throughout the space from when he was last awake. But this is her mess. I’ll let her lay in it.

Juliet pushes the door closed behind Ophelia. Which is the safer option. She is a Born, after all. If Ares does wake up and Ophelia doesn’t fix him, she will be right in his line of sight.

“She’s not happy,” she tells me, sauntering up beside the monitor. “But she’s going to try again. I gave her some tips. Who the hell knows if they’ll work. But it’s worth a shot.”

“Thank you,” I say, keeping my eyes fixed on the monitor. Ophelia is looking at Ares like a puzzle that both terrifies and disgusts her.

“Lana,” Juliet says, softer now, serious. “If he wakes up and she can’t undo it... what’s your plan?”

I glance at her and feel like all of my internal organs disappear with her words. “There is no plan,” I admit, my words hoarse. “There is no other option. We have to fix him.”

Juliet looks away, folding her arms and sighing. “Then let’s hope your twisted little friend has a redemption arc in her.”

I press a hand to the monitor again. “Come back to me, Ares,” I whisper, barely audible. “Please... come back.”

The front door makes a grinding sound as it’s opened. The sound of footsteps echoes throughout the warehouse as they make their way through the maze. A few moments later, Harry steps through first, followed by Sysco and Roman. But behind them is James St. Claire. Ares’ right-hand man and assistant.

He’s about the last person I would have expected to accompany the group.

His sharp gray eyes scan the room until they land on me. I don’t expect them to narrow at me like they do.

“Lana, what the fuck is going on?” he asks. His tone is sharp. I’ve never heard him be anything but in control and at the ready. “Where is Ares? What’s wrong with him?”

“James, I?—”

“He hasn’t returned my calls. No one’s seen him in days,” James cuts me off, looking like he’s about ready to tear the world apart. “This isn’t like Ares.”

I didn't realize he cared for Ares so much.

Sysco moves to intercept, a hand raised in caution. "James, things are... complicated right now."

James glares at him. "He's my employer and my friend. Complicated or not, I think at this point, I have a right to know what's going on."

Juliet crosses her arms, studying him with a cool detachment. Roman lingers at her side, silent and unreadable.

I step forward, my voice tight. "He is here, James. But he's not okay."

James's eyes flick to mine. "What does that mean?"

Instead of answering, I nod toward the monitor. "See for yourself."

James's gaze flicks to the monitor. The second he sees Ares—pale, his clothes torn, dried blood caking his arms and neck—his brows furrow and something grows... dark in his expression. "What the hell happened to him?"

But I don't answer because suddenly, Ares moves.

It's not much. His hand twitches. But my new, sharp eyes don't miss much now.

"Get Ophelia out of there," I say in a breath.

Harry scans his hand, and Juliet yanks Ophelia out of the vault. Harry slams the door closed again as Juliet hauls Ophelia across the space, talking to her privately.

On the screen, we see it as Ares' breathing speeds up, which sends my heart rate

skyrocketing. Next, he takes in a sharp inhale.

And dammit, I realize he's scenting the air.

Then his eyes snap open.

A low, animalistic growl rips through the speakers. Ares rises in a violent rush, body tensing like a loaded weapon. He hurls himself at the vault door, a furious blur. I flinch and instinctively take a step away from the door.

"I can fucking smell you!" he snarls. "Harry. Sysco. James! Who else is out there?"

He doesn't know Roman or Juliet, but he can scent them, and it's like he's turned absolutely feral.

He slams his shoulder against the reinforced wall so hard it echoes like a gunshot. Again. And again. He doesn't even wince. I'm not even sure his broken collarbone from earlier has healed yet, but there's no way it doesn't snap again in the next few seconds.

"Shit," Sysco mutters. "He's worse than before."

From her half-hidden corner, Juliet shifts her weight, one hand hovering subtly near the hidden dagger at her hip. Roman steps forward, tension rolling off him.

They better stay put, or it's going to get ugly and violent in here.

James is pale, horrified. "What the hell is wrong with him?!"

I step between him and the screen. "There was... an incident. This woman, she was hurt by Augustus. He did bad things to her. And she, Ophelia, it made her hate

vampires. Turns out she can do... things."

He blinks, like he didn't hear me right. "What?"

Why the hell do I feel so nervous? I know James. Not well, but I've been around him plenty. He's Ares' employee. He's just some guy who works for my fiancé. So why is my heart pounding? Why am I worried about the look of fury in his eyes?

"She got in his head," I say. "I'd seen her do it before but didn't realize to what extent she could do it. But she thought Ares was like Augustus. She thought all vampires were like him. So, she told Ares to kill every vampire he knows in New York. And then himself."

I don't mean to, but as I speak about her, my eyes naturally flick to Ophelia, where she is still speaking to Juliet.

It's like watching a hurricane roll in. The look in James's eyes darkens. I see a muscle in his jaw twitch. His hands curl into fists. "She fucking what ? She just dug into his mind and turned on some command?"

Ares throws himself at the wall again. There's that sound, the one I've been anticipating. The sound of his collarbone cracking. I can't breathe.

"He's going to destroy himself before we can fix him," Harry mutters.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The look on James's face is ice cold. He turns to where he saw me looking. His gaze fixes on where she stands. I swear there's a sudden drop in air pressure.

"You did this?" he asks, his tone low. "You made a judgment? You messed with his head? You made a vampire hunt other vampires?"

Ophelia stiffens, hands clenched. For a second, I don't think she can speak, she's so paralyzed with fear. But finally, her lips part just slightly. "I didn't want to be afraid of living in New York anymore. Because as long as there are vampires, I'm not safe. Lana wasn't safe."

"He would never hurt her!" James snarls.

"Just knowing him got her fucking kidnapped!" Ophelia snaps, and oh, she is so stupid.

James steps forward, a deadly look in his eyes. But Sysco steps between him and Ophelia, looking down at him with serious, fixed eyes. "Take a breath, bro."

James looks around the room like it's suddenly filled with strangers. The calm, composed assistant is gone. What remains is something lean and volatile. His breath is too fast. His hands tremble. When he speaks again, it's lower, guttural.

"You broke him."

"I... I honestly didn't know it would go this far," Ophelia says, voice cracking.



Ares screams again. He's clawing at the vault door now, skin tearing open in long, red streaks. He's frantic. Rabid.

James seethes.

Everyone else exchanges wary glances. Neither Harry nor Sysco knows James well. He's always just been Ares' assistant that they'd see or hear from in passing. Roman is watching James with wary eyes, evaluating his every move.

I look at James differently now. There's something off about him. Something I've never seen in him until now. Not just anger. Not just grief. Something deeper. Twisted. And I don't know what it means.

The tension in the vault is a noose, tightening with every breath. Ares bellows again from behind the enforced door, pacing like an apex predator locked in too small a cage. Blood drips down his hands, his knuckles raw from pounding the walls in a frenzy.

Juliet looks up at Ophelia again, her blue eyes narrowing. "It didn't work," she says evenly, as if trying to smooth out the tension of the past few minutes. "The hold is still there."

James snaps. "Then we kill her. That'll end it."

I turn, stunned. "What?"

"If it cuts the threads, it's what we have to do. She deserves nothing less," James growls. His calm, collected demeanor is gone—shredded. What remains is something wild, feral. "You kill the source."

Juliet rises, sharp. "I know from experience that killing a person doesn't guarantee

their ties end with them. Trust me. Do you really want to run that risk?"

Ophelia is trembling now, her shoulders rigid with fear, but her lip curls in defiance. "You think I wanted this ? You think I wanted him like that ?"

It takes everything I have in me not to strike her. She wanted him dead. She told him to kill himself. And now, she finally sees the reality of what she did, and it frightens her.

"Tell us the truth, Ophelia," I say, my words shaking with my restraint. "You said you did this—but not alone. Who helped you?"

Ophelia's eyes flick between us, cornered. Her voice breaks. "I don't know."

"Bullshit," James growls.

Ophelia clutches her side, breathing fast. "It was a woman. A therapist. She had a very specific specialty. Helping people who had been hurt by vampires."

"Holy shit," Sysco mutters. "That's a thing?"

Dammit. I had never really thought about it. That there were enough people out there who had been victimized by vampires that there would be a fucking therapist who specialized in helping the survivors.

No wonder Ophelia hates vampires so much. She's seen proof that there are others out there that are hurting as much as she is.

"She helped me after Augustus," Ophelia continues. "She made me feel... seen. Like I wasn't crazy. She understood. But she hates vampires, too. She said... she said we could reshape things."

Juliet's expression hardens. "What was her name?"

Ophelia's head shakes violently. "I don't know. I swear—I don't remember what she looks like, or where we met. She changed it every time."

"That doesn't even make sense," Sysco says, annoyed.

Ophelia's eyes rip to meet his. "I know. It was pretty fucking trippy. I can't even remember how I tracked her down. It's like she can pluck the details from your brain in real time. Her name, her face, where she's going to be. She scrubs it as she goes."

My stomach turns. "So how do we track down someone we can't even name?"

Silence.

Roman turns toward Ophelia, his vivid blue eyes fixed intensely. "You need to try again. Harder. Push deeper. If we can't find this woman to help you undo this, it has to be you. Find another path."

I glance back at the monitor. Ares is still pacing, more erratic now. Blood smears the ground at his feet.

Ophelia swallows hard and nods. She keeps a wary eye on every one of us as she steps forward. I almost feel bad for her. She's the only human in this space. She's surrounded by six vampires, plus the one locked up. But she's fucked up enough, I can't summon the sympathy.

She walks up to the door of the vault and lays her hands against it. "Ares," she calls softly.

On the monitor, I see his head jerks toward her voice. With a roar, he slams his entire

body against the door. It rattles, makes a horrendous ruckus, but it holds.

“Ares, you have to stop this,” Ophelia says.

I notice the air feels colder. Sharper.

“These are your friends,” she says, and the sound of her voice is a little different. Something prickles on my skin. “You don’t want to kill them. You don’t need to kill them. And I need you to stop hurting yourself.”

On the screen, Ares stills in the middle of the vault. He’s breathing hard, deep, ragged. He does not look calm or himself. But he is still, at least.

I look back at the others. Sysco looks so damn hopeful that he’s about to get his best friend back. Harry is cool and observant. Juliet bites at her thumbnail nervously. But Roman’s eyes flick over to James. James stares at Ophelia with so much hatred it chills me.

What the hell is going on?

“Keep going, you selfish bitch,” James snarls, his tone low.

Every vampire in the room looks back at him.

“Keep. Going,” James says again.

Ophelia squeezes her eyes closed and swallows hard.

I want to yank James’s throat out and throttle him. I think it’s working, but he’s just threatening her. What fucking good does that do right now?

“Ares,” Ophelia says once more, flattening her palms against the hard surface of the door. “It’s over. You have to stop. Let what I told you to do go.”

The temperature of the room drops further. Something prickles along the back of my neck.

On the monitor, I see Ares close his eyes.

Holy shit. I think it’s working. I want to encourage Ophelia, to tell her to keep going, but I don’t dare break her concentration.

“You’re free, Ares,” Ophelia says, and her voice sounds different. It resonates, almost like a bell. It pierces my ears. I feel it down to my core. “Do what you will.”

Something pulses through the air, and on the monitor, I see Ares drop to his hands and knees. I’m holding my breath as I watch him, as I search him for any signs of a change. He just stays there for several long moments, taking in a slow, ragged breaths, and then another, smoother one.

And finally, he lifts his head.

His eyes are no longer glowing brilliant red. They’re him. His beautiful, comforting hazel. He blinks, and his eyes flicker—as if surfacing from drowning.

“Lana?” he calls out, his words haggard and confused. “Sysco?”

I feel it in my bones. “It’s done. You did it, Ophelia.”

But we don’t get two seconds to celebrate, to take it in, to process. Because there is a feral snarl. I don’t even see it when James darts forward, only when he suddenly slams into Ophelia from behind.

“You should be worshiping us on our knees, and you make us kill each other?” he snarls next to her ear. I’m not even sure I heard him right. But the next second, he’s grabbed her by the back of her shirt. He yanks her back, flinging her across the warehouse like she’s nothing but a ragdoll.

She hits the edge of the stairs with her ribs first, and then her head makes a sickening crack sound as it hits next.

There’s a blur of motion that bullets for the door in the same breath that Ophelia falls to the floor.

What the hell just happened? I stand rooted for a second, trying to process Ophelia’s unconscious form lying on the ground and the empty space beside me where James was just a few seconds ago.

“The hell?” Roman snarls as he crosses the warehouse, looking out the door.

But James is gone .

“Holy shit,” Juliet breathes as she rushes forward. With careful hands, she straightens Ophelia’s limp form. There’s blood smeared on the ground beneath her head.

“She needs a hospital,” Juliet says as she checks her pulse. “She’s definitely got some broken ribs. There’s the risk of a punctured lung, her breathing doesn’t sound right. And she probably has a cranial fracture.”

Her eyes snap up to mine. “If we don’t move now, she might not make it. Roman, help me.”

I stand frozen. Torn.

Ares is still in the vault, dazed, barely upright. His eyes dart, lost. I want to run to him—but Ophelia...

Roman lifts Ophelia gently. Juliet's hands are already covered in blood, but her voice is cool, sharp. "Look, Lana, I'm an ER doctor. I'll keep her alive. But we have to go right now."

I blink five times, stunned, confused. "Thank you."

And just like that, they vanish into the corridor.

I turn back to the monitor. Ares sits on the floor, bloodied and broken, but... here.

He lifts his gaze to the camera.

Recognition flickers.

My heart stutters.

He's back.

"Holy fuck, what the hell just happened?" Sysco blurts, vocalizing the chaos we're all still a little stunned by.

"Ares?" I say, pressing the button on the control to activate the voice com.

"Lana?" I hear him, my name coming out breathy and anxious. "Where the fuck am I? What... What is going on?"

Instantly, my eyes sting. Shit, this is going to be so hard.

“How are you feeling, Ares?” I ask. My voice cracks.

I see Ares shake his head as he kneels on the concrete. “Foggy,” he says honestly. “A little fucking dazed. Vengeance, what’s wrong?”

And here is why I would go to the ends of the earth for this man. His head is scrambled right now. He has no fucking idea what’s going on. But he hears the emotion in my voice, and it’s me he’s worried about.

“You don’t...” I hesitate, unsure what to ask or how to ask it. I have to be so damn careful from here on out. “Are you bothered by Harry or Sysco right now?”

He takes a moment to answer, confused by my question. “I... Sorry, Vengeance, but what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

My eyes flick over to Sysco first and then Harry. They’re both taking my lead right now.

“If I open this door, are you going to do something violent?” My voice breaks on the words again.

Ares is quiet for a moment again. On the monitor, I see his eyes shift to the door. He takes in the streaks of dried and fresh blood there. He looks at his split knuckles. He rotates his shoulder, wincing. He’s healing already, his vampire blood fixing what he broke.

But I see it, as he takes in the violence around him.

He goes paler.

“What the hell did I do?” he finally asks, his voice hoarse. “Lana, why can’t I



remember how I got here?”

I glance at Sysco. I see it in his eyes. He doesn't want Ares to know either. He knows how much this is going to hurt him. The guilt he's going to carry. But there's no avoiding it.

Sysco nods his head. Harry crosses to the scanner and places his palm on it.

There's a loud clicking sound as the lock disengages.

The door swings open.

And thank the dark, Ares does not rush at Sysco or Harry. He stays kneeling on the floor of that prison cell, looking up at the three of us with a look of anticipation and absolute dread.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I step inside slowly. I don't know why. I'm not worried he's going to hurt me. But it feels a little like approaching a feral animal you aren't sure will accept your help. "You're safe. You're at Harry's vault. Do you remember how you got here?"

He squints, and his brow furrows. "No."

I kneel in front of him, close but not touching. He studies me like he's trying to determine if I'm real.

"Fuck, Vengeance, the way you're looking at me," he says, his expression tortured. "Did I..."

"You didn't hurt me," I assure him as I reach out and take his hand in mine. "Not once."

Some of the tension drains from his shoulders. He lifts a trembling hand and brushes it against my cheek. His fingers are healing, but the blood still clings beneath his nails. "You look different."

I smile, faintly. "A lot has happened."

He nods slowly. "I feel like my brain's been torn in half."

"That might be the toxin. I had to drug you. And, everything else, you..." Shit, I don't even know where to start. How do I tell the man I love what happened?

Ares must sense my hesitance because he doesn't immediately ask for me to explain.

“You don’t have to hide, Sysco and Harry.”

At the invitation, they both step inside the vault. They look ready, in case Ares is still under Ophelia’s influence, but not scared. Thankfully, Ares doesn’t move from his place on the floor as they enter.

"Hey, Ares," Harry says evenly. "You're alright. You're safe."

"That's what she said," Ares murmurs, glancing at me.

A long pause stretches. Ares shifts his weight and grimaces. His healing is slower than usual, but steady.

"What the hell happened to me?"

I glance at Harry, then Sysco. Fuck, I really don’t want to have to be the one to explain it. But I am his fiancée; they’re just his friends.

It has to be me.

“You’ve been acting off for a while now,” I begin, returning to meet his gaze. “Do you remember any of that?”

I see him wracking his brain, searching his memory for the evidence of what I’m saying. Finally, he gives a small nod. “You thought I was cheating on you.”

There’s emotion in his voice. A crack. A fracture. My thinking that hurt him just as much as it hurt me.

“Only because you kept disappearing. You always had some place to be, but it wasn’t always work. James confirmed that to me. And then we realized you were missing

chunks of time,” I continue.

I see the shift in his eyes as he starts piecing little bits of it together. But he’s more lost than ever.

“You came home in different clothes. There was blood under your fingernails,” I say, diving into the darkness of it. “And when I picked you up in Queens, and then Gio told us...”

This is so hard. How do you tell the love of your life that they’ve killed five people, maybe more?

“What did I do, Lana?” Ares’ words are little more than a breath of dread.

“Gio told us his son Luciano had been killed,” I say, putting the first nail in the coffin. “In Queens. And we started piecing it together. Any time any of these vampires had been killed, no one could account for your whereabouts.”

His eyes narrow, and he looks... hurt. “No. That’s not possible. I wouldn’t hurt Luciano. I haven’t even seen him in years.”

Sysco steps forward. “You weren’t you, Ares. You were gone, man. For a while, you were sometimes you, but it got worse and worse. Finally, you were just completely gone. We had to knock you out. Twice. You didn’t even recognize us.”

“That’s not—” Ares presses his palms to his temples, breathing hard. “I don’t remember that. I remember...” His words trail off as his gaze fixes on the floor.

He blinks rapidly, like he’s trying to clear the fog out of his brain.

“I don’t know. I guess there are some flashes.

Fuck, I definitely can't remember much of anything since... Since I went and talked to Ophelia."

Harry and I glance at each other, and I know I couldn't ask for a more perfect segway.

"That's because it was her," I say, my throat feeling thick.

My stomach twists. I want to throw up or scream.

The betrayal of it all still sears my soul.

When the confusion in his eyes deepens, I press on.

"The signs were there, but at the time, I didn't know it was possible.

But Ophelia has a supernatural gift. She can influence people. "

"What do you mean?" Ares asks, his voice rough, hints of anger leaking into it.

I glance at Sysco, and we both take a deep breath.

We've had time to process this fact. But this is the first time Ares is hearing about other supernaturals beyond vampires.

"Turns out there are people who can do things. Things like telling you to do something, and you do it, even if you never would normally. Ophelia was angry when you went to talk to her, wasn't she? "

"She was fucking livid," Ares confirms. His eyes darken. "I tried to reason with her, to help. But she wouldn't hear a damn word of it."

“Turns out she wasn’t happy with just trying to put you in your place,” Sysco helps deliver the news I really don’t want to share. “She used this supernatural influence, and she told you to kill every vampire you know in New York.”

I squeeze my eyes closed and pray Sysco doesn’t disclose the second part of what she told Ares to do.

Thank fuck he keeps it to himself.

“No,” Ares says, shaking his head. “That’s not possible. And I wouldn’t ever do that. Augustus—he deserved what he got. But every vampire I know in New York? Hell no.”

“Beth, Mike,” Harry begins. I squeeze my eyes closed. This hurts. It’s so damn painful. And it just makes it worse that it was my former best friend who could do this. “Felix. Tom. Luciano.”

“We don’t even really know the full body count yet,” Sysco says quietly. “Cliff has been missing. We haven’t found a body yet, but we’re guessing you got to him, too.”

Ares stares at us like we’re speaking a language he doesn’t understand. Then, his face crumples slightly. The denial fractures.

I pull his hand into mine, pressing a kiss to his palm. He didn’t fucking deserve this. He had no control. What Ophelia did...

A tear dampens my eyelashes. I wipe it away before anyone can see it.

“You were hunting me when Lana finally tricked you into coming to her,” Sysco says, the words tight.

“Even you?” Ares asks in distress as he looks up, disbelief, grief, and shock painting his face ashen.

“Ares, look at me,” I say as I place a hand on his cheek. “Right now, in this moment, does any part of you want to hurt Sysco?”

His eyes are nearly frantic as he searches mine. “No,” he says with conviction.

I nod. “This, right here, right now, is you. Anything that happened before a few minutes ago was not you. From the time you stepped into Ophelia’s apartment until just a few minutes ago, that was not you. You hear me?”

He stares at me, and he looks so desperate to believe me. But he literally has blood on his hands right now.

“Lana’s right, brother,” Sysco says. He crosses the vault and squats down beside Ares.

He levels his gaze with him. “You were not you. We saw little glimpses here and there, but I know you. We know you. The man we’ve seen the last eight days wasn’t Ares Hunt.

That was Ophelia’s Frankenstein puppet. Don’t pick this weight up with you. You aren’t responsible for it.”

Shit. I love Sysco. That was about the perfect thing to say.

“Where is Ophelia?” Ares asks. And it says something about this incredible man. He doesn’t ask it with malice or with vengeance. His words are hard, but they don’t promise justice.

“In the hospital,” I say as something else twists in my gut. “James showed up, and when he realized what happened, he made her pay for what she did. I... I don’t know what her condition is yet.”

Ares holds my eyes, and there’s too much compassion he’s showing toward me. He knows what Ophelia meant to me. He can hear the conflict in my voice.

But she is the one who did this to him.

“What about Gio?” Ares asks, moving on. His voice sounds hoarse. “Why isn’t he here if the rest of you are?”

I look at Sysco, then Harry, and they look at me in response.

“Gio’s gone, but that wasn’t on you,” Harry says. He extends a hand to Ares, who takes it, and he pulls Ares to his feet. “We’re here for you, whatever you need. But you seem like you’re yourself again. You and Lana have a lot of shit to talk about. Only she can tell it.”

Ares looks over at me, and I see him really looking. He’s woken up to a lot of shit being different, but he’s noticing the actual physical differences in me.

“Come on, we need to get you home,” I say, taking his hand, even as I reach into my back pocket for my phone.

I call Billings, who answers after just one ring.

I ask him to pick us up, and he reports he’ll be here in two minutes.

Apparently, he’s been waiting close by, anxious to figure out what’s going on with his boss.



“We have a lot of weird shit to deal with,” Sysco says. “But I think you deserve the rest of the day. Reset with your girl. And then all of us can meet back with Juliet and Roman. And then figure out what the hell that was with James.”

“What does James have to do with any of this?” Ares questions, his brows furrowing. “And who are Juliet and Roman?”

“I’ll explain it all,” I say, tugging Ares to the door. “But I’d really like to get out of here. I don’t know if I can stand it another second in this place.”

We step out into the daylight, Ares squeezing his eyes closed against the brilliant sunlight.

Right on cue, Billings pulls up to the curb.

Ares is essentially blind as he casts a wary glance at Harry and Sysco, both of whom have slipped on sunshades.

They simply give a reassuring nod, and Ares climbs in behind me into the black SUV and closes the door behind him.

I immediately grab the sunshades from their storage spot in the vehicle and hand them to Ares, who puts them on.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

“I’m relieved to see you looking more like yourself, Mr. Hunt,” Billings says as he signals and pulls onto the road.

“Thanks,” Ares says, still sounding confused and a little baffled.

It’s a quiet drive as we cross the Brooklyn Bridge and head back to the Upper East Side.

Because the fewer people who know about everything that has just happened, the better.

For Ares. I will do anything I can to protect him, and even though Billings is a vampire and has been Ares’ driver for years, he doesn’t need to know all of these terrible, dark details.

I need to call Florence. I need to tell her that her brother is back.

But, for some reason, I can’t right now. It all feels too fragile, too fresh. I vow I will call her soon, but it won’t be right this second.

So, I simply take Ares’ hand and rub reassuring circles into the back of it with my thumb. Ares stares out the window. I can feel the turmoil, the confusion raging around inside him like a hurricane. It’s all coming. It’s going to be heavy. It’s going to be hard.

But I’m right here.

Finally, we work our way through the traffic, and Billings stops on the side of our building.

Ares and I climb out, and we enter the lobby of our building.

Our favorite doorman, Laz, gives me a relieved nod when he sees Ares and I walk in together.

I had him on alert for if Ares came home, though I didn't give him any of the details.

We take the elevator up to our floor, and I unlock our door.

I feel this weird sense of stressed relief when we step inside the penthouse. We're home. This space feels like home in every sense of the word now. But we have so much ahead of us to work through, I can't exactly feel relaxed.

I click the button on the remote, which closes the window coverings, leaving the penthouse washed in darkness.

"I need a shower," Ares states when we walk in.

I give a nod and watch as he goes back to the bedroom.

I'm really damn glad he suggested it, that I didn't have to ask him to go shower.

But the sight of him with his own blood smeared all over him isn't something I can handle.

Once upon not so long ago, the sight of blood would throw me into a panic attack.

After seeing my mother and sister after they were murdered, their blood splattered

across our apartment, the trauma ran deep.

Being with Ares has cured most of that. But as I see his blood, as I think about what it means, once more, the world threatens to close in on me.

I force a breath in, closing my eyes. I won't let the world spin out on me, though. I won't. I don't have time for that shit.

My insides are starting to feel like tar, and there's something burning in the pit of my stomach. I cross to the fridge and pull out one of the blood bags Florence brought for me. I bite into the plastic bag, and I suck.

Hell, why does this taste good? It's mind boggling.

This cold, coppery liquid is one of the best damn things I've ever drank.

And miraculously, by the time I reach the bottom of it, I'm satisfied.

I feel it wash through my body, feel the cells in me regenerate.

That sensation of perfect stasis, of being absolutely balanced, courses through me.

I close my eyes and let it course through my entire body.

How is Ares going to feel about this? What happened to me.

The decision Florence made. What it means for my future.

The fact that I now require blood every single day.

It isn't an option. If, for some reason, I don't have access to donated blood each and

every day, I'm going to have to go out and feed live.

Shit. I haven't really thought about that part yet.

I could feed on a live person. Grab someone off the street. Sink my fangs into their neck and take a few pulls. The same way Lawrence bought me and fed on me in his basement.

Stars, I suddenly feel like the same kind of monster.

Except the amount of blood I require is minuscule compared to how much a Born requires.

When did the world go and turn so fucking upside down?

I ignore all of that, though, and I finally call Florence. I tell her what happened. I tell her that Ares is himself again. She wants to rush right over, but I beg her to give it a little bit of time. The hard part isn't over yet.

"I'm glad he has you, Lana," Florence says, her tone serious and heavy. "You have no idea how good you've been for him. In every way. Let me know when he's ready."

"I will," I promise.

I hear the water turn off in the shower. Two minutes later, I wander into the living room as Ares walks down the hall. He's wearing some black sweatpants and a white t-shirt that clings to his still damp chest.

Good grief, he's so damn beautiful.

I take his hand and pull him to sit beside me on the couch. He looks clearer, so much more himself. I still see worry, frustration, anger crease little lines at the corners of his eyes. But I see clarity there.

He's finally himself again.

"I want you to walk me through it, Vengeance," he says, never once looking away. "All of it. Don't spare me any of the details."

"Okay," I say with a hoarse voice.

And so I do.

I begin with the morning he went and talked to Ophelia.

I point out how Tom didn't show up to work.

We work our way through his odd behavior.

Ares never even realized he was behaving oddly toward the others, that I was worried about what he might do to them.

But one at a time, I share the details of how that zombie version of him went after any vampires he knew.

I tell him how I began to realize that the Steele family had gone through a similar experience with the uncle. How Sysco and I pieced it together that someone had done this to Ares, that he wasn't being himself.

Ares listens to it all with his lips set in a thin line. He asks for clarification. He shares when he had no fucking idea what he was doing. Ares doesn't seem to remember

much of anything at all since he went and talked to Ophelia.

“She did this?” Ares asks. “She just... told me what to do, and I fucking did it?” he asks in baffled annoyance.

I nod. “Turns out there are other gifts out there besides being immortal and being incredibly fast and strong. Apparently, Ophelia has known she could do this since she was a teenager. It’s not consistent, but it works often enough.

Guess she hates vampires enough to lose her damn sense of conscious. ”

Ares shakes his head, staring down at his hands like they don’t belong to him. Because, for a while, they didn’t.

“And then there was Luciano,” I say, my throat feeling thick as we work our way through it. “When Gio found out what had happened, he...” I swallow once. “I was at Florence’s, and he...”

Fuck, I don’t want to have to tell him any of this. I want to magically erase all of it, to reset and recorrect.

But there is only one way through this. And it’s with the truth.

“He came after me. Said it had to be a life for a life.”

Ares tenses, his jaw locking. “He touched you?”

I nod once. “He... he sliced me open. From navel to sternum. I didn’t even have time to scream.”

Ares jerks back like the words physically strike him. “Lana...”

“It was bad. Really bad,” I say, voice wavering. “I was dying. And Florence made a decision.”

He looks at me sharply. “What decision?”

I hold his gaze for a few seconds. And I see it as he starts piecing it together. He knows what he can see with his eyes, what he can smell.

I am different.

I swallow. “You know what she’s been researching. What she’s been trying to create. Has she ever actually explained the regenerative ability of it all to you?”

His breath catches. His grip on my thigh tightens. Panic sharpens his eyes. “Florence tested it on you?”

“She saved me, Ares. I was bleeding out. She was literally trying to put my intestines back in my body. I... I was gutted. No hospital could have put me back together. There was no surgery that could have saved me,” I say, and I hate the words.

I don’t want to describe this for Ares. It will haunt him forever.

But I can’t have him doubting Florence’s decision.

I can’t let him resent her for saving me.

I need to make him understand the reality.

“Nothing but Florence’s miracle could have saved me. ”

His hand shakes. It takes a lot of turmoil to make a Born vampire’s hands shake. I



watch him try to hold it in, but he can't. His fingers rise, running both hands through his hair as he takes in a shaky breath. "Holy shit, Lana..."

"Listen to me," I say as I shift. I lift a leg over his, coming to keel with my knees on either side of his hips.

I settle into his lap, forcing his gaze to my eyes.

"I'm okay. I feel okay. Better than okay.

It worked. The regeneration, the blood—my body rebuilt itself in real time.

Ares, I don't age anymore, I don't scar.

And I can't be killed, not easily. I'm stronger.

I'm fast. And sunlight doesn't even bother me. "

Ares turns, looking at me like I'm something he doesn't deserve. "Lana, I... I can't believe I let this happen to you."

"No," I say, grabbing his face in both hands. "You didn't let anything happen. None of this is on you. I was supposed to be here, Ares. In this world. With you."

He closes his eyes, leans into my touch. But I feel the guilt simmering under his skin.

"If I hadn't lost control—if I hadn't killed Giovanni's son?—"

"Stop." I say it firmly, cutting through the spiral. "You didn't choose that. It wasn't you. And if you keep trying to take the blame, if you let guilt win, it'll hurt me. It will eat at us."

His eyes fly open, and the look on his face—like I just hit him with truth so deep, it carved its way into his bones.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I know I'm fighting dirty right now. I know Ares will do anything for me, even ignore his own pain. But I can't stand that look in his eyes. I can't bear to see him in such agony. I don't know any other way to save him from himself right now other than to weaponize myself against him.

"Can you let it go?" I ask softly. "Can you move forward with me? Because I need you. I need you, not the man buried in shame. I've missed you so damn much."

The ache in his eyes makes my breath hitch.

He lifts a hand, cupping my cheek like I might slip away.

"I can," he says. "For you—I will."

I don't wait another second.

I crash into him, our mouths finding each other with a desperation that's been building for what feels like years, even if it's only been eight days. His arms wrap around me, tight and possessive, pulling me flush against him like he'll never let go again.

Ares climbs from the couch, pulling me up with him. I'm ripping his shirt off without thought. He unbuttons my pants and shoves them down my hips. In a matter of seconds, he's completely naked, and I'm down to nothing but my underwear.

Our lips have hardly broken apart, though. His skin is hot when Ares' hands come to my hips, and without any effort, he grips them, lifting me clean off the ground.

His lips are savage as he takes possession of mine. My body is a raging inferno of heat as I wrap my legs tightly around his waist. My nipples harden, and I press them into his bare chest.

Roughly, I feel him finger my panties. He tugs them to the side, and the heat of his head is instantly there.

A devious smile comes to my lips as I look down at him. His eyes are burning with the rage of desire.

And then he crosses the room. The cool surface of the wall flattens my back as he presses me into it and thrusts inside of me.

I'm never going to get sick of this. Ares fills me completely. He fits against every bit of my body. He knows exactly every place of my body to touch to send me higher and higher.

I'll never get tired of touching him. Letting my fingers run over every inch of this tattooed skin. Memorizing every rise and fall of him.

My back presses into the wall as he presses harder into me. The contact between my legs makes my head spin.

Ares buries his face in my neck. He licks my skin, nips it with his teeth.

A hot breath leaves my mouth as I tip my head back to the wall. Ares kisses his way across the front of my throat, one of his hands coming up to cup my breast.

I squeeze him tighter with my thighs.

I feel it rising. Like the tide. Like a tidal wave. It sucks out to sea, and at any moment,

it's going to come crashing back to shore, obliterating everything in its path.

Both of my hands rise to lace into Ares' hair. My breath is heaving now, my chest rising and falling, pressing my breasts into his chest.

Ares meets my eyes as he thrusts inside me, sharp and quick.

I hold his gaze as I grind my hips against him.

"I love you, Lana," he growls as he slides in and out, his pace intensifying.

My brain is blissed out. My body is a coiled bomb waiting to go off.

But it's as easy as breathing when I confess the words. "I love you, too."

And I don't stifle my cry as the orgasm crashes into me. I let it rip out of me with every intense pulse. I call out for the entire world to hear if they want.

It's the best feeling in the world. This, with Ares.

For a while, I wasn't sure if I'd ever get to be with him like this again.

But it's the best thing in the world when I watch his expression intensify, and then he calls out my name as he comes inside of me, every muscle in his body so tight, he could snap me in half if he weren't careful.

We fall back onto the couch, tangled and breathless, and he groans against my skin like worship, like punishment. Like salvation.

"Mine," he murmurs, voice cracked and reverent, over and over like a vow.

We lie tangled on the couch, our skin still slick with sweat, the city a soft hum beyond the glass. Ares' hand rests on my waist, the pads of his fingers tracing slow circles against my side like he's afraid to stop touching me, like I might vanish.

He shifts slightly, propping himself up on one elbow to look down at me. The shadows stretch across his face, catching in the angles of his jaw, in the hollows of his eyes. But there's no darkness there now. Just wonder.

"You're different," he murmurs. "Even just to the touch. Your skin—it's warmer. Denser, maybe. Like you're made of lightning instead of flesh."

I laugh, soft and breathless. "Lightning. That's a new one."

He brushes a strand of hair from my cheek. "Your heart... it doesn't beat like it used to. Slower. Quieter. But it's so fucking steady."

I feel his reverence. It's as if he's cataloging me like I'm something rare. Like a secret he gets to keep.

Then his face shifts. A shadow creeps across it, more grief than awe.

"I'm still not sure how to feel about what Florence did. She saved you, yeah. But she also made a choice for you. One that can't be undone."

I nod slowly. "I know. But I don't regret it. I didn't feel like I was losing myself, Ares. I felt like I was stepping into who I was always meant to be."

His throat works on a swallow. I lean into him, pressing my forehead to his.

"You want to know what it feels like?"

He nods.

“I feel awake. Constantly. Like every cell in my body is humming. My vision’s sharper. I hear things I didn’t even know made sound. I don’t get tired. I don’t feel cold or hot.”

His brows lift slightly, but he says nothing, just watches me like I’m the answer to a question he didn’t know he was asking.

“There’s blood in me now, but it’s not hunger. It’s power. It fuels everything—the regeneration, the energy, the strength. I’m not like you,” I say gently. “I wasn’t born from a curse. I was made. Engineered. A different kind of forever.”

His mouth parts like he wants to say something, but no words come out. Instead, he leans down and kisses the spot just beneath my collarbone.

Then another. And another.

His lips skim down to the curve of my breast, the center of my sternum. “My miracle,” he murmurs.

Lower, to the ridge of my hip bone. “My death and my resurrection.”

I thread my fingers through his hair as he kisses lower still, reverent and slow.

“I would’ve walked through fire for you,” he whispers against my skin. “But now I think you are the fire.”

His mouth worships every inch of me like I’m something holy. And I let him.

Because I am his miracle.

And he is mine.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

“She’s in bad shape,” Juliet says as we step out of the smoothie shop. With a cup in either hand, we both walk out of the busy store and cross to the table outside.

Damn. If it weren’t for the difference in hair and eye color, Ares and Roman look like they could be brothers. The broody expressions, the tattoos, they’re both tall and built like they grew up in an MMA arena.

I extend Ares’ smoothie to him and sink into the seat beside him.

He takes it, though he doesn’t immediately set into it.

He’s been fairly quiet since we met up with Juliet and Roman twenty minutes ago.

I’ve caught Ares up on all the details of their presence in the city, including the impossible reality that there’s a necromancer around.

He’s still processing all of that information.

And that was after Florence and Clementine came over this morning. I’ve never seen Florence cry before today. But her relief at having her brother back was overwhelming. Guess that’s what happens when you’re the only blood family each other has left.

“The internal bleeding was extensive,” Juliet continues as she sits beside Roman. “She broke five ribs, she has a skull fracture, and she was definitely concussed. She’s probably going to be in the hospital for two weeks.”

My throat is tight. It feels like there's a barb wedged in it. "Is she conscious?"

Juliet nods. "Yeah, they worked on her for about two hours, and she woke up a few hours after that."

"So, she's going to live, right?" I ask. My words sound funny. They're too strained, too tight. Too emotional.

Juliet studies me. She's still trying to get a feel for the situation and everything going on here. "She is."

I nod in relief, looking around at the bustling city around us.

"I don't know how we'll live in the same city together after everything that's happened.

I can't forgive her for what she's done.

She'll hate vampires even more now after James lost his damn mind like that.

New York was her dream, but it's always been my home. "

Juliet reaches across the table, laying her hand over mine. "Relationships are complicated. Sometimes you think you know someone, and it turns out you don't."

Who betrayed Juliet? What's her story?

"When people put your city at risk, you don't let them stay," Roman says.

He, like the other two Born at this table, is wearing some serious sunglasses that mean business.

He's already difficult to read. Having his eyes obscured makes it even harder.

"Sounds to me like Ophelia needs a change of scenery."

"I don't think I can just kick her out of Manhattan because we're in a fight," I say, my eyes narrowing at Roman.

"It's a hell of a lot more than a fight when someone goes and roots around in another person's mind and makes them kill others," Roman says, his brows gathering. "That was an outright declaration of war."

"He's right," Juliet says cautiously. "Someone who could go to that kind of extreme is dangerous. You can't let her stay in the same city you live in."

"We could send her back to Chicago with you," Ares says, and there's a tiny hint of a smirk pulling on one corner of his mouth.

"We have rules in Chicago," Roman says with a shake of his head. "Ophelia no longer fits the bill of qualification. She's not coming into Chicago ever again."

This feels wrong. Talking about kicking Ophelia out of an entire city feels wrong.

And it feels wrong to be so torn about this.

What she's done is unforgivable. I can't ever forget what she's done to Ares, and how, because of her choices, her reactions, I'm not even human anymore.

But still. It's her life I'm talking about upending.

"She might be in danger staying anyway," Juliet points out. "James seemed a few levels beyond livid when he found out what she did. Who's to say he won't try to

finish the job?”

Ares shakes his head. “I still can’t believe James reacted the way he did. He’s always been so collected, in control. I’ve never seen that side of him.”

“I have a weird feeling about this, Ares,” I admit aloud. “Something was up with his reaction. Do you really feel like you know much about him personally? You work together all the time, but what about who he is outside of work?”

Ares rubs two fingers over his lips, thinking. “James is pretty tight-lipped. He’s just come across as being professional, but maybe he didn’t talk much about himself for a reason.”

“Have you spoken to James since you came back around?” Roman asks.

Ares shakes his head. “I’m taking a step back for a minute from work. But it sounds like I might need to check in with James.”

He pulls his phone out, even as Roman nods in agreement.

Something hooks in my gut. Something uncomfortable and cold.

The anger in James’s eyes. The violence as he lashed out at Ophelia.

Ares is right. I’ve only ever known James to be a cool professional.

But it was as if he took what Ophelia did personally.

Why?

“Straight to voicemail,” Ares says as he hangs up. “I don’t like it, but it isn’t

necessarily an admission of guilt.”

Roman studies Ares, and I see cool calculation there. Roman is so damn intense, and I just know he’s got a thousand dark thoughts swirling through his head right now.

“Keep an eye on him,” Roman says. “But I wanted to ask, now that you’re...

you. This necromancer we’re looking for.

It’s going to be nearly impossible to find him if we’re just searching in person.

I’m going through facial recognition scanners, but my access in this city is limited.

Harry and Sysco have given their help in finding this bastard.

I was hoping that you might be on board, too? ”

Ares studies Roman for a moment. I don’t blame him for his hesitation. He wasn’t there when Juliet and Roman first explained that there’s a damn necromancer poking around New York City. It can’t feel real to Ares.

Turning over access to his security camera system is a big deal.

Ares looks over at me, searching my expression for answers. And it means everything that Ares trusts me this fucking much. Ares is a powerful man, one of the richest in this country. And he’s asking me, Lana, a nobody who grew up with nothing, what I think.

The things this man does for my confidence.

I simply nod.

“I can arrange that,” Ares says confidently and immediately, looking back at Roman. “Should we get going on it?”

“I think that would be best,” Roman says, a slightly relieved expression settling onto his face.

All four of us rise from our seats and head out in the direction of Ares’ office.

“So, how long have you and Roman been together?” I ask Juliet as we walk through the city. Roman and Ares are discussing security details and seem cool and collected enough about it.

Juliet makes a noise as if to signal she’s thinking. “Ten years,” she finally comes to the conclusion. “Wow. That went fast. It honestly feels like yesterday when my best friend had to tell me I was in love with him.”

“You couldn’t tell?” I question her with an arched brow.

Juliet lets out a chuckle. “Roman and I didn’t exactly like each other when we first met. In fact, I was pretty positive he was going to kill me on more than one occasion. Which is really crazy, because Roman says he knew I was it for him way, way before I did.”

“Sounds... complicated,” I remark.

“I dated my best friend’s brother and then was engaged to a psycho who stalked me, all within the span of a year before Roman and I got together,” she says, no shame, all ridiculous shock factor. She even wears a smile.

I can’t help but laugh. There’s something... easy feeling about Juliet. But easy isn’t the right word, necessarily. I can tell, Juliet is a woman who’s made mistakes in the

past. She doesn't hide them. Doesn't pretend they aren't there. But it makes her relatable.

"Well, you obviously figured it out," I say as I watch Roman and Ares ahead of us. "Roman is constantly watching you like you're the center of his whole universe."

"That's funny, I could say the same thing about you and Ares," she says with a smirk as she meets my eye. "How long have you two been married?"

"Engaged," I correct her, even as I hold my hand up, taking in the gorgeous ring on my finger. I've still never taken it off since Ares placed it on my finger. "Six weeks. Though we've been pretending to be engaged since the first day we met."

"Lana," Juliet remarks, looking up at me from beneath her eyelashes with a smile. "A fake engagement. Color me intrigued. Were you this when it happened, or still human?"

To anyone else in the vampiric world, this would be a big fucking deal. My changed species status would shift most vampires' perspective of reality. This would be dangerous. But to Juliet, this doesn't even phase her.

What the hell is really going on in Chicago?

"Human," I chuckle. "I walked into a vampire party, looking for Ophelia. She'd been missing for three weeks. Ares saw how stubborn I was being and offered to team up since his path somewhat aligned with mine. And, well, a few weeks later, I knew I couldn't live life without him."

"Aw," Juliet says, part sarcastic, part genuine. "I love every bit of it. Except that you went in to save Ophelia? The one who jinxed Ares? Wow."

“I know,” I say with a sigh. Just then, Ares pulls open the door to his office.

Roman turns back, placing a hand at the small of Juliet’s back, ushering her through first. I cast a look at Ares as I step inside.

He doesn’t seem stressed or on edge or angry, so I’m guessing his conversation with Roman has gone well.

We all step up to the elevator, and Ares presses the up button. Despite the fact that I’ve come to this building plenty of times since it’s Ares’ main office, I’ve never stepped foot on any floor other than 39. It’s never even crossed my mind to consider what else is in this building.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The elevator slides open, and the four of us shuffle inside.

A few moments later, after rocketing skyward, we step out onto floor 38.

I blink four times. There is a small space, black walls, dark gray carpet, and one singular door ahead.

Ares steps forward and punches a series of numbers into the keypad.

We step into a space that looks like it's straight out of a science fiction movie.

It's dark, but we're surrounded by a thousand little green, blue, and red lights. There is a woman sitting at a desk facing a wall of monitors. The rest of the walls are lined with high-tech looking equipment.

"Shauna," Ares greets her. "Would you mind giving us the room for a while? You can go grab some coffee or something."

He takes a one-hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and hands it to Shauna.

"Thanks, Ares," she says, a grin taking over her face. She keys in a few commands, logging off duty, and rises from her chair. She exits without saying anything further.

"What the hell is this place?" I ask, looking around like I've stepped into another dimension.

Ares looks back at me, his brows knitting slightly. "My security center. I... I have a

few properties in this city. There are a few security cameras set up for them.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re monitoring all of Manhattan with this setup,” I gape as I turn around, taking it all in. “I thought Harry was high-tech.”

“Harry’s operation was at least three times this,” Roman remarks.

Juliet smacks him in the chest, rolling her eyes.

I simply shake my head, my brows rising. Ares gives a little smirk, clearly enjoying that he’s surprised me.

“I hope you’re tech savvy, because there’s a reason I employ Shauna,” Ares says as they turn to the computers.

“One of the perks of being immortal,” Roman says as he takes the seat Shauna vacated. “We have forever to learn new tricks.”

I’d never thought about it from that angle before, but Born vampires are immortal. The world is going to change around them. Technology is going to change. Adaptation is kind of a must.

“How long has Roman been a vampire?” I ask quietly as I lean into Juliet, even though I know Roman is going to hear me asking. He’s busy at the moment, tapping away at the computer.

“Thirty-five years,” Juliet answers.

I make a slight sound of disappointment. “And you?”

“I’m forever twenty-nine, baby,” she says. “But I’ve been that way for eleven years

now.”

“Hmm,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “I keep hearing this word immortal when it comes to vampires, but so far, the oldest one had only been immortal for eighty years. I mean, that’s pretty old, but honestly not that impressive.”

“That psycho I said I was engaged to?” Juliet says as she looks over at me. “He was 119 when we met. Is that more impressive?”

I lift an eyebrow and tilt my head. “That’s a little better. Did that ever feel gross, though?”

“I’d rather not talk about Sebastian,” she says, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, sliding her hands into her back pockets.

So, it was her former fiancé who betrayed her.

Ouch.

I don’t press anymore.

“Okay, we’re scanning,” Roman declares as he pushes back from the keyboard just a little. Up on the screens, dozens of video feeds start scrolling at a high speed. There’s a little green square in each one, scanning faces. It’s all moving rapidly. Technology can be amazing sometimes.

“It’s really scanning all this footage at once?” Ares questions, his intense eyes never leaving the screens.

“Yep,” Roman confirms, a small, controlled smile on his lips as he watches his work. He’s proud of what he’s done here.

It's pretty wild. There are eight million people who live in New York City. Roman is trying to latch onto the face of one of those people. It sounds impossible.

There's a beeping sound, and one of the screens freezes. Before my eyes can even latch onto what's changed, there is another beeping sound, followed by a third.

"Got him," Roman says as he leans in, his gaze fixed on the screen.

"That's the necromancer?" I ask, my eyes flicking from one screen to the next.

"That's Markus," Juliet confirms with a nod.

He's so... average. If I were to pass him on the street, I would just walk right on by him. Ethnically ambiguous, he's neither handsome nor ugly. He's average built, the way he dresses doesn't stand out. I'd guess he's in his younger thirties.

"Wait a fucking second," Ares says as yet another screen locks in on a still image of Markus, the necromancer. "These..." Ares licks his lips and shifts his stance, his eyes boring into those screens. "Every one of those buildings is a building I own."

"What the hell?" I balk, my brows furrowing as I focus on the buildings more.

Sure enough, I recognize two of them.

Roman turns and looks at Ares with confused, surprised eyes. "All five of these separate buildings?"

Ares nods. "Two of them were mine before. Three of them I inherited from my father."

"This doesn't seem like a coincidence," Roman says, his gaze shifting back to the

screen as yet another hit pops up.

“Holy fuck,” I say, taking a step forward. “That’s James!”

And indeed, not only is Markus on the screen, but beside him, obviously talking to him, is James St. Claire, Ares’ assistant.

“That can’t be a coincidence either,” Roman says darkly as his eyes slide to Ares.

“What the fuck?” Ares breathes, leaning in closer. He watches as the frames of the video jump forward. It isn’t a smooth video. It’s only two frames per second. But it’s clear as day. That’s James talking to Markus, the two of them walking down the sidewalk together.

“I don’t think we have any clue who the hell James really is,” I say coldly.

“And I’ve trusted my entire portfolio to him,” Ares says, his tone hard.

“What if whomever Markus is looking for is tied to one of your buildings?” Juliet says.

I feel my body go cold, chilled all the way through. What the hell could that mean, and who the fuck would they be looking for?

“I need some answers from James,” Ares says darkly. He straightens. “And since he’s not been honest with me, I’m not going to go asking nicely. You up for a little B and E, Roman?”

“Lead the way.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The elevator hums as it carries us to the twenty-ninth floor. None of us speak. The silence hangs heavy, thick with anticipation and the strange, twitching energy that always seems to settle when you know you're about to find something you won't be able to unsee.

Roman stands closest to the door, arms folded over his chest. His jaw is locked, sunglasses still in place despite the dim interior lighting.

Juliet leans into the corner, chewing her lower lip in thought.

Ares is stone beside me, fingers flexing and curling like his body wants to fight, but his mind is still catching up.

The elevator dings softly, and we step out into a hallway that looks like every other high-rise apartment building in Manhattan. Soft gray carpet. Neutral walls. Modern sconces casting buttery light down the corridor.

Ares leads us to the door.

Roman kneels quickly, pressing his ear to the frame. He stays there for a moment, then shakes his head once. "No one inside."

He rises and pulls a lockpick kit from his back pocket like it's second nature. Within seconds, the door clicks open.

We step into James St. Claire's apartment—and stop dead.

It's cold.

Not temperature-wise. There's heat, electricity, all the signs of a functioning home.

But there is no life in it.

The living room is pristine. Too pristine. A modern black leather couch sits in front of a low-profile coffee table. But there's literally nothing else in this main space. There are no photos, no books, no shoes by the door. There aren't even any dishes in the sink.

Back in the bedroom, the bed is made. There is a phone charger on the nightstand and literally nothing else. In the closet, there are a dozen items hanging, but at the bottom, a suitcase is lying open on the floor.

This isn't just someone who is obsessively clean. This goes beyond minimalism.

"This isn't an apartment," Juliet mutters. "It's a damn waystation."

Roman drifts toward the window, looking out onto the street. "He never planned to stay here. Not for long."

I trail my fingers along the wall as I move into the space. It feels wrong. Like a place that looks like it should hold someone's life, but all it has is the ghost of intention.

Juliet opens a drawer in the nightstand. She pulls out a passport, flipping it open.

"France. India. Romania. Germany. Austria. Hungary." Her gaze flicks to Roman. "Markus has family in both India and Germany. He told me so himself."

Roman nods slowly. "James met him over there. And he came here to lay the

groundwork.”

Ares turns, something dark growing behind his eyes. “He used my name. My company. My trust. For what?” He digs through the other nightstand. It’s so strange, rummaging through someone’s personal space when they’re totally unaware.

But James’s behavior was alarming. His association with Markus, the necromancer, made him a target we had no choice but to investigate.

“Got something,” Ares says as he pulls something from the drawer.

A book.

The leather cover is cracked, aged. The smell of dust and parchment makes my skin prickle, the metallic tang of something old and secret.

Ares hands the book to me, and I flip the cover open.

Journal of Thaddeus St. Claire.

“St. Claire,” I say as I look up at Ares. “A relative of James’s then? Same last name.”

“Maybe,” Ares says. “It was important to James. There’s hardly anything here, so we have to assume anything we do find is significant.”

I flip through the pages, scanning lines as I go. The language is old. No one from this century uses this kind of language. There are references to blood and revenge. It talks about hiding things and waiting.

I don’t like it.



“We take it back with us,” Ares says as he casts his gaze around the room again.

“These don’t look like they belong here,” Roman calls out, his head buried in the closet. He pulls two tubes out, both of them very recognizable as blueprint storage containers.

We gather around the bed as he pulls one set of prints out and lays it on the bed, and then the other.

“This one’s for a property I’ve owned for five years,” Ares says, tapping the edge of the parchment. “And this one belonged to Augustus before he left it to me.”

I step closer. Two different buildings. Two different parts of Manhattan. There are no notes with the prints, no marks.

“He’s definitely looking for someone,” Roman says, those vivid blue eyes rising to Ares and then me. “Guess this narrows things down for us. Five of your buildings down to two.”

“But why the hell would he be looking for a body in these huge buildings in Manhattan?” Juliet questions, folding her arms over her chest. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No coincidences,” I murmur, shaking my head.

“We need to check both of them,” Ares says, his tone heavy and dark. “But maybe this old journal will tell us what we’re looking for.”

“Let’s wrap this up,” Roman says as he turns and digs into the closet once more.

We do one last sweep of the apartment. There’s nothing else. No letters, no photos.

There isn't even a single bit of food in the fridge. It's chilling how temporary this place feels, knowing James has worked for Ares for two and a half months.

Satisfied there's nothing else to unearth, we head for the door. Roman locks it behind us. Ares carries the blueprints, and I hang on tightly to the journal.

The hallway feels darker on the way out.

And James St. Claire doesn't feel like an assistant anymore.

He feels like a dark threat, one we don't yet understand.

We step out of James' apartment building just as the city begins to dip into evening.

The sky is a deep steel blue, caught somewhere between fading light and the encroaching night.

Neon signage flickers to life. The street hums around us, people rushing by, taxis honking as if time itself is trying to beat the city into submission.

Juliet lets out a breath, slow and almost wistful. "I kinda missed this place."

Ares and I glance at her, surprised. She's not looking at us, just watching a couple bicker as they cross the street arm in arm.

"You've lived here?" I ask.

She nods. "Moved here just after I turned eighteen. Did all my medical school here. Didn't leave until I Resurrected."

"And you chose Chicago over New York?" Ares asks, more curious than skeptical.

Juliet smiles, not defensive, just honest. “New York made me tough. Sharp. But Chicago made me whole. That’s where I found my people. Where I fell in love. Where I stopped running.”

Roman, walking beside her, laces his fingers with hers. Those intense eyes of his turn down to his wife, and there are about a hundred emotions in them. Admiration. Love. Respect. Reverence.

Juliet adds, “Hard things happened there, too. But Chicago is home. Because of who’s in it.”

Sometimes, home isn’t a place, it’s a person.

I realize it with every fiber in my being as I glance at Ares.

He is my home. Not New York City. Not the penthouse.

It’s him.

But as I look at Ares, I realize that he’s unusually quiet. His mouth is set in a neutral line, but there’s something behind his eyes—contemplation, not just reflection. What Juliet just said about home has him thinking. I file that away for later.

By the time we reach the building, the wind is picking up off the park. Fall barely teases the scent in the air, even though it’s only the very end of August. It feels like this summer has gone by in a blink. So damn much has happened, I never even got two seconds to acknowledge it.

The penthouse elevator ride is quiet. For a moment, I’m expecting comments about the penthouse, the wild location Ares and I live in. But it doesn’t come. Neither Juliet nor Roman says a word as we walk inside.

Which tells me they probably live like this as well. Is everyone in the vampire world absolutely loaded? Everyone I knew growing up was as poor as I was. But when it comes to every vampire I know, they are all used to private jets and multi-million-dollar penthouses.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask Roman and Juliet as we close the door behind us. “Might be a long night.”

“I am actually starving,” Juliet says. Without invitation, she steps to the fridge and pulls it open. She pulls out three blood bags and bites into the first one.

Roman just smirks at his wife and shakes his head. I meet his eyes and smile.

I love that she just helped herself.

“I’m good, but thanks for asking,” Roman says simply as he watches Juliet discard the first blood bag in the trash.

Ares heads straight for the dining table and rolls out the blueprints. I place the journal beside them.

Juliet steps forward, her snack finished. Her eyes scan the pages at Ares’ fingertips. “Time to crack open the past.”

The spine of the journal creaks as Ares opens it slowly, and the scent of dust and parchment drifts out like a ghost of the past. The handwriting is elegant, practiced, written in dark ink that has faded to sepia in places.

I lean closer beside Ares while Juliet and Roman hover on the other side of the table, watching intently.

"First entry," Ares says, shifting his grip on the old book. "It's dated March 2, 1926."

He begins to read aloud:

“They simply buried him.

There is but one stone marking the grave. There is no name carved into the stone, simply a crescent moon and an X. I've watched it for years, studied, observed. And not a soul comes to visit his grave.

Not his bastard father. Not his missing mother.

Everything he accomplished. All he did. None of us would exist were it not for him. And this is the thanks he is given.

Forgotten.

Sevan and Cyrus erased his name from history. There is not a single record of what he was called. Dorian will never speak it. Malachi will not say it.

Their small-mindedness disgusts me.

But I have heard rumors. And Roter Himmel doesn't know what may come for it. I must do more research. Before I can make a move, I must confirm. It isn't easy. My presence in Roter Himmel is noted.

But for this, for him, any risk is worth it.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

Times will change.”

Silence.

Ares slowly lowers the journal. No one speaks for a long moment.

"Fuck. He's talking about living in Roter Himmel," Juliet finally says, her voice quiet but sharp, like her throat is tight. "Only... only Royals live in that town. The court. The castle. He couldn't live there unless he was one of them."

I see it as Roman's fingers curl into fists. His shoulders tense, the muscles in his jaw flex. "That would make Thaddeus a Royal."

Oh shit. Oh, oh shit. "Correct me if I'm wrong; we're still figuring out the whole insanity of Royal vampires, but if James has this journal, and they share the same last name...

" My brain is spinning, all of the implications tumbling through it at once.

"That means James isn't just some assistant.

He's from that bloodline. He's a fucking Royal. "

Juliet's expression darkens. "Which means he had something very specific in mind when he came to New York. This wasn't about finding a job. He could have lived a cushy life in Roter Himmel. It would have had to be something damn important to pull him away from that."

“James said his father moved around a lot,” Ares notes. “I never got the impression that he was lying about that, even looking back on it, knowing he wasn’t being upfront about things. The way he talked, I didn’t get the impression that his father would have lived in Roter Himmel.”

“James did say he lived in Europe before he came here,” I point out. “Roter Himmel is in Austria, right?”

Juliet nods in affirmation.

“Fuck,” Ares says as he runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t like this. I feel so... played.”

“Keep reading,” Roman says.

I take the journal from Ares and turn to the next page.

“The sea is worse than I expected.

The constant rocking. The cramped quarters. I could have spent more and gotten a bigger cabin, but I only managed to steal so much to bring with me, and I need the funds to survive while I search.

The King called for entertainment, and all of Roter Himmel came.

He loves his games. So, while the entirety of the court watched his orchestration, I took my chance.

I started digging. And digging. I worried at first that I was mistaken about this being his resting place, I had to dig so deep.

He's been buried so long I wasn't sure there would even be anything left to exhume.

But I finally found it.

His bones.

One by one, I collected them and placed them in the chest. They are in poor condition, but I will have to have faith that it will be enough.

I felt the power as I touched each of his bones, as if history was whispering to me.

They themselves hold secrets and vision.

I counted it an honor to touch them. To be the first in his presence in nearly two millennia.

I found the proof I needed in an old book. They exist. It has happened before. The dead rose. And I was putting my life at risk just by asking, but I got what I needed. There is talk of a necromancer in New York, in America.

So, to America, I travel now. I know what I've given up. An easy life in Roter Himmel. My connections to the Royals. The backing of the King.

But to make the Blood Father rise once again, to change the world, I will do anything necessary."

There are exactly three heartbeats that thud in my chest before the reality of what I just read lands like an anvil in the room.

"Holy shit," Roman barks as he scrubs a hand over his face.



“He was digging up the damn Blood Father? The man who tried to take over the damn world with vampires? The asshole who slept around with any woman he could find so he could create a whole brood of children? The one who went to war with Cyrus and somehow lost?”

“Holy fucking shit,” the words breathe out over my lips.

James himself told us about the Blood Father.

About all the history of vampires. James is the one who told us about King Cyrus and his reincarnating wife, Sevan.

But he also told us about the Blood Father.

He tried to step into the light with vampires.

The whole population of vampires exists because of that man.

A man who took lovers and bred them. A man who went to war with the intent to take control.

“As far as enemies go, they literally don’t come worse than this,” Juliet says.

Her voice is shaking. For the first time, I see a spark of fear in her eyes.

“If the Blood Father were to come back, it would literally change the entire world. Humans... oh, it would be so bad for them. Everything, everything would be so different.”

“But it must not have worked,” Ares points out. He’s so level, so calm when the rest of us are about to freak out. But I have a feeling it’s because he still doesn’t know

much of this history. “The world isn’t run by vampires. Humans aren’t enslaved to us. So, it must not have worked.”

“Keep reading,” Juliet says, biting at the corner of her thumb nervously as she shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

I turn the page and read from the next entry.

“June 12, 1926

New York is loud. Louder than I imagined. And the amount of people around, all the time, is mind-boggling. They are everywhere, at all times.

I’ve secured a room. It isn’t much. There is no quiet. There is a strange smell that comes from the floor below me. But it is private, and it will do while I search.

The necromancer I seek remains elusive. I’ve heard whispers, rumors, but no one can give me a name. I expected this task could take weeks—perhaps a month—but already it has been six weeks, and I have no leads.

The bones weigh heavily on me. Not in the physical sense, though the chest is no small burden. It’s the dreams. The things I see when I close my eyes. I feel the breath of something ancient in my room, watching. Always watching.

This city is full of unholy noise, but none of it compares to the silence that settles when I open the chest. They hum, the bones. They hum with power I don’t understand. But I must consider it an honor to guard the Blood Father.”

“I have a bad feeling about where this is going,” I say. My stomach turns. My palms feel slick with sweat. All of the little pieces are starting to slide together.

“Keep going,” Juliet says as she slides her hand down her face with a groan.

I hand the journal back to Ares, who takes it with a sigh, flipping the page.

"The call of the Blood Father grows heavier by the day. I hear him whispering to me at night. I feel his urgency during the day. He haunts me every time I sleep. It feels as if the dreams are bleeding into my nights, too.

Even in waking hours, I feel the weight of the Blood Father's will pressing into the back of my skull, a constant thrum that makes me forget my own thoughts.

I see glimpses of blood in reflections, ancient battlegrounds in my tea, and voices that do not belong to this century whispering truths I do not want to know.

He is reaching for me, begging for me to hurry.

But it has been two more months, and still, I cannot find confirmation of the necromancer. I don't know who else to ask. I feel as if I have talked to everyone by this point; the whole of New York seems to think me a lunatic by this point, the man who seeks the one who can raise the dead.

I must be careful. The necromancer may never appear, and I am the only person alive who knows the Blood Father no longer is buried in Roter Himmel.

I must guard that secret above all else.

I imagine if King Cyrus ever got wind of what I have done, he would grant me a fate a thousand times worse than death.

The man is maniacal. My punishment would be endless.

So, I must protect the bones.

But every day that passes, they steal my peace. They suck away my sanity.”

I swallow once and shake my head. “That’s creepy as fuck.”

“They were making him crazy,” Juliet says quietly. “How... how is that even possible? They were just bones. How could they... haunt him?”

“Don’t underestimate a curse,” Roman says darkly. “With what the man tried to do, it would be more surprising if a curse hadn’t attached itself to him.”

My eyes flick to Ares, who stares at Roman with trepidation.

I can’t imagine how all of this must feel.

Yes, he’s known about vampires since he was an older teenager.

But his world of vampires was more mafia-esque than curses and ancient bones.

This is an entirely different version of reality than he’s ever lived in.

“Ares, keep reading,” Roman encourages.

Ares clears his throat and turns the page once more.

“I can no longer keep the bones near. I hear his voice in every waking moment, and the urgency he presses upon me has nearly incapacitated me.

I will never find the necromancer with this chaos in my brain, in my soul.

I cannot keep them with me any longer. Not until I find the one who can awaken them.

I've found a construction site. The building is skeletal, but the foundation is strong. I'll hide them within it. The city will grow, and it will never have any idea what rests beneath. But I will remember. I will always remember where they are."

"Oh my gosh," I breathe. "That has to be it. The timeframe, I bet James dug into it, and that's why he came to work for you, Ares. The Blood Father was hidden in one of your buildings."

"Finish it," Roman growls, pressing past what I just said. The urgency in the room doubles, and my heart starts pounding as we begin to understand.

I lean over Ares shoulder as he turns to the next passage. The handwriting is erratic, ink splattered and smeared. It's as if he wrote it in haste... or desperation.

"November 21, 1926

I am out of coin. The city bleeds me dry. Food, lodging, bribes for information—all of it devours what little I carried across the sea. I thought America would be easier. But this place has its own breed of cruelty.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I have searched endlessly. The necromancer must be here.

He must. But as the days rot and stretch into weeks, I begin to question: what if there is no necromancer?

What if all the stories I heard were lies?

What if I crossed the ocean, dug up the dead, buried sacred bones in foreign soil. .. for nothing?

If Cyrus ever finds out what I've done—what I stole—he will not stop at death. He will unravel me. Piece by piece. I've seen what becomes of traitors. There is no mercy there. No end to his rage.

But I cannot turn back now. I only need one more month. One more month to find what I need and complete what I began.

Just one more month. Please."

"I think that's the last entry," I say as I nod to the next page. Ares hands me the journal, and I take a breath.

"January 29, 1927

I cannot beg any longer. I've pawned everything I brought across the sea. The bones are still safe—still retrievable. The building is nearly finished. I carved the markers myself, laid stone over them so they will remain untouched. Only I know where they

lie.

But I cannot starve. I heard whispers today about an underground fighting ring—a place where rich men bet on bloodshed. They pit men against each other for sport. What they don't know is that I am no man. I may not look it, but I am stronger. I am faster. And no human can stand against me.

They gave me the name of my opponent: Sebastian Vincent. American, I think. They say he's brutal, undefeated. That he breaks jaws and ribs without blinking. But I will snap his spine like twine. I will take his blood if I must.

When I win, I'll have enough to survive one more month. One more month to complete what I began.

The Blood Father waits."

"Holy fuck."

My eyes rise from the page to meet Juliet's. She's pale as a ghost. Her chest rises and falls in short, fast bursts. "Sebastian," she whispers.

"Juliet?" I question, my brows furrowing.

She's gone pale. Her mouth opens, then shuts again. Her eyes are fixed on the journal in my lap like it just whispered something only she could hear.

"Juliet?" I ask again gently, my voice tight with concern.

Her hands tremble as she reaches up and presses her fingers against her mouth. Her chest rises sharply. "Sebastian," she says, barely above a whisper.

Roman straightens beside her, every muscle in his body going taut.

“You knew him?” Ares asks carefully.

Juliet closes her eyes. Shakes her head, but not in denial—more like she’s trying to dislodge something heavy and sharp inside her skull. “I didn’t just know him. He was... he was my fiancé.”

The words hit me like a punch. The psychopath. She mentioned him. “What?”

“I loved him.” Her voice cracks. “Before Roman. Before everything. Sebastian and I were engaged.” She exhales shakily, eyes glassing over.

My heart twists. I haven’t known her that long, but I’ve never heard her voice like this—so raw, so scraped down to the bones.

Juliet continues, her breath picking up. “He had a temper. He could be... controlling. But I didn’t see it at first. I thought he was like me, that he understood what it meant to live a hard life.” She blinks rapidly and shakes her head. She takes in a shaky breath.

Roman doesn’t bristle. He doesn’t look jealous or angry. He simply keeps a steady hand on her arm, a look of complex understanding in his eyes.

“Sebastian had a rough start at life, and then horrible circumstances after he Resurrected,” Juliet explains, even with moisture pooling in her eyes.

“He hated himself. I think he was punishing himself. He didn’t really care if he died.

He told me about the fights in New York.



He did it for several years. It was guaranteed money because no one else knew what he truly was.

“Shit,” I whisper. “Thaddeus thought he was fighting a human.”

Juliet lets out a sound between a laugh and a sob. “Sebastian wouldn’t have held back. Not even for a second.”

Ares leans forward, elbows on his knees, his brow drawn tight. “That means Thaddeus was killed in that fight. Which explains why the journal ends there.”

Juliet’s whole body is trembling now. Roman pulls her against him, wrapping her in his arms. She buries her face into his chest, and for a long moment, the only sound is her quiet, broken crying.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “I didn’t know.”

Juliet shakes her head without looking up. “He’s dead. Long gone. But this just... it’s like the past is hunting me again.”

Roman kisses the top of her head. “You’ve already survived the worst of it, amor. This is just an echo.”

Juliet curses and presses her forehead into Roman’s chest.

This feels too intimate. I feel like I shouldn’t be here.

There’s obviously so much painful history here.

I can feel the agony radiating off Juliet right now.

Juliet did love Sebastian. I can feel it without even trying.

But her pain, her anguish—Sebastian also hurt Juliet in the deepest way possible.

What happened to Sebastian? What did he do to her? Juliet said she and Roman had been together for ten years. I can see the love between them in such an obvious way. But this reaction? Juliet obviously wasn't expecting the past to rear its ugly head on something so seemingly unrelated.

Damn. Poor Juliet.

Ares and I glance at each other, and though it's unspoken, I see it in his eyes. A moment of gratitude. It's me and him. There hasn't been a moment of harshness or betrayal. There's never been anything that's made me question him. He's never once hurt me.

He is my person from now until time ceases.

And I'm so fucking grateful that I've never had to go through the kind of heartache Juliet has.

As Ares offers me a small smile, a look in his eyes that just screams I love you , I think maybe the same thoughts are rolling through his head.

Juliet takes in a deep breath, attempting to steady herself. I glance down at the journal still clutched in my hand, and that's when I notice it.

There's one last page. The ink is different. The paper less stained, the scrawl more controlled. It isn't Thaddeus' frantic, blood-rushed handwriting.

This is neater. Sharper. Calculated.

“There’s one more entry,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. It comes out hoarse, like it’s scraped over gravel. “Guys, there’s one more entry!”

The atmosphere shifts instantly. Tension thickens in the air like smoke.

I clear my throat and begin to read.

“Entry by James St. Claire – August 23

I’ve read every word he left behind. Thaddeus St. Claire. My father’s uncle. A fanatic, yes—but he wasn’t wrong. The Blood Father was left to rot with no respect. Left to be forgotten.

It took me years. Decades. I tracked his steps through rumors, dust, and dead ends. I followed him through the web of history, and eventually, the truth clawed its way up from the dirt.

I narrowed down the buildings. There were five under construction in that year. And I’ve narrowed it down to only two possibilities. I tracked down the blueprints. And then I tracked down the owners.

Ares Hunt. Augustus Lonan.

Father and son.

Now, I’ve made sure I have access to both.

Thaddeus failed because he only had rumors to go on. Because he ran out of time.

I won’t.

I found a necromancer before I even came searching for the bones.

Markus arrives tomorrow.

The rightful ruler of vampires sleeps beneath our feet.

Soon, he will rise.”

I close the journal softly.

No one says a word. The only sound is the faint hum of the city bleeding in through the penthouse windows.

Juliet is the one to break the silence.

Her voice is low. Distant. “He did it.”

Roman looks over at her, brow furrowed.

She clarifies, still stunned. “James accomplished what Thaddeus couldn’t. He actually found a necromancer.”

Ares rises slowly to his feet. His jaw is tight, the veins in his forearms standing out like cords, he’s wound so tight.

“And now that necromancer is in my city,” he says darkly. “Working with someone who knows every corner of my life.”

The weight in the room shifts again.

It’s not just betrayal anymore.

It feels like... prophecy.

And we're standing in the middle of it.

"That last entry, it was only four days ago," Roman says, scrubbing a hand over his face in disbelief.

"What a fucking disaster," I say, shaking my head.

"I mean, the whole origins, the lore, everything to do with how vampires came to be, is so wild. But this? Taking it all the way back to where all of you came from? His name is the Blood Father , for fuck's sake.

Do things ever get quiet and easy in this world? "

"Not really, no," Juliet says at the same time Roman smirks like what I just asked is cute.

I shake my head again. "At least my life will never be boring again."

Juliet sniffs, wiping at her face. "Unlikely." She tries to laugh about it, but what she just learned has obviously still got her in a chokehold.

"Look, we need to get on this shit, but I could kind of use a minute. So, we're going to go back to our hotel for a bit.

We'll call you when we're ready to head out again, if that's alright. "

"Of course," I say, nodding my head. Hell, I wouldn't blame her if she needed a whole week instead of a minute.

“See you soon,” Roman says, taking his wife’s hand and walking to the door with her. Ares and I watch as they walk out and close the door behind them.

Ares slides his hands around my hips from behind, pulling me into him. The movement is wildly comforting in a moment when I’m feeling... overwhelmed? Scared? It’s all so crazy I don’t really even know.

“We need to update the Barons,” Ares says. The rumble in his chest as he speaks is one of my favorite feelings in the world.

“Oh yeah,” I say, chucking, because, of course, there is one more thing. “Harry and Sysco made me a Baron while you... weren’t you.”

“Of course they did,” Ares says without even a hint of surprise. He presses a kiss to the hollow behind my ear. “You’re Lana fucking Kincade.”

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I turn in Ares' arms, coming chest to chest. I loop my arms behind his neck, and he presses his forehead to mine. I allow my eyes to slide closed, and I take in a slow, deep breath.

It's nearly impossible to describe how I feel right now. It's like I'm exhausted. Like I've been working out nonstop for weeks now. Like I've taken AP tests for eight days straight.

But my body doesn't feel tired. I don't need to sleep. And I feel mentally sharper than ever.

But the exhaustion is there.

So damn much has happened in the last few weeks. It just keeps coming at us, one life-threatening situation at a time.

"You're amazing," Ares says, his lips moving against my skin. "How much you handle. The grace you handle it with. That incredible mind of yours. I worship at your feet, every day, Vengeance."

"I really like that word," I say as my entire body ignites. I bite my lower lip, looking up into Ares' hazel eyes with a need that grows more demanding by the second.

There's been so damn much doom and gloom. Since I got him back, we've dealt with one crisis after another.

As I stand here in his arms, with my body pressed against his, I need him.

A devilish grin tugs on Ares' lips. His hands come to my hips, their touch turning possessive. "We should get out there," he mutters, his voice low, rough. "Start doing what needs to be done."

"Twenty minutes of worship won't hurt anything," I whisper in a rough tone.

The look in his eyes is lethal, wild. But there's something else there, too—aching, devotion, heat.

He doesn't ask questions. He doesn't hesitate. His mouth crashes into mine like a promise and a punishment all at once. There's desperation in it, something raw and frantic like we both need to remember we're still alive. That we still have each other.

My fingers claw at the hem of his shirt, and it's gone. His skin is fever-hot against mine, his hands everywhere—my waist, my hips, my throat. My shirt disappears, followed by my pants. I'm gasping, clinging, and still, it doesn't feel close enough.

We shuffle through the penthouse, bumping into furniture. Finally, Ares spins us, and the cold press of glass hits my shoulder blades.

He lifts my hands above my head, pins them against the window, and leans in close.

"If anyone looks up," he breathes, lips brushing the shell of my ear, "they'll see exactly who you belong to."

A shiver runs down my spine—and it has nothing to do with the chill of the window.

I bite my bottom lip. "Let them."

Ares growls in pleasure. His eyes flare red, and in one smooth movement, he unhooks my bra, letting it fall to the floor, my breasts exposed.



With a wicked grin on his lips, he sinks down to his knees, holding eye contact the whole time as he lowers himself.

His hands slide down my back, round over my ass.

He squeezes my cheeks, his fingers digging into my flesh.

It's a little different from when he's done it before.

I won't be bruised tomorrow. The thought makes me a tiny bit sad. I like being marked by him.

I don't get much time to lament. Ares snakes his hand into my underwear from the front, gripping it in his massive hand. He yanks, tearing the delicate fabric. He lets it fall to the floor beside him. A manic smile forms on my lips.

We don't have time to play for long. Ares gets right to it. He hooks my right leg over his shoulder. With his opposite hand, he pushes me back against the floor-to-ceiling glass, my back flattening against it.

He presses a hot kiss to my mound. My head tilts back with a groan when he laps his tongue out, and drags it up through my folds.

He then sucks at my clit using the very best, most brain-shattering pulse.

His massive hand grips my hip, supporting what must be half my weight, and it's completely effortless for him.

I kind of get it now that I'm similar to him.

But his other hand... Oh, his other hand does wicked things.

A finger teases my entrance. I get two seconds of warning before he slips right inside me. It's effortless with how wet I am.

"Fuck, you're my favorite flavor," Ares says against my skin, eating me out in the best way possible. He takes a full-mouthed bite at me, his teeth scraping against my flesh before he sucks me so hard my vision spins.

"Shit, Ares," I pant, feeling the reckless need building inside me with the force of a freight train.

He moans against my pussy, and oh, those vibrations... Meanwhile, he pumps another finger inside me, curling them in a come-hither motion.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

In that moment, I remember that I am pressed up against a glass window that looks out over Central fucking Park.

It's evening, nine o'clock, but this city never sleeps.

My bare ass is pressed up against that glass, to say nothing of my bare back, and just between my legs, my fiancé's fingers pumping in and out of me have to be visible.

Someone could definitely see him on his knees and his head bobbing between my legs.

Fuck. That thought makes my blood burn so much hotter. I rocket closer to that cliff.

Does that mean I'm into... what would it be... exhibitionism?

I don't give a damn right now. Because with one long, powerful suck at my clit, Ares shoves me over the edge. I shatter. The orgasm rips from my clit, out through my core, straight to my toes, to my fingertips, to the back of my skull.

"Ares!" His name screams over my lips as I see stars. My legs lose strength, but Ares' grip never falters. He holds me pinned against the glass as I come undone. I pant, my bare chest heaving, my nipples pebbling against the cool air.

He does not cease sucking on me, pumping his fingers inside me.

And I've barely come down when Ares licks his way up to my belly button.

When he kisses a path between my breasts.

His hand comes up to cup my breast, and his fingers are soaked with my heat.

Ares kisses me, and I taste myself on his lips.

That hand continues north, his fingers wrapping around my throat, though he doesn't squeeze.

"Get your pants off, now, and fuck me against this window," I growl, looking up into his darkened eyes.

"I love that fucking mouth of yours," Ares growls in approval. With one hand, he unbuttons his pants, and in one swift motion, they're in a pile at his feet.

I barely get one glance down, taking in the sight of his beautiful, perfect, rock-hard cock before he spins me around. My hands fly out as he bends me over, his hands gripping tightly at my hips.

And one second later, Ares skewers me with that perfect cock. He slides inside me, zero resistance, as my wetness accepts him. He's barely been inside me for two seconds before he starts sliding out and in, his pace picking up force with each thrust.

I hope this glass can take just as much as I can.

My fingers are splayed wide against it, and the force of Ares pounding into me from behind is no small thing.

I gaze out at the city at night. There are half a dozen people walking on the sidewalk directly below me.

I see four more walking in the park across the street.

Fuck. I kind of want just one of them to look up. They would see my tits bouncing as Ares slams into me. They would see my eyes roll into the back of my head. They'd see Ares' fingers sliding between my legs, playing with my clit in a very ungentle way.

I feel it building again. How? How can he pull orgasms out of me this easily?

"I love every damn inch of this body, Vengeance," Ares says, his voice completely feral. He rubs the pad of his middle finger up and down over my clit, taking long, beautiful strokes.

"It loves every inch of you, Venom," I manage to get the words out.

He slams into me harder, the noise of it filling the penthouse.

A growl rumbles in his chest.

I sense it coming.

The earth-shattering finish.

Ares' grip on my hip tightens. His finger slips over my little bud.

And the entire planet must detonate.

My vision goes white.

A gasping scream rips from my lips. Ares lets out a roar.

And I unravel. I shatter. I cease to exist, or perhaps I become the entire universe.

Ares groans again, thrusting one last time, pushing me to one last, ecstasy filled moment.

His arms wrap around my waist. His hot, soft lips press into my spine.

"Fuck, I needed that," he says against my skin. "You're absolutely addicting. You know that?"

"I think I might," I say as I straighten and turn in his arms. "Good to know we're both addicts."

He kisses me, and I don't know that his mouth has ever been this hot. His heart pounds in his chest, pressed into my own.

But it feels perfect. This. This is what I've been fighting so hard for. Why I'll keep going, no matter what we have to face. Because these moments, just like this, are what makes every day with Ares, the best day of my life.

“That was twenty-two minutes,” Ares says as he crooks an eyebrow at me.

“Sorry, world,” I say, unbothered. “Guess I’d rather get plowed by my fiancé than worry about saving you.”

Ares smiles the most crooked, seductive smile, and I fucking melt. He leans in, his hands circling around to cup my ass cheeks, giving them each a squeeze.

“Have I ever told you that you have the absolutely most perfect ass on the entire planet?” he says low and rough into my ear.

“You haven’t,” I answer, utterly pleased.

He simply growls and nods. “And it’s all fucking mine.”

“I love that fucking mouth of yours,” I echo his own words back to him.

He smacks my left cheek and smirks at me as he turns, releasing me. “Come on, the world still needs saving.”

“Give me just a second,” I say as I step toward our bedroom. “Someone keeps ruining all of my underwear. And I’d rather not save the world commando.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

Telling Sysco and Harry everything we had learned required explaining everything .

The origins of vampires. King Cyrus. The reincarnating queen.

Their demented son. The war that divided the Royals from the Born.

The House system. So many damn details that I didn't feel like we had a firm grip on yet.

And here Ares and I were, teaching the other Barons.

Harry had heard rumors about all of this. But he had never believed any of it. Even as we explained it all, I wasn't sure if he believed us.

Sysco's mind had been fucking blown. "You're serious right now?" He'd asked about twelve different times. "A king?" "You telling me there's vampire Royalty in Boston? In fucking Mississippi?" "No. No way."

In the end, though, he believed me and Ares.

Then, the question was, what to do with the information?

What did it change? How did we move forward from here?

All of that could wait.

Because, for now, the priority was to find James, find Markus, and keep them from

bringing the Blood Father back.

We're about to head out—to get back into all of this shit—when Juliet calls.

I pick up on the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey," she says, voice a little softer than usual. "I don't know how you feel about it, but it seemed like the right thing to do to give you an update. Ophelia's being moved from the ICU to a regular room."

That takes me off guard. I stop walking, the city still humming around me. Ares pauses beside me, watching me carefully.

"Already?"

"She's tougher than she looks," Juliet says. "Vitals are stable. She's banged up, but...she's conscious. Alert and oriented."

I stare ahead, across the street, where a man in a business suit is sipping coffee and yelling into his phone. Life keeps moving, even when it feels like the rug is ripped out from beneath our feet.

"Thanks for letting me know," I say. My voice feels tight in my throat. It feels so damn wrong that I haven't been there for her, been there with her. She was hurt. But the way things are... "I think... I think I might go see her."

There's a pause. "You sure?"

No. Not at all. This might be the worst idea I've had all year. But I nod anyway. "Yeah."



“Good luck,” she says. We hang up, and I turn to Ares. His jaw is set, unreadable.

"She's stable," I tell him, even though I'm positive he heard everything said on the phone. "They're moving her."

He doesn't say anything at first. He's studying me, reading how I feel about this situation. "You sure, Vengeance? The things she said to you before... I can't stand the thought of her saying that shit to you again."

"I don't know, maybe this is a terrible idea. But I just... We meant something to each other at one point, you know? And to think of her being in the hospital, with no one with her?" I shake my head. "I think it's worth a try."

Ares steps in close, brushing his knuckles across my cheek. "Whatever you need. Do you want me to come with you?"

I snort. "We both know that's a terrible idea."

He tries to smile for my sake, but it doesn't reach his eyes. He simply nods and then kisses my forehead. "I'm going to check in with Roman. We still need to figure out where Markus is going next. Text me the second you're done."

"I will."

We part ways at the curb. Ares melts into the crowd, his tall frame swallowed up by the surge of bodies and motion.

I head in the opposite direction, toward the hospital. Toward a ghost I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

Every step is heavier than the last. I try not to overthink it, but I'm already spiraling.

What do I even say to her?

She destroyed Ares. Almost got him killed. Got people killed. Lives were ended because of her need for revenge.

I try to reason myself into feeling better by thinking back to the real origin of it all.

Augustus. Ares' father. If Augustus hadn't been such a horrible being, if he hadn't been taking people and selling them to vampires to feed on, none of this would have happened.

If Ophelia hadn't gone to that Red party, she never would have been taken by Augustus's guys, and she never would have hated vampires.

But also, then I never would have met Ares. I wouldn't be engaged to the love of my life. I would still be living in that shitty apartment, being lonely and tired and unfulfilled.

I'd still be human.

But I haven't regretted being a Made since the moment I opened my enhanced eyes.

The reality is that Ophelia made her choice. She took things too far. Bad things happen to good people all the time. It's a horrific reality. But not everyone turns around from it and makes someone else kill innocent people who are simply guilty by species.

Ophelia made a choice.

Still, I can't quite find it in me to hate her. Despite all of her terrible choices, I don't know that I hate her.

Do I forgive her? Absolutely the fuck not.

Will we ever go back to what we were? Nope.

But once, she was everything to me. She was home

Each step toward the hospital feels heavier than the last. Not physically—my new body hums with strength—but the emotional drag is suffocating. I have no idea what I'm going to say to her.

But she's alive. That matters.

I round a corner, the hospital coming into view. It's quiet down this road, and it's nice having a clear sidewalk to myself.

But as I go to step off the curb and cross the street, I freeze. Literally, my feet won't move. My brows furrow, and I look down. Both my feet remain planted firmly on the sidewalk. And no matter what I do, I can't fucking lift them.

Holy shit.

My throat tightens, and a sweat breaks out across my entire body.

And then I feel it—a presence. Heavy. Focused. My spine tingles, every hair on my arms lifting.

I'm not alone.

That's when the world tips. It's like vertigo hits me, but I don't feel like I'm actually in danger of falling.

But it's like everything spins slightly and tilts sideways.

The sidewalk around me dulls. Colors blur.

Sound drops away. The chatter of the city fades until I can only hear my own heartbeat, thudding like a drum inside my ribs.

She stands across from me. I didn't see her arrive.

There's a woman standing on the sidewalk.

She stares at me with fixed eyes, her gaze heavy and unrelenting as she studies me.

She is ordinary and extraordinary all at once.

Neutral slacks. Pale blouse. Hair the shade of dirty snow, pulled into a bun.

Her presence hits like a pressure front. Dense. Wrong.

I try to blink, to clear the haze crawling into my mind. My thoughts feel sticky, half-formed, like trying to wade through wet cement.

"You're different," she says. Her voice is cool silk wrapped around a knife. "Not quite like them. But not human, either."

My mouth opens, but I don't know what to say. I can't focus. Her eyes—fuck, what color are her eyes? I can't remember even though I'm looking at them.

"She never mentioned this," the woman says, never looking away. I try to blink, to make my brain clear, but I just can't. "We spoke about you at length. You were a solid presence in her life. Until you fell in love with the very thing infecting our city."

“It was you,” I say as it hits me. The therapist Ophelia saw, the one who specializes in vampire trauma. The one who helped Ophelia influence Ares. “Do you even know what you did? What you helped Ophelia do? People are dead now, and my fiancé will have to live with that guilt forever.”

A small smile crooks on her lips, though I can’t even tell if they’re full or wrinkled, if they’re pale or colored. “In the end, the balance must be kept. The scales tipped too far years ago, they were too imbalanced recently. They remain imbalanced.”

And there I have it. The confirmation that this woman is indeed responsible for Aleah and Duncan Steele losing the majority of their family. She is the one who infiltrated their uncle, and made him kill every one of their family members.

“Imbalanced,” I say. I stay rooted in place, unable to move an inch. “What do you mean by that?”

“Numbers, girl, it’s not that complicated,” the woman says condescendingly. “There are far too many vampires in the world to begin with. There are cities around the globe infested with them. But New York, my home, is one place I can do something about. Where I can help with... crowd control.”

I shake my head. “You realize these are people, right? Good people. And you get to be the judge? You think you get to play god? More blood is on your hands than any of those vampires.”

She offers a smile, though it flickers in and out of my brain in real time. “You’re young. Inexperienced. You have yet to see the rot they have caused over decades. The power they’ve seized. I don’t ask you to understand. I simply thought I would give you time to give the rest of them a warning.”

I shake my head. “There aren’t even that many vampires in New York. And thanks to

you, five of them, maybe more, are recently dead.”

She’s so cool, so calm, I want to rip her fucking eyes out. But I can’t really even see them. My vision of her continues to flicker, continues to wipe in real time.

“It’s no longer just about numbers, Lana,” she says, and the moment she says my name, my skin crawls. “I’ve recently heard about the influence a certain cell of Born hold over this city. And I want it to stop.”

My whole body goes cold. The Barons. She’s talking about the Barons, and I know it with every cell in my being.

“Harry Kim. Sysco Sullivan. Augustus Lonan. Giovanni Bosco. Cliff Morgan. And Ares Hunt,” she says, each word like nails in a coffin. “The influence they hold over this city is unacceptable, and I will see it end.”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I shake my head. No. Holy shit, no. “Augustus is dead,” I blurt.

I’m saying more than I want to, but it’s like I can’t hold all of my own thoughts.

Like some of them are slipping out before I can catch them.

“Ares killed him after what he did to Ophelia and the others. Giovanni is also dead, and Cliff has been missing. We assume he’s dead.

So, their influence is over. It’s done.”

She looks pleasantly surprised at that. “Thank you for that information,” she says with a smile that flickers before my eyes. “But I’m afraid this is an all-or-nothing mission. Tell your friends to clear the city, or I will do it for them. And they’ll never see me coming.”

I want to throw up. Scream. Cry. I want to pummel this twisted woman into a bloody pulp on the sidewalk, but I can’t move. My feet remain glued to the ground beneath me.

Why won’t all the insanity just stop? Can’t things just chill the fuck out for a while? The dire situations just keep piling up, one on top of the other.

“What got you here?” I ask, my words like ice. “What gave you such a God complex?”

She shakes her head. “We can talk psychology all day, but it won’t change anything.

It won't make you understand. But you need to tell your friends.

I won't wait much longer. Ares is a very proficient killer.

Maybe I'll use him again. Or Sysco. He's quite unpredictable, isn't he?

Or maybe it could be Harry who takes out the rest of them.

He's so calm. I would like to see what it's like when he loses control. ”

“Fuck you!” I bark, trying with everything I have in me to lunge at her. I want my hands around her throat. I want to smash the back of her head against the pavement. I think I'd like to sink my fangs into her neck and see what her blood tastes like. I want to take all of it.

“A warning, Lana, a heads up. That's all this is,” she says, her demeanor calm despite my outburst. “I will clear this city. So, those who wish to live need to leave New York.”

I stare at her, seeing her without being able to see her. Every word she speaks, I feel them in my bones. I feel them in my chest. The history is there. The proof is evident. She's taken out the Steele family. She already made Ares kill so many.

If she says she will do this, she's going to do it.

And she'll use someone I love to accomplish it.

“We need some time,” I say, and every word feels like a defeat. “There's someone here, someone with ties to the Royals. They're trying to bring back the Blood Father, and I would think that's the last thing you would want.”



Finally, what I have to say stills her.

Her face pales. Her shoulders slump. Her gaze narrows.

“There is a necromancer and a vampire with too much knowledge and a family mission looking for his bones as we speak,” I say.

I can feel it. I won’t defeat this woman.

So, I need to get very, very clear on what needs to happen now.

“We’re close. And we plan to stop him. So, you need to give us time to take care of this.”

Dammit. I wish I could actually see this woman. I wish I could read her better. Does she realize how serious this is? Does she take me seriously? Does she understand the gravity of what it would mean for the Blood Father to return?

“Two weeks,” she says. My skin prickles as she speaks, and instantly, a ticking clock starts counting down in the back of my brain.

“You have two weeks to resolve this situation. No longer. Then I will take care of it myself, and I will choose which of them, maybe even you, suits me to clean New York of the Barons.”

Fourteen days. And then she’ll turn one of us into a weapon.

“Do you understand the gravity of what I’m saying, Lana?

” She asks as she steps forward. I want to take a step back, to put some distance between us, but I remain frozen, the world tilting surreally around me.

"You can't stop me. They can't find me. Many have tried.

I've erased my identity from memory. You'll forget my face the second I'm gone.

You'll forget my voice, my walk. I've honed this gift over decades. I am the blank space no mind can hold."

A chill settles into my bones. My instincts scream, every part of my body aware I am prey before a predator who doesn't need claws or teeth.

"Do you understand?" she asks, her voice suddenly thunderous in my mind.

I nod.

I don't just understand. I believe her.

She nods. "You have your time. Two weeks to find the necromancer, to stop the Blood Father. But no more."

She snaps her fingers, startling me.

I blink, and the world shifts.

The street is empty. The hospital is gone. I'm standing in a part of the city I don't recognize.

I spin once, twice. My heart pounding. My breath shaky.

I don't remember her face. I don't know where I just was.

I dig into my brain. She's there. She has to be there. She was blonde, right? No,

brunette. Actually, I have no idea if she had hair at all. If she had eyes. If she was two feet tall or twenty. Fuck. How? How can a person do something like this?

A gifted person can do this.

They can turn someone against everything they normally would do.

They can make an uncle slaughter dozens of his family members in one night.

They can help an inexperienced woman turn Ares against his own kind, make it so he can't even remember what he was doing.

Fuck.

I turn, orienting myself. One more damn thing. It's one more damn thing to go tell the others.

I thought I could face Ophelia. To try and mend things. But this... Her association with this woman, Ophelia turning to someone like this for help... Things are too broken. We're too far past the point of no return.

I won't be going to visit Ophelia in the hospital.

The clock is ticking.

I head down into the nearest subway station and wonder just how much we can all take before we break.

When I get to Ares' building, I feel... sick. Nervous. Scared. A sense of dread is coating my insides. I feel like I'm always weighing who do I tell? How much do I tell? It's fucking exhausting.

So, by the time I reach the thirty-eighth floor, I'm too wiped out to even think about measuring it all.

Roman is seated at the helm, scanning over tons of footage. Ares stands over his shoulder, watching it as well. They really are so damn similar. To my surprise, Sysco is standing right next to Ares, watching with that wild intensity that is signature to him.

Juliet is at the back of the room, talking on the phone. She sounds stressed, but professional.

"We order the machine. It isn't really an option at this point," she says. "The money is there. I'd planned to use it to remodel the lab, but it's just going to have to wait. Okay, thanks."

Juliet said she is an ER doctor, but from that conversation? She's a lot more than that.

I make a mental note to Google her name later.

She hangs up and slides her phone into her pocket at the same time Ares turns and scrapes those dangerous eyes of his down my body.

"How did it go?" he asks, his tone a little wary.

I draw in a deep breath, resolve settling into my bones. I'm done holding information back. I trust everyone in this room. Yes, I've only known Juliet and Roman for a few days, but I'm just going to take a leap of faith on them.

"I didn't make it to the hospital," I say. "I was... intercepted. And given a warning."

And so, I relay everything that's just happened.

The world fracturing, the cerebral state the woman put me in.

Her warning about the Barons' hold on the city, that she's planning to use one of us to take out the rest of the Barons.

I tell them that she told me we have two weeks to intercept the resurrection of the Blood Father before she goes after us.

"Who is she?" Ares snarls. "Name. Description."

I shake my head. "That's just the thing. I couldn't even figure out what she looked like when she was standing in front of me. It was like she was erasing herself from my brain in real time."

"That doesn't make any sense," Sysco says, his eyes narrowing.

"I know," I say with a nod. "Trust me, it wasn't a fun trip. Ares, I can't even imagine how you feel about the eight days Ophelia took from you. I feel fucking violated that she simply erased herself from my memory."

He swallows once, and I almost wish I hadn't brought it up. He's been struggling enough to not hold himself responsible. Why did I have to remind him?

"So, she makes threats to the entire vampire population of New York, to us directly, and we don't even have a description?" Sysco says, his tone annoyed and disgusted.

"Is this who was working with Ophelia?" Juliet asks.

I nod. "She's a therapist, I do know that.

Ophelia went to her because she specializes in helping people with trauma caused by

vampires.

But even Ophelia didn't know her name. She said they would always meet someplace new, and Ophelia could never remember where they'd met, couldn't remember her name, or what she even looked like. ”

“That’s fucking freaky,” Sysco sneers.

“That’s a little bit of information to go off of,” Ares says. “She’s a therapist, and we know she’s a woman. That’s got to narrow the results a little bit.”

Roman is typing away furiously at the keyboard.

“Not really,” he says, his tone dark. “There are over thirteen thousand therapists in New York State, and according to this, women make up over seventy percent of therapists nationwide. Good luck finding a directory of every single therapist in New York City.”

“Damnit,” the curse slips over Ares’ lips. “There’s really nothing else to go on, Lana?”

I shake my head, hating that she’s this damn good. “It’s just an empty void in my head. This... damn, this is kind of scary, Ares.”

“You might not have her face, but we have yours,” Roman says. He snaps a picture of me and puts it into the computer, and within seconds, my face is popping up on cameras.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

We track me walking to the hospital. Crossing streets. Going around corners.

But as I get within a block of where the woman intercepted me, the cameras end.

“Fuck,” Sysco curses as he sits back. “So damn close. We almost had her face!”

“How is she such a threat to the overall population?” Roman asks. He’s frustrated. It was a good plan, a good thought. And we were just seconds away from capturing her face.

“You ever heard of the Steele family?” Ares asks.

“No,” Roman answers honestly.

Sysco gives them a quick recap of the extermination their family went through.

“So, she really can do some damage,” Juliet says, her tone sounding far away. Her gaze is fixed on the floor, as if she’s picturing horrible things happening.

“Yeah, she can,” Sysco says. “Fuck.”

“Exactly what we need,” Ares says, his gaze turning back to the screens. “A ticking clock to find a slippery snake, and the looming threat to all of us.”

Bad. It’s really, really damn bad.

“One crisis at a time,” I say as I square my shoulders. “We can’t fix all of the

problems at once. First, we find James and Markus.”

We head to the two buildings James had the blueprints for.

The first is a very commercial building, one Ares has owned for just over a year.

There’s two restaurants on the main floor, two floors of offices, and then half a dozen floors of apartments.

We head straight to the basement and start looking.

Without knowing exactly what we’re looking for, it’s hard to be certain if it is or isn’t there.

But all of us, myself, Ares, Roman, Juliet, and Sysco, comb through every square inch of the basement.

It’s relatively empty. A few storage boxes and some forgotten parts, there’s the heating and cooling system mechanics and a massive electrical panel.

But from what we can see, there’s nothing to indicate any space where a chest full of bones might be hidden.

We head to the second building.

The air outside the Midtown building hums with the white noise of the city. Taxis honk in the distance. Somewhere farther north, a siren wails. But all I can hear is the quiet tension buzzing between the five of us.

"We were talking about starting renovations on this building," Ares mutters as he stares up at the building. "James had all kinds of ideas."



"And you didn't think that was suspicious?" Sysco asks, raising a brow.

Ares cuts him a look. "At the time? No. It's what my company does. He worked for me. It was his job."

Except James had an ulterior motive.

Roman exhales slowly beside Juliet. His arms are crossed over his chest, eyes scanning every inch of the facade. "Well, let's see what your right-hand man was really up to."

This is purely a residential building. There is no doorman, so at least we don't have to talk our way in, even though Ares owns the building. We walk right on in and head to the stairs behind a closed door. The air is colder, and the proof of the building's age is instant.

A chill works its way down my arms as we descend, and it feels a little like stepping back in time. I imagine Thaddeus visiting this building at night, when the work crews had left, coming through the skeleton of the building for a place to hide something ancient and sinister.

When we step out onto the floor of the sub-basement, the mood shifts. The light flickers overhead. Paint peels in strips down the walls. It smells like metal and mildew.

"Charming," Juliet mutters.

We move through a hallway, checking doors as we go.

There are old boxes down here, though not many.

There's a few forgotten pieces of furniture.

There are old buckets of paint and a few trashed tools.

Finally, at the end of the hall, we find a locked maintenance door.

Ares pulls up something on his phone. He owns dozens of buildings; there's no way he's got every code for every place memorized.

A few seconds later, he finds what he's looking for and keys in a code. It buzzes open.

Inside is a storage area filled with discarded drywall sheets, rusted pipes, and coils of wire. No surveillance cameras. No signs of recent construction. But the dust on the floor—it's wrong. There's a faint trail where something heavy was dragged.

Roman crouches down, eyeing it. "These are fresh. I'd say in the last day or so."

We follow the trail around a corner.

It's damn obvious when we spot it.

There's a section of wall that's been broken up by the sledgehammer leaning against the wall. There is a crack stretching out from it, along the wall, that makes me nervous to be down here in this basement.

But there is a wide-open maw in the concrete, and inside it is a small chamber, maybe four feet wide, three feet deep, and three feet tall.

"I think we found the place," Sysco says as he blows out air between his lips and rubs a hand through his hair.

“Not before James retrieved the bones,” Roman states.

Because the secret chamber is empty.

Inside, there’s a clear square on the floor, dust showing the place the chest rested for nearly a century. But there’s a path disturbing it and it’s clear to tell where it was retrieved and pulled from its hiding place.

Ares clenches his jaw. "He has them. He found the bones, and we probably just missed it by hours."

"And now he has Markus," I whisper. My skin goes cold.

Roman steps back, folding his arms over his chest. "He's got everything he needs. We're not hunting for the bones anymore. We're hunting the resurrection."

"And we have no idea where or when that will happen," Sysco adds grimly.

We stare at the empty alcove for a long time. The silence feels final.

Ares' voice is low, guttural. "We're running out of time."

I can feel the weight of it. The absence of those bones screams louder than any siren.

We turn and go. But the gravity of the situation is suffocating.

He’s already moving. And we’re just trying to catch his shadow.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

"He's not answering," Ares mutters, lowering his phone like he wants to crush it in his hand. The hard line of his jaw tells me exactly how much restraint he's using.

Roman sits across from him, arms folded, that unreadable calm over his features. "He knows you're onto him."

"He kind of gave himself away that something was up when he threw a damn tantrum on Ophelia," Juliet says dryly.

"He'd want somewhere private," I say, my gaze unfocused as I stare at the floor.

"He's been looking for the bones for months.

He's spent years getting Thaddeus's journal, time tracking down Markus.

I don't think he'd want to wait any longer.

He's going to be in a hurry now that he has everything he needs.

He's going to want somewhere private to do this... reincarnation."

"He wouldn't be stupid enough to use one of my buildings now," Ares says, pacing. "It's obvious I'm looking for him."

Juliet shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She looks like she's about ready to crawl out of her own skin with the need to do something. "Then he's using something new. Something that has no risk of you knowing about it."

"Let me try something," Ares says as he slides over to the computer. He types with the controlled intensity of a man on a mission. "If he bought something recently under his own name..."

It only takes thirty seconds before something pings.

"Closed today," Ares says, his pitch rising with adrenaline. "James St. Claire. He paid cash."

"Where?" Roman and Sysco ask at the same time.

"The Bronx," Ares replies as he looks up and meets my eyes.

"Any other details?" Sysco asks. "Permits pulled, closing contingencies?"

"Nothing," Ares says as he leans back in his chair, rubbing two fingers over his bottom lip. "No paper trail except the sale. But this just closed."

"What time?" I ask as my heart starts hammering.

Ares' eyes flick back to the screen. "An hour ago."

"He might not even have the keys yet," Sysco says as hope and excitement pitch his tone. "If we get there first, we might head him off."

"Let's go," Roman says as he stands and heads straight for the door.

The building is empty. At least, it seems pretty safe to assume since there are no lights on shining through the windows, and I see no signs for any businesses that might be operating during the day. It makes sense since it just sold.

Billings kills the engine, parked half a block down and across the street.

We pile out quietly. It's always just me and Ares in this gigantic SUV. It's almost comical to watch as Roman, Juliet, and Sysco climb out in addition.

"Think he's here yet?" I ask. I'm straining my enhanced ears, listening for signs, but I'm getting nothing.

"Can't tell," Ares says as we walk down the sidewalk.

"We keep quiet from here on out, got it?" Roman says, and it's actually kind of impressive to watch him in his element. Whatever his job in Chicago is, he's damn good at it, it's easy to tell. "Hand signals. Eyes open. If he's already in there, we go with our instincts."

I, and everyone else, simply nod that we understand.

We scan the building, and Roman picks a side door. Ares tests it and has the lock picked in under ten seconds.

The door is thankfully silent as Ares pushes it open.

We step inside, and it's kind of miraculous that I can see.

My eyes still dilate mostly normally, unlike the Born.

Their eyes stay dilated at all times, which allows them to see amazingly well at night but makes them nearly blind during the day.

So, I'm positive I can't see nearly as well as they can at this moment, but it's still far, far better than I could before I died by Giovanni's blade.

There's a lobby and a ticket booth. There are stairs that immediately head up on the left and the right.

I think this is an old theater.

But I hear the sound of faint voices on the other side of the wall before us.

Roman presses a finger to his lips, a reminder to stay silent.

One by one, we follow him up the stairs.

They're old and dusty, but to our benefit, they don't squeak.

My skin turns to goosebumps as the temperature seems to drop with every step.

Roman bypasses the main floor of seating, instead heading all the way up to the balcony level.

As we walk out, the sound of the voices increases.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end when I recognize one of those voices as James's.

We didn't beat him.

But it's the next sound that stops all of us in our tracks, just moments before we step out onto the balcony.

It cuts through the quiet like a blade through something live—wet and unnatural.

It starts low. A grotesque, slurping noise, like raw meat being dragged across

concrete. Then a crunch—sharp and intimate, the sound of bone grinding against bone, not breaking but fitting, locking into place like puzzle pieces being forced together too fast, too tight.

A moment of silence follows, and each of us looks at the other with absolute dread.

We're too late. We're too fucking late.

There's something in the air. I can't see it. But I feel something inside and around. Like it's rushing. It's as if we're stuck in a tunnel, and the air is being sucked in or out, I can't tell which. But it's entirely unnatural and completely disturbing.

The sound builds.

A wet pop. Then another. Like joints snapping back into sockets.

But deeper. Thicker. It's as if something once hollow is being filled—arteries swollen with new blood, lungs inflating for the first time in centuries.

There's a grotesque gurgle, like fluid sloshing in a throat, and then a rattling, wet choke—the sound of someone trying to take their first breath through lungs that haven't remembered how yet.

Ares shifts beside me. I feel him tense, and it's a testament to how damn disturbing the sounds are that we're all frozen here, immobilized by the horror of it.

The temperature continues to drop, turning more frigid by the second.

A tear—flesh knitting over raw muscle. The slick suction of tissue sealing closed.

Then a terrible, stretching groan, like skin being dragged over a frame too fast, too



tight, too alive.

A shiver rips down my spine as something lets out a shuddering moan—not pain, not pleasure.

Just the confused, guttural sound of something remembering how to be alive.

Roman curses under his breath.

We all hear it now—the heartbeat. A wet thumping, pulsing erratically, like someone built a heart from scratch and didn't know which way it should beat.

And it's wrong. It's so fucking wrong I feel it in a visceral way.

Stretching. Curling. Wrapping around bone with slick, wet snaps.

A wet gasp fills the air—but it's not from any of us.

Finally, it's Juliet who steps out onto the balcony. I see her face blanch white, and she covers her mouth with her hands. Ares steps out after her, immediately followed by Roman and then me, and finally Sysco.

We find the edge tucked in the dark. But it grants us a perfect view of the stage, and the nightmare waiting down below.

Markus stands in the center of the stage. In front of him is an old oak table, and lying upon it, there are bones. He keeps a hand laid on them, only the bones are no longer still, and they are no longer simply bones. They twitch. Rattle. Shift. Connect.

Muscle begins to thread itself between the joints.

Veins burst from within, wrapping around the growing tissue like vines choking a tree. A ribcage forms. A spine. The hollow socket of a skull knits into place. The body breathes.

Breathes.

Oh fuck. I feel tears prick my eyes. It's the most disturbing and horrifying scene I've ever laid eyes on, and I walked in on my mother and sister's dead, murdered bodies.

It's because I know what that reincarnating nightmare is. The wreckage he would make the world.

And we were too late to prevent the beginning of this.

I'm chilled even more when I hear Markus muttering. I can't understand the words. And then I realize his eyes are entirely black. There isn't a trace of white left in them.

Beside Markus stands James. Calm. Steady. Reverent.

Two other men flank him, one on either side. They look so much like him that, for a second, I think I'm seeing triple. But no—brothers, they have to be. Their posture is militant, their expressions unreadable. Their gazes remain fixed on the reforming Blood Father.

Ares' fingers close around my hand. I hadn't realized I was reaching for him until I feel his grip. We exchange no words, but I see it in his eyes. Horror.

Markus chants louder, the words something ancient and evil.

The body keeps growing.

Hair sprouts from the scalp. Skin stretches across bone like paper being unrolled. Orbs start forming in the eye sockets, wet, round blobs of goop.

I feel a scream building in my chest.

Ares is trembling, barely restrained.

The creature's chest rises and falls.

And then he speaks.

It's in a language I don't understand. But still, the words chill me. The voice is wrong. It vibrates through the air. It rattles my bones and reaches into my chest.

James and his brothers drop to one knee. "Father," they utter at once, reverence in their voices.

Juliet grabs Roman's arm. He doesn't even flinch.

"We have to stop this," she hisses.

Ares breathes through his nose, and slowly, he withdraws his dagger.

Sysco leans in beside me. "We're out of time. We have to do something. Now."

Below us, the Blood Father turns his head in our direction. He sniffs the air once.

And then he smiles.

It is a smile that knows hunger. And savage power.

Ares whispers, "Now."

Ares straight up jumps over the edge of the balcony, immediately followed by Roman, then Juliet, then Sysco. I hesitate for just a moment, but I know this new Made vampire body of mine can handle it.

I jump.

Markus doesn't see us coming.

James does.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

He lifts his head, eyes narrowing just as Ares slams into the nearest brother with bone-shattering force. The man doesn't even scream—just crashes into the wall with a crack.

Juliet throws a blade across the room. It hits the second brother in the leg, staggering him. Sysco follows in a blur, fists and fury.

Chaos explodes.

I take my closest opponent. James.

“No!” James shouts as he sees everything erupt into chaos.

He launches toward Markus, trying to protect the nightmare unfolding before us, but I cut him off mid-sprint with a low tackle, slamming my shoulder into his ribcage. We hit the stone floor hard, but I recover faster—roll, mount, and hammer my elbow into his jaw.

He snarls, blood flashing in his mouth.

I go for an armbar, twisting to lock in a submission—but he's strong. He wrenches free, his fist crashing against my ribs. I grunt, bones protesting, but I've taken worse. And I am not so fragile anymore.

He scrambles up. I follow.

We circle, breath ragged in the thick, metallic air. In the background, I hear a bone

snap—Ares or Roman, maybe Sysco. No time to look.

“You don’t know what you’re fighting, Lana,” James pants, fury etched into every line of his face. “Cyrus has kept us in the dark long enough. Don’t fight the tide.”

“Why did you have to turn out to be a fucking liar?” I ask with a sigh. “I’m getting pretty damn sick of people who are two-faced.”

He simply shakes his head in frustration and disappointment, just before he lunges.

I duck the first punch. It whistles past my ear. I block the second, redirecting his wrist with a tight parry, and pivot into his space, slamming my knee into his thigh. He grunts but grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks, spinning me off balance. I twist with the motion and elbow him in the throat.

He stumbles, coughing violently.

I charge, fists flying—a combo: jab, cross, hook. My knuckles crack across his cheek, split his brow. But he’s fast—he’s Born, and we’re fucking up his plan.

He reaches for something from his pocket—metal glinting under the low light. I dive, too late.

Steel punches into my chest.

The world shatters.

It’s just left of center—too close to my heart. I feel it slice, nicking muscle, maybe more. My body jerks. Pain flares—white-hot and devastating.

But then?—

I feel the sting shift to heat. My heart stutters... and keeps beating.

I gasp. The regeneration kicks in like a fuse lighting through my bloodstream. I can feel the tissue knitting, the wound sealing even while the blade's still in me.

James's eyes widen.

“What the?—”

I rip the blade from my chest.

He flinches back, but I'm already moving.

“Made different, bitch,” I bite.

I punch low into his gut, twice, fast and mean.

When he folds, I hammer my elbow into the back of his neck.

He collapses to a knee—I wrap my arm around his throat and pull, cinching a standing rear-naked choke.

He fights it, slams his elbow into my ribs again, but I hold, legs locked around his torso. He's slipping.

Then he slams us both backward—my spine hits the edge of something hard, and the wind whooshes from my lungs.

I roll free, coughing.

Behind me, Markus cries out. Roman tackles him. They roll across the floor, fists

flying.

The Blood Father—still forming—sits up, a maniacal grin on his face as he watches the chaos.

His skin is still raw. His voice is like gravel soaked in evil.

He spouts words, but I don't have any clue what he's saying.

I have no idea what language he would have even spoken in Austria over two thousand years ago.

Fuck, it's all so disturbing.

Juliet shouts something I don't catch.

One of James' brothers lashes out at her, slicing across her side. Roman roars, throwing Markus aside and grabbing the brother by the throat. His grip tightens.

Then he lets go—and rips the man's heart from his chest.

James is bleeding heavily now, his face a mess from my raking claws. "What the fuck, Lana? You're not even human anymore," he spits.

"You bet your ass I'm not."

He charges again.

I feint left, spin, and catch him with a roundhouse kick to the side of his head. The sound it makes is wet and satisfying. He stumbles, dazed.



I follow—grab his arm, wrench it into a lock, and snap the elbow joint. He howls.

Behind us, I hear Roman yell something, a sickening crack of a neck-breaking. But James is still mine.

He lashes out, claws raking my shoulder, but I slip under and slam him to the ground with a double-leg takedown.

But we both look, for just a second, as Juliet pins Markus to the ground. She places her hands on either side of his head.

She twists.

And she rips.

“No!” James screams like he’s possessed as we watch Markus’s decapitated head drop to the ground.

It’s so damn savage.

I feel it—like the air implodes. Like the marrow of the world sucks inward.

The Blood Father convulses violently on the table, his half-formed body arching up in a grotesque spasm. His skin cracks open like old parchment. Veins shrivel beneath translucent flesh. One of his eyes collapses into its socket with a sickening wet pop.

He begins to desiccate.

It’s like watching time attack him at hyper-speed. Muscles blacken and peel from bone. Organs rupture, deflating like rotted fruit. His ribcage shrinks inward, snapping with dry, brittle crunches as his chest caves in.

James stumbles across the stage, desperately trying to get to the withering nightmare. “No. No, no, no—please—” he begs, sliding on the blood-slick floor, his hands reaching out like he can stop it.

He can't.

It's too late.

The Blood Father turns to ruin, rotting by the second.

The whole room feels suspended as we all watch the nightmare.

And then there's nothing left but bones again.

James kneels beside him, eyes wild, hands trembling above the remains. His breath heaves. And for three seconds, it feels like it's over.

Then something in James snaps.

He spins—feral—his eyes scanning those surrounding him. So fast, I can hardly see it, he launches at Ares with a roar.

I scream, but I'm too far away.

Ares blocks the first strike, knocks James back with a solid elbow—but James is unhinged. He drives forward, pulling something from his belt like it's been waiting for this moment.

The sound of it plunging into Ares' chest ends my whole world.

A dull thunk. A sharp exhale.

Ares' eyes go wide. He clutches at the stake, his lips parting in confusion—no words, just pain.

His knees buckle.

“Ares!”

I scream so loud it rips my throat. The world tilts.

I'm practically teleporting across the stage, but I can't stop it as his skin drains of color, going pale, then gray. His veins go dark. His mouth sags open.

He collapses, heavy and final, to the ground.

Still.

Silent.

Dead.

Time and space feel suspended as the word echoes through my brain.

Dead.

Ares.

Dead.

Someone screams. Someone bellows.

It's like something ancient and bottomless inside me goes cold—then explodes.

I turn on James.

He doesn't even see me coming.

I crash into him like a freight train, tackling him to the ground. We slam into the slick stone, my knee driving into his ribs with a crunch. His breath whooshes out.

I see his eyes—startled, maybe even scared—and I don't care. I don't fucking care.

My fists fly. One. Two. Ten.

I don't count. I don't think.

I feel bone break beneath my knuckles. I feel his teeth give under the hammer of my rage. Blood sprays my face, my hands, the walls. James tries to cover his head, but I grab his wrists, slam them to the floor, straddle his chest, and rain fury down.

“You fucking bastard!” I scream, and my voice is not human.

He gurgles something—maybe a plea, maybe a curse.

I bare my teeth.

And it all comes to a crystal clear point as I drive my hand into his chest.

Flesh parts like wet paper.

My fingers curl around his heart—still beating—and I tear it free with a scream that rips my throat raw.

James jerks beneath me. One last breath escapes his lips. His eyes roll back. He

twitches once.

Then nothing. His skin turns gray, and he's absolutely still on the ground.

Sysco kneels beside Ares, obscenities and pleas pouring out of him. I collapse to my knees beside Ares, shaking. Blood coats my arms. My chest is heaving. My entire body is trembling, but not from fear—from fury. From despair.

I look at Ares.

His eyes are still open.

But he's not there.

I cradle his face in my hands. "No," I whisper. "No, no, no..."

I press my forehead to his, tears falling hot and fast. "Please come back to me. Please, Ares..."

But he doesn't move.

He just lies there, like a statue carved from ash and sorrow.

And I feel my heart tear in two.

The space has gone still for a moment. James is dead. His brothers are dead. Markus is dead. The Blood Father is dead.

Ares is dead.

And the world might as well just end now.

“L ana.”

A sob is working its way up my chest, ready to explode through my entire body, when Juliet walks over and kneels beside me.

My eyes slide over to meet hers, and I don't know if I'm really seeing anything right. She has this expression I can't explain.

“It'll be okay,” she says as she places a hand on mine.

I want to scream at her, cry, curse, because what the hell could she mean? Of course it won't be alright. But she looks back at Roman, who stands just five feet behind her. There's a look of pained resignation, and he turns away from Juliet, deliberately not looking at her.

“Well,” Juliet mutters, her voice heavy with something between weariness and inevitability. “Here we go again.”

I can't even process her words. It's like they won't sink into my brain. I can't sort them out or make any sense of them. Not when my whole world just evaporated.

Juliet looks back at Sysco, and then looks me square in the eye and says, “Just keep what's about to happen to yourself, okay?”

I don't understand.

Until she hovers her hand over Ares' chest, and then rests it against his skin.

Instantly, a cry of pain escapes her lips, and for a moment, I think she's been shot as blood sprays from her chest. The very next second, she slumps forward.

Dead.

Ares gasps. His back arches.

The stake in his chest pops out like it's been launched from within. His eyes fly open. He sits up, wild and breathless.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

I stare.

Ares.

Alive.

Alive?

Ares looks around the room, dazed. His body tenses, though he's obviously in pain. He holds a hand to his chest where he was just staked and grimaces. He turns to me, dazed. "Lana..."

"Ares," his name comes across my lips in an emotional, disbelieving tremble. I throw myself into his arms, and this time, I can't stop the sob that works its way out of my body.

He's alive.

Ares is alive.

“What the hell just happened?” Sysco asks from the other side of Ares. His voice is high, shocked. It echoes in the bloody silence that fills the massacre site.

“Lana,” Ares says again as he splays a hand against the side of my face.

He’s looking around at the mess that’s around us.

He lets out a groan again, rubbing at the place in his chest where the stake was just moments ago.

The gaping hole is already knitting itself closed.

“What...?” But he trails off, at a loss for words.

More tears cascade down my face, another sob heaving my chest. My brain and heart can’t catch up with the whiplash that’s just happened. I can’t make sense of any of it.

I cradle him in my arms, rocking slightly in the aftermath of everything, blood soaking into my jeans, my hands sticky with it—but I don’t care. He’s warm again. Breathing. His heartbeat thrums against my chest like a war drum, and I can’t stop the tears that fall.

I’m shaking. I can’t stop touching him—his face, his chest, his shoulders. He looks dazed, like he’s still trying to piece together where he is. I press a kiss to his jaw, another to his temple, and whisper against his skin.

“I thought I lost you,” I breathe. “I thought?—”

“I was dead!” Ares suddenly realizes, the shock taking over. He searches my eyes



frantically. “How?”

“Seriously, what the fuck just happened?” Sysco barks again, looking around with wild eyes. “Juliet, is she... Is she really dead? How the hell did she do that? Did she bring Ares back?”

The room goes still again as reality crashes back in.

Juliet is lying right beside me. She definitely looks dead.

And just ten feet away, her husband stands with his back deliberately turned to her.

“Roman,” I say his name, a terrified question.

He doesn’t turn around immediately. His shoulders are slumped, his head hanging slightly. And as I study his form, I realize he’s shaking.

Whatever the hell just happened, he knew it was coming, and he looked away so he didn’t have to see it.

“Roman,” Ares says his name, more persistent than I inquired.

I see Roman take a deep, steadying breath. He lifts his face to the ceiling for a moment, his eyes closed. And finally, I see resolve in his shoulders as he turns and walks across the stage. Without a word, he walks past Sysco and me. His eyes lock on Juliet’s body.

She’s crumpled on the floor. Still and pale.

Roman drops to his knees beside her, not with a crash but with a quiet reverence. Like she’s sacred. He gathers her up carefully, as if she’s made of porcelain, and

tucks her against his chest.

“She died for him,” he says quietly. “It’s her gift. And her curse.”

Ares stiffens in my arms. “What do you mean?”

Roman brushes Juliet’s hair back from her face with a trembling hand. “Juliet’s mother cursed her when she was a baby. She can’t really die.”

“But she is,” Sysco says, voice tight. “She looks pretty fucking dead to me.”

“She’s died dozens of times,” Roman says, his voice hollow. “But she always comes back.”

Ares sits up straighter, still rubbing the place on his chest where he was staked. “What do you mean? She died for me?”

Roman just nods, his jaw tight. There’s pain in his eyes.

Old pain. Deep. I wonder just how many times he’s had to watch his wife die.

“It’s an exchange. Her life for yours. Only there’s a loophole, because she can’t stay dead.

Her curse is that she cannot die. Her gift, just like how Markus can raise the dead and Ophelia can influence people, is that Juliet can die for other people. ”

My head is spinning with all that information.

Juliet is like Markus. Like Ophelia. Like that damn therapist.

Juliet is a Born vampire, but she is also gifted.

That's what she meant when she said here we go again . She's done this before. A lot of times, if I had to guess.

"So, she's going to come back?" I ask softly.

"In five minutes," Roman says without looking at us. "Give or take."

Something about the way he says it—the absolute certainty, the weight in his voice—says this isn't the first or second time he's held her like this and waited.

The way he turned his back right before Juliet touched Ares...

Roman knew exactly what Juliet was about to do. And he couldn't stand to watch it.

How many times has Roman seen Juliet die?

"That's about the craziest shit I've heard yet," Sysco says as his eyebrows rise toward his hairline and he shakes his head. "But damn if that gift wouldn't come in handy all the time."

Ares and I sit on the floor beside him, our legs tangled, both of us still catching our breath. He touches my face again, gently, his thumb brushing away the tears I didn't realize were still falling.

"You're okay?" he murmurs.

"You were just dead, and you're asking if I'm okay?" I balk.

Ares expression darkens. "I saw James stab you."

“Right, I forgot,” I admit stupidly. I look down at my chest. My shirt has a hole, but there’s no evidence that I was pierced in the chest and nicked in the heart.

There isn’t any blood there. There isn’t even a red scar.

“It’s totally healed already. Honestly, I hardly felt it for more than two seconds. The regeneration is... diabolical.”

“I’ll be thanking Florence every fucking day of my life,” Ares says as he cups a hand behind my head and pulls my forehead to his.

“You got fucking stabbed?!” Sysco bellows, looking at me with huge eyes. “And you’re just fine?”

I nod. “I’m fine.”

Sysco shakes his head. “That’s it. I don’t know a damn thing anymore. Vampires getting staked and being fine, others bringing people back from the dead. The whole rulebook is out the window.”

I chuckle. And I’m so grateful for Sysco. That, even in a moment like this, he can still make me smile.

But my heart has another attack when, just a moment later, Juliet gasps.

She lurches forward in Roman’s arms like someone waking from a drowning dream. Her eyes snap open. Her hands clutch his shoulders.

Roman doesn’t flinch. He just exhales slowly and pulls her closer.

“Hey,” he says softly.

Juliet blinks, dazed. “What...?”

“You did it,” he says. “You brought him back.”

She groans and drops her head against his chest. “Oh, good. Can we just get me a punch card at this point?”

Another tear gathers in the corner of my eye. I push to my hands and knees, my palms smearing in the blood beneath us, and crawl over to her.

Without hesitation, I wrap my arms around her. She smells like blood and sweat and death—but she’s warm. Alive.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

Juliet’s voice is muffled in my shoulder. “No biggie. Just another Saturday.”

I let out a wet, half-hysterical laugh and pull back, brushing a hand through my hair. And then Ares is there, wrapping his arms around both Juliet and Roman.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice gritty. “I owe you both everything.”

Ares understands what it took out of Roman to watch his wife do what she did. It ripped a piece of his soul apart, and Ares wants to recognize that.

“No problem,” Juliet chuckles as she hugs Ares back. “Just don’t go dying again. What I just did? It’s a one-time thing.”

“I’ll do my best,” Ares chuckles.

Good to know, though.

The look Roman gives Ares as he backs away says something. It's different between them now. There's a bond there.

Juliet groans again, rubbing her face. "Okay, well, that sucked. How long was I out?"

"Exactly five minutes," Roman answers, helping her sit up. "I timed it."

"You would." She smirks tiredly and leans into him. He kisses her forehead, his fingers running through her hair like he's grounding himself.

Sysco climbs to his feet, looking around at the utter carnage—the puddles of blood, the ripped flesh, the broken bodies, and the carnage of what was nearly the end of the damn world.

"Well... now what the fuck do we do?"

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I've never seen so much blood in one place.

Once upon a time, the sight of all this blood would have made me pass out. I couldn't have handled it. But slowly, Ares seemed to heal that. And when I became a vampire? I think that took care of the rest.

But blood is thick in the air. It soaks the floor. Clings to my skin. The tang of it coats the back of my throat as we move slowly through what's left of the resurrection stage, as if moving any faster would bring it all crashing down again.

Juliet is wiping her face with a cloth that might have once been white but is now saturated in streaks of red and black. She looks like hell. Like we all do.

The bones of the Blood Father—what's left of them—lie in a heap.

"That's the last one," Sysco says, hauling what's left of James' brother onto a tarp.

Juliet crosses the floor, careful of the blood pools, and glances down at the body. "We cremate them. All of them."

Roman wipes blood off his jaw, his shirt soaked through. "Then we scatter the ashes."

Juliet nods. "That's what we did with Archer King. No bones. No trace. No way back."

I don't know who the hell Archer King is, but I get the willies just from the way

Juliet says his name.

Ares' gaze darkens. "Agreed."

We gather the remains. Five bodies. James, his two brothers, Markus, and whatever's left of the Blood Father. Sysco makes a few quick calls, quiet and efficient. He's got a guy. No questions asked. Doesn't ask who the bodies are. Doesn't want to know. Just says he can do it.

We load them into tarps and tape off the ends and cracks so no more blood can escape.

The van Sysco arranges is old and beat-up, the kind that looks like it belongs to a band that never made it.

We drive in silence to a facility on the edge of the city—a place with no name, no real address.

Just a man with dead eyes and a roaring furnace.

Juliet stands beside me as Roman and Sysco dump one of the brothers into the flames. I watch as Ares grabs the bag with the Blood Father's bones and then drops them into the fire as well.

"I didn't even really know who that was until a few days ago," I say as I wrap my arms around my middle. "And he could have ended the world as we know it."

"Cyrus tried to make the world forget his son," Juliet says as she stares into the flames. "Too bad immortals have long memories. I wonder if he will ever realize his son's bones aren't in Roter Himmel anymore?"



I don't have an answer to that, so I don't say anything.

It takes hours to burn every one of these bodies down to ash. I don't know why I'm surprised, but I am, when we have to wait half the night before it's done. But eventually, it is. We collect every bit of the ash and bag it, and then we drive to the Hudson.

Morning is teasing the horizon, fog curling off the water, the skyline behind us an eerie silhouette of the city we just saved. One by one, we tear open the bags, and dump them into the dark water. The current dissolves them in seconds. Gone.

Forever, I hope.

When it's done, we stand there for a long moment, staring into the water.

Juliet breaks the silence. "I don't know about you all, but I need a fucking shower and a week of sleep."

"Same," Sysco mutters.

Roman runs a hand through his hair, blood drying under his nails. "We regroup after sunset."

Everyone agrees. One by one, we drift apart into the city.

But Ares reaches for my hand, lacing his fingers with mine.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to.

We head for home.

The penthouse is quiet. Still.

After seeing so much carnage, it almost seems impossible that it hasn't spread throughout the entire world. The walls here are so clean. The floor untouched by blood. The only sound is the faint hum of the refrigerator.

I walk into the living room and just stand there. What are we supposed to do with our lives now? How... how do we just have a normal day after everything that just transpired?

Ares walks up and wraps his arms around my waist. And it's the most natural thing in the world when I loop my hands behind his neck, but it's something that I will never, ever take for granted.

"I still can't believe it," I whisper.

"I know," he says, his voice rough.

"I watched you die," I say, and my words crack as emotions try to strangle me. "I felt it. You dropped to your knees, and I... I couldn't breathe."

He pulls me tighter against him, and I lean into the strength of his body, into the heat of his skin. He's alive. Warm. Breathing.

"I thought it was over," I admit, my voice cracking. "I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm here," he says softly. "Thanks to Juliet."

I look up into his eyes. "I don't want to waste any more time."

His brows pull together. "What do you mean?"

“I mean,” I say, pressing a hand to his chest, right over the place the stake pierced him, “I want to marry you. Tomorrow. I want to be yours, officially. Permanently. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

His breath catches.

Then he growls—a deep, rough sound that vibrates through me. His hands frame my face.

“Say it again.”

“I want to marry you,” I whisper.

His mouth crashes into mine, all teeth and fire and devotion. It’s not gentle. It’s everything. His lips bruise mine, his hands grip my body like he’s trying to mold me to him. I kiss him back just as fiercely, matching his desperation.

He lifts me without breaking the kiss, carrying me down the hall. My back hits the bed as he tips us onto it. His hands roam down my thighs, spreading them, anchoring me around his waist.

“I love you,” he says, his voice ragged against my throat.

“I love you more,” I whisper, clinging to him.

He tears my shirt, and I gasp, arching into him. His mouth traces fire down my neck, his hands reverent and hungry.

I claw at his bloodied and torn clothes. It isn’t pretty. It isn’t clean. Violence happened today. Death was all around us. But none of that matters.

Because I still get to touch him. I still get to feel him breathing.

We make love like we've been starved of each other—like the world could burn outside, and we wouldn't care.

It's not careful. It's not slow.

It's the kind of love that rebuilds.

That claims.

That marks this as a new beginning.

When it's over, we collapse into each other, limbs tangled, breath shared.

Ares brushes hair from my face, his eyes burning with something ancient and infinite.  
“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” I whisper.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I don't know how long I sit there on the edge of the bed after he leaves—just staring at the crumpled sheets where Ares had been lying minutes ago, where I had clung to him like the world would collapse again if I let go.

But it hasn't. Not today.

Because he's alive again.

Because I still get to love him.

The morning light cuts across the penthouse in golden streaks, soft and quiet and surreal. My heart is anxious, strung out, stressed from everything that's happened, but today... today it's pounding for something different.

Hope.

My phone buzzes. Ares.

Got our license. You're going to be my wife by tonight.

I laugh, actually laugh, full and breathless and alive.

I'll find something white.

Time is ticking, and there's a million things to do before tonight, so I launch out of bed.

I don't overthink it.

It's a little boutique tucked into a narrow stretch of SoHo, nothing flashy.

I tell the woman working there that I need something I can get married in tonight .

Her eyes go wide with panic for a moment, but as she sees the conspiratorial grin growing on my lips, she gets it.

She steels her expression, and she gets to work.

For just a few moments, I have an ache inside me.

Shopping for a wedding dress is supposed to be a big deal.

It's supposed to be something you do with all the important women in your life.

But my mother is dead. My sister is dead.

My best friend ended things with the kind of finality that there is no coming back from.

Florence will kill me for not inviting her. Clementine will be heartbroken.

But as I look in the mirror when I try on the first dress, I know it. My priorities have shifted dramatically in the last twenty-four hours. This is a means to an end. This gets me what I want today. Time can be short, and you never know when things will change in the blink of an eye.

So, I'm not waiting. And I won't regret this.

I try on three dresses.

The fourth one stills the world.

It's simple. Creamy satin. A little structured at the waist, feminine neckline, an open back that kisses my skin. It's not fussy. It's not loud.

But it's absolutely me.

When I step out, the attendant gasps. "Oh, honey... this is the one."

"Yeah, it is," I say as I admire myself in the mirror.

I text Ares as I'm paying.

Found the one.

His reply comes eight seconds later.

Fuck, the thought of you walking toward me in white... The next few hours will be the longest of my life, Vengeance.

It's my absolute favorite thing in the world when he goes feral over me.

I become a blur of action. I have to charge my phone by one o'clock, I'm so glued to it trying to get everything lined up. I send out texts to everyone we love:

9 PM. The Mirage Highline. Be there. Dress nice.

I have to turn off all my notifications, so I'm not tempted to read their responses and spoil the surprise.

Back at the penthouse, Ares makes calls like a man possessed. He's been pulling strings all day—permits waived, vendors appearing like magic, bribes paid to get people to rearrange their schedules.

Every moment feels dipped in something glittering and golden. This day isn't just beautiful—it feels charmed.

As I watch Ares across the house, I can't help but admire him.

He's so fucking beautiful. Lean, strong legs.

Abs for days. Arms I literally drool over.

And a face that would make lesser women weep.

All the extra details are the cherry on top.

I love his tattoos. I love how they span his arms, his hands, his back, his chest, his neck.

I love the diamond studs in his ears and the silver hoop in his nose. He's a perfect work of art.

And somehow, he's mine.

Ares hangs up the phone and looks over at me. A wicked little grin crooks in the corner of his mouth. "You're staring, Vengeance."

"I can't help it, Venom," I smirk as I cross the room and wrap my arms behind his neck. I expected a hug, but he scoops me clean off the ground, wrapping my legs around his waist. He walks to the kitchen island and sets my ass against it, pulling me



in close to him.

“I can’t believe we’re here,” he says softly as he brushes his knuckles against my cheek. “Everything that’s been working against us, all the shit we’ve gone through. But we’re here.”

I shake my head in utter disbelief. “Three months,” I say, the awe in my voice obvious. “How has it only been three months since I met you? I swear we’ve already lived three lifetimes together.”

Ares shakes his head. “Not even possible. It’s definitely been three years with all the wild shit we’ve been through.”

My eyes lower to his lips for a moment. “Plus, I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for you, Ares. Everything you’ve done for me, all the ways you’ve healed things that were broken inside me...”

The look in Ares’ eyes deepens. He leans forward, pressing his lips to mine. It isn’t demanding or urgent. It just feels right. As second nature as breathing. We’re each other’s rocks, or maybe each other’s sun, we orbit and exist around each other.

“You’re everything, Lana,” Ares breathes against my lips. “You hold the entirety of my soul in your hands. Never doubt that.”

I kiss him this time, my hand flattening against the tattoos rising up the side of his neck. His hand splays over my thigh, right over where my tattoos is, the one of Ares, the god of war’s helmet interwoven with thorns and roses.

Something vibrates in my back pocket. Ares bites at my lower lip playfully before he backs away. “Better keep going, or I’m going to get distracted—in the best way, and this wedding won’t be everything you deserve.”

Fuck. This man, the perfection of him.

I look down at my phone, and smile at the name on the screen.

“Elle,” I say, and even just speaking to her on the phone makes my chest feel warm and comforted.

“Lana,” she says in that beautiful southern drawl. “Does this text mean what I think it means?”

A silly grin is plastered on my face, and yet I am not embarrassed in the least. “And what do you think it means?”

“Hmm, I’m seeing a white dress and a tuxedo and a very beautiful surprise,” she says, and I can practically see the warm smile on her lips.

“You might be in the right line of thinking,” I tease. “Any chance you can make it down to New York?”

“I really, really wish I could, believe me, Lana,” she says, and I feel disappointment sink into my stomach. “But I’m eight and a half months pregnant. I’ve been having contractions for two days now. They might not be the real deal, but they could turn into it any day.”

“Shit, I forgot,” I say, smacking my palm to my forehead. “Duh. Of course, you need to stay in Boston.”

“I really wish I could be there,” she says, and I can hear how much she genuinely means it from her tone. “You and Ares deserve everything.”

“Thanks, Elle, that means a lot,” I say, biting my lower lip. I need to take another trip

to Boston. There's just something magical about this woman. "I want a picture when that beautiful baby comes, got it?"

She laughs on the other end. "Got it. I will definitely send you a picture. But congratulations, Lana. I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," I say with a sigh. If things were different, I kind of wish we could live next door to each other and be best friends. We're wildly different, but fuck it. I love her.

"Bye, Lana," Elle says, and I say goodbye.

And, immediately, another call comes in, wedding business demanding attention.

An hour before the ceremony, I sit in a private suite at the venue.

The makeup artist lines my eyes with soft smoke and shimmer. The hairstylist pins my curls into a loose half-updo with the rest of my hair left to cascade down my back. There's a mirror in front of me, and I can't stop staring at myself like I don't quite recognize the woman I've become.

Not because I look different. But because I feel it.

There's no fear anymore. No uncertainty.

Only this glowing, grounded, wildfire kind of love.

I've died. I've been remade. I've hunted monsters and battled nightmares. But tonight, I get to be a bride.

And I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

It feels like just a blink later when I'm ready, and outside, the music begins—soft and instrumental, a rising cascade of piano and strings.

From behind the doors, I can hear the murmur of confused voices. Our friends and family all gathered, with no idea why.

The doors swing open.

And I step forward.

I think at most weddings, when the bride steps out, a hush falls over the crowd. Not this one. Because as soon as I step out, the reason for this gathering becomes very apparent. At that same moment, Ares steps out from another door, taking his place at the front of the room.

I'm fucking beaming. And the crowd loses their minds. "No way," someone mutters. I see Juliet slap Roman's chest. Florence presses her hands to her mouth and begins to cry. Sysco, none too quietly, says, "fuck yes!" and then grins like an idiot.

It was probably obvious when they walked in and saw the aisle down the middle of the chairs and the beautiful, decorated arch at the front. But me in a white dress and Ares in a tux confirm it for the whole damn world.

I walk myself down the aisle, proud, calm, glowing. The room is awash in twilight—the backdrop is all floor-to-ceiling windows, Manhattan glittering beyond them like the city knows something magical is happening inside.

And at the end of the aisle stands Ares.

He wears a deep red tux, his dark hair swept back, his expression completely undone. He's looking at me like I am the only light he's ever known. Like the sun finally rose

after a hundred years of darkness.

Our eyes lock. And I swear I forget how to breathe.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

I walk toward the man who changed my whole life.

The man who completed me. I walk toward the rest of my forever.

Because that's what we have now. Yesterday, I watched him die.

I held his cool, still form. But he's a miracle, and I'm a miracle.

And now we're about to bond into one for the rest of forever.

I'm fucking beaming by the time I reach Ares, and he just might have swallowed the sun today, because the man is luminous.

I take his hands and just look at him for a few moments.

I love him with every fiber of my being.

And now I get to vow it in front of everyone who matters.

There is no officiant. We don't need one. No one else has the authority to define what this is between us.

Ares squeezes my hands, never once breaking eye contact.

"Lana," he begins, his voice already rough with emotion.

But he's also calm. So confident. "We started as a lie. An arrangement. A

performance. But from the moment you looked me in the eye—unafraid, furious, fucking radiant—I knew I’d never be able to pretend with you.

Not really. Not when everything in me screamed mine .

” The word comes out as an emotional whisper.

It snags something inside me. It catches in my chest. I blink furiously, making sure the tears gathered in my eyes do not fall.

“I’ve lived just long enough to know that forever isn’t a promise. But with you, forever sounds too short. I would stretch time until it broke just to love you longer.”

Ares stares into my eyes, and I swear there is some kind of alchemical magic going on right now. I feel his words all the way into my soul, stitching us together, binding us in a physical way.

“Lana, I vow to protect your fire. To honor your darkness. To worship your strength.

“You have brought me to my knees in the most sacred way. You are not just my heart. You are my home. You are my beginning and my end.

“And whatever comes after—this life, the next—I will find you there, and love you all over again.”

I swallow the tears in my throat. This man. This man. How am I ever, ever going to top the perfect vows he’s just spoken?

“Ares, you were supposed to be a means to an end. What we agreed to in the beginning... We were both crazy. I never expected the vampire I was supposed to fake a future with... would become the man I couldn’t imagine surviving without.

” Emotion cracks my voice as I remember what it was like in those few moments after James staked him.

I couldn’t see past it. I couldn’t see a future without him.

“Ares, loving you has broken me apart and rebuilt me into someone I never dared to be—whole, wild, strong. You saw every jagged, guarded piece of me and didn’t flinch.”

He squeezes my hands, brushing a thumb over the back of one of them. He’s so steady, just as he’s been the entire time I’ve known him. Here, holding his hands, I feel so grounded, like nothing could ever shake us.

It will take more than death to rip us apart. We’ve already proven that.

“I don’t care how long we live—ten years or a thousand. It still wouldn’t be enough time to love you the way you deserve,” I continue. “But I’ll spend every breath trying.”

Ares smiles down at me, strength and devotion radiating from the man who has become the center of my whole universe.

“I vow to never flinch from your shadows. To match your ferocity with my own. To choose you again and again—no matter the odds, no matter the war, no matter how many times the world tries to tear us apart.

“You are not just the man I love. You are the pulse in my veins. The fire in my blood.

“And I will love you—through eternity, through ashes, through every impossible tomorrow.”



Ares pulls two small objects from his pocket. He takes my left hand and slides a beautiful, simple band to join the ring I've worn since the beginning.

"I do," he says, his voice rough with conviction as he stares into my eyes.

I take the other ring from his hand and reach for his left hand. The band is thick and black, simple and solid. I stare into his eyes as I slide it onto his ring finger. "I do," I vow.

Then his hand is at my waist, and I'm rising on my toes, and we're kissing like we've waited a hundred years for this moment. Like it's oxygen. Like it's war and peace and forever all rolled into one.

The room explodes in cheers.

Clementine cries with a smile. Sysco whoops and yells, "That's what I'm talking about!"

Juliet mutters, "Hot damn," and fans herself.

Ares presses his forehead to mine, his arms around me.

"My wife," he breathes.

My smile splits wide across my face. "Say it again."

"My wife," he growls, louder this time. Possessive and proud. Like he's claiming something the whole world better never try to take from him again.

Around us, the city sparkles. Love burns hot and wild in my chest.

Ares presses his lips to mine again, sealing our vows and silencing the world.

Everything becomes golden. The city lights glitter beyond the windows, and the air in the room is heavy with joy and warmth.

I hear the cheers from our friends and family, a chorus of clapping and hollering that echoes around us as we finally turn to face them as husband and wife.

My face aches from smiling, but I don't stop.

Ares doesn't let go of my hand as we walk down the short aisle together. Every step feels surreal. I'm Lana Hunt. I'm married . I married—for real—to the vampire who pretended to be my fiancé to save me.

“Come on, everyone,” I say as we head for the back of the room. “It's time for some cake!”

And that's exactly what we do. I don't know how Ares pulled it off, but he tracked down someone who could make us a breathtaking cake today .

It's four tiers high. It's white with black and red and gold accents.

The whole room cheers and gathers round as Ares and I slice a piece and enjoy every bit of the cliché as we stuff each other's faces with the delicious sugar.

The caterer serves up slices of cake, and I relax just a little as the moment shifts a little more casual.

Before I can process any more, Clementine appears in front of me like a glittering ghost in a satin blazer. Her wife follows behind her, narrowing her eyes at Ares and me.

“Okay,” she drawls in that London accent, a glass of champagne already in hand, “this entire surprise wedding? Beyond iconic. How did you pull this off, considering everything else going on?”

I snort. “Well, we decided last night that we didn’t want to wait any longer. And here we are now!”

Florence narrows her eyes playfully. “I demand a time stamp.”

“This morning,” Ares says with a wry grin. “Seriously.”

The sound that escapes her is halfway between a gasp and a laugh. “Shut up.”

Juliet strides over, grinning, dragging Roman behind her. “Wait. Hold on. You’re telling me this was a today decision?”

I nod, laughing now as everyone else starts reacting.

Florence crosses her arms, expression flat—but the corners of her mouth betray her. “You planned all this and didn’t even call me? I should disown you both.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” I say as I wrap my arms around my real, true-blue sister-in-law. “But I hope you can find it in you to forgive me. I literally only tried on four dresses, so you didn’t miss out on much.”

“That magical piece of fabric was dress number four?” Clementine gapes in shock.

“Seriously, that dress was made for you, Lana,” Juliet compliments with a raised brow.

“I can’t believe you pulled this off,” Sysco chuckles as he strides over.

Ares slips his arm around my waist and kisses my temple. “I had to pull some strings.”

“That’s one hell of a string,” Sysco says, nearly sloshing his champagne over the rim of his glass.

“I knew something was going on today. I mean, you were literally dead yesterday, Ares. We killed five men. And then radio silence today? It was giving ‘either we’re about to commit a felony or a wedding.’”

Harry joins the group and raises his glass in our direction. “Didn’t think you could surprise me after all the shit you pulled off without me yesterday. I stand corrected.”

The music shifts. The strings ease into something low and romantic. I feel it like a tug in my chest.

Ares holds his hand out to me, eyes glittering beneath the chandeliers. “Dance with me, wife.”

Wife. Damn, that word feels dangerous and warm and perfect.

We move together like we’ve done this a thousand times. My hand fits in his. His other hand finds the small of my back like it’s gravity itself. Around us, our family and friends fade into candlelight and soft chatter. It’s just us. Just Ares and me, in this still, golden pocket of time.

Our foreheads press together. The music swells around us like silk. And in front of everyone, beneath the glittering lights of the city and the hush of reverent joy, Ares kisses me again. Deeply. Devotedly. Like I’m the only thing that has ever mattered.

The crowd cheers.

I feel the world anchor around me. I've never been happier. I've never felt more loved. And I know it all the way into my bones—this is the start of our forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

If anyone deserves an easy-going honeymoon where there is nothing to do all day but lay in bed and make love, with no pressure and no worries, it's Ares and me.

But that is not what we get.

It was a risk even taking yesterday off to get married. This maniacal therapist gave us a ticking clock. So, it's back to dealing with shit for us.

She wants the Barons to clear the city. She knows our names. She knows our faces. She fucking listed us off: Sysco. Harry. Ares. I suppose she doesn't know I'm technically a Baron, too, but that doesn't even matter. She specifically said she might even use me.

Two days tick by as we attempt to track this woman.

We'd start with her name, but I don't have one.

We'd try her face, but I can't remember it.

Juliet shows me photo after photo, even sketches, asking me to pick out any familiar detail—eyes, lips, posture. But there's nothing. It's like my mind is a freshly wiped mirror. Clean. Empty.

We now have this facial recognition software and an expert in Roman who knows how to use it. But we have no face. We could scan all of New York City, but without even a hint of what she looks like, we have nowhere to start.

Fuck.

With nine days left, we go through old security footage from around the time Ophelia admitted seeing her.

We focus on “safe” meeting places close to Ophelia’s apartment and work.

Roman and Ares cross-reference building rental agreements and therapist licenses, not that those are easy to access.

Sysco, Juliet, and I spend hours combing the internet for any female therapist in the city.

There are so fucking many of them. And we get no hits.

When we’re left with only seven days, I’m coming back from the bathroom when I hear Roman and Juliet arguing down the hall.

“We need to go home,” Roman says, his tone low and serious. “We have our own lives to get back to.”

“I know,” Juliet replies with a frustrated sigh. “But how do we just leave them with this mess? I mean... I just can’t do that to Lana. She’s my friend now. Could you really just tell Ares ‘figure it out on your own? See you later?’”

My heart hammers in my chest. It’s true. Over the past few weeks, I’ve come to consider Juliet a friend, too. A good one. And I’ve seen the bond forming between Roman and Ares, and Sysco.

But it’s clear now, with Markus gone—the whole reason they came to New York, their responsibilities in Chicago are pulling at them like an undertow.

“A few more days,” Juliet says. “We can spare a few more days to help them figure this out.”

I hear Roman let out a huff of air through his nostrils, but he must nod in agreement, because the next sound I hear is footsteps walking away.

A breath of relief escapes me.

We need all the help we can get.

Six days. Six damn days left.

The room is dim except for the glow of a dozen screens. Everyone’s hunched forward, searching. Clicking. Scanning. Sysco mutters under his breath while Roman scrolls through therapist licensing records. Ares and I sit shoulder to shoulder, combing building rental records for alias names.

It feels like grasping at smoke.

The tension in the air is brittle. Ares is frowning so hard it looks like it might crack his face in two. His hand brushes mine every few minutes like he’s grounding himself—like if he stops touching me, he might get pulled under again.

Harry’s off in the corner, typing away on a laptop, a headset in one ear.

Then his phone rings.

“No way,” he breathes.

“What is it?” Sysco asks, sitting up straighter.



Harry puts it on speaker before answering. “Cliff?”

“Hi, Harry.”

Holy shit. My eyes go wide as I look at Ares.

That is definitely Cliff’s voice. And we’ve all spent weeks thinking Cliff was dead.

“I thought it was a ghost calling,” Harry says dryly as he looks up and meets Ares’ eyes.

“What the actual hell, Cliff?” Sysco pipes up so he can be heard. “You just disappear off the face of the planet and let us think you’re dead?”

“We all do what we think we have to,” Cliff says, his tone slightly biting. “Contrary to popular belief, I wasn’t tracked down like my cousin.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Ares asks. His voice is tight, a little fractured. He’s been living with this for weeks, thinking he killed one of the Barons, and we just hadn’t found the body.

“Didn’t exactly seem safe in New York, did it?” Cliff bites back. “I saw the signs, saw the danger. I won’t apologize for taking my family and getting them somewhere safe. Somewhere sane.”

“Wait,” I interrupt, trying to wrap my brain around everything I’m hearing. “You left New York?”

“Of course I left New York,” he says like the question is stupid.

“How many bodies have to drop before logic sets in and you see a lost cause? That

fucking city has never been friendly to our kind. My family might have been there for decades, but I'm not sitting and waiting around for some psycho to take me out. ”

Ares stares at the floor and shakes his head. What Cliff doesn't know is that Ares was said psycho taking out the vampires. He just had no damn control over it.

“Where'd you go?” Sysco asks, his brows furrowed.

“Somewhere with a lot more protection for vampires,” Cliff replies. “Let's leave it at that.”

What does that mean? Maybe somewhere close to one of the Royal Houses? I don't even know.

“Look, Harry, I just called to tell you I need to sell my half of the Atlantic Front development. I'm not coming back. It's just not worth the risk anymore.”

Harry stares at the phone like it just insulted his mother. “You're really walking away? From everything?”

“I've seen enough blood spilled in that city. Watched too many friends fall apart. If you're smart...” his voice lowers, “you'll leave too.”

The call ends with a click. No goodbye.

We sit there, stunned. The silence stretches so long it starts to feel heavy.

“Holy shit,” Sysco whispers. “He's really alive.”

“Not just alive,” Ares mutters. “He walked away. He... chose peace.”

I look to Ares.

His head is bowed, eyes distant. I can practically feel the guilt draining out of him. His voice is barely a breath. “I didn’t kill him.”

“You didn’t,” I assure him as I take his hand. I give it a squeeze, trying to push every ounce of love I have into the touch.

None of us speak for a long moment.

Then Sysco says what we’re all thinking, his voice low and serious. “Cliff didn’t just vanish. He opted out. And maybe we should all be asking why that suddenly feels like the smartest move anyone’s made all year.”

There’s weight to the words he just spoke. To the idea he’s just sparked.

But holy shit. Cliff Morgan. Alive.

Gone.

Harry leans back in his chair like the wind just got knocked out of him. “I can’t believe he really left.”

I stare at the wall, but I’m not seeing it.

We’ve been sitting in this security room for days , sifting through information and every digital ghost trail we can find. But the therapist? The one who made Ares a killer with a touch and a whisper?

She’s a shadow.

We've been hunting a ghost—and we're no closer to finding her than we were on day one.

I turn to the others. "When she starts the next purge..." My voice comes out hoarse, but I don't stop. "She said she will use one of us. She was specific. Me. Ares again. Sysco. You, Harry."

Sysco goes still. Juliet's brows pinch.

"How will you stop her?" I ask, locking eyes with Sysco. "Or you, Harry?"

They both flinch.

Ares finally speaks. His voice is low and sharp with truth. "I don't want anyone else carrying what I'm carrying. Waking up with blood on their hands and no idea who they've killed. Realizing they had no control."

Juliet glances at him, somber. Roman remains stone-faced, arms crossed, but his jaw clenches.

Sysco exhales through his nose and scrubs a hand over his mouth. "We can't all just... leave," he says, though his words sound conflicted. "We own half the damn city. We've got businesses, real estate, staff. Roots."

But the words sound hollow, even as they leave his mouth. His gaze flickers toward the door, like maybe he's already picturing what it would be like to walk through it and not come back.

Harry, though—he doesn't even flinch. He shakes his head. "No. I won't let her win. I'm not giving New York up. We regroup in the morning," he says, sharp and clean. "We keep looking."

No hesitation. Of course. Harry's one of the last standing Barons in New York now. He breathes this city. If anyone was born to belong here, it's him. There's no part of him that would even consider running.

One by one, everyone gathers their things. Quiet, subdued.

Goodbyes are mumbled.

No one mentions that it feels like the walls are closing in.

We step outside into the city's dying light. Juliet and Roman fall into step beside me and Ares.

I keep expecting Juliet to crack a joke, to say something snarky just to ease the tension—but she doesn't. Instead, we walk for a block in silence, the hum of the city swelling around us, making it all feel smaller somehow. Quieter.

I sense it before I hear anything. A tension. Uncertainty. Finally, I look back over my shoulder and see Roman giving Juliet this... look. I don't know exactly how to define it. Hesitancy? Wariness? Juliet's face is clearly saying come onnnn...

They both see me looking, their eyes snapping to me. My feet falter, and I pull Ares to a stop beside me.

Juliet casts one last look at Roman, one that says she's doing this, and he better not stop her. Roman just raises his hands in surrender.

"Look, Chicago has always been a sanctuary of sorts," Juliet dives in. Roman is staring at her in a fixed way, like he's trying to telepathically tell her to watch how much she says. "Things are... different there. It's a little less... human?"

“Juliet,” Roman growls. He folds his arms over his chest and stares at his wife with impatient adoration.

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She grimaces as she looks back at him, as if this is physically painful to not be able to say what she wants to say. “It’s not like New York, okay? I’ll just say that you’d fit in there. The both of you.”

What the hell is really going on in Chicago? Juliet is trying to tell us something without really spilling the beans.

Ares lifts his head slightly, interested. But Juliet doesn’t push. She just shrugs one shoulder and looks forward again. “If you ever decide this place isn’t worth dying for, you know where to find us. I’m saying you should think about becoming our neighbors.”

Roman doesn’t say anything more, but he relaxes a little. Whatever is going on in Chicago, he’s worked hard to keep it a secret.

Juliet looks at me again as they turn in the direction of their hotel. “Sleep on it,” she says with a concerned smile.

They turn down the side street, and disappear into the night.

Ares and I keep walking. Our hands find each other’s naturally, fingers entwining without effort. But neither of us speaks as the weight of Juliet’s proposal settles in.

We walk the next four blocks in silence, the city pressing in around us. I’m thinking of shadows that erase their own faces. Of the glint of a stake in the chest of the man I love. Of waking up every day wondering if someone I care about might be turned into a weapon.

I glance at Ares.

He's staring straight ahead, his jaw tense, brows drawn low.

We don't say a word. But somehow, I know we're thinking the same thing.

What if this city isn't worth it anymore?

The moment we step into the penthouse, I feel it settle over us—the silence, the safety, the distance from the rest of the world.

But Ares is quiet. Too quiet.

He drops his keys into the bowl by the door and heads for the windows like he needs the city's lights to anchor him. I watch his reflection in the glass, his broad shoulders tense, hands tucked in his pockets like he's holding something back.

I come up behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist, resting my cheek between his shoulder blades.

"What are you thinking?" I ask softly.

He exhales. It's not a sigh, not quite. More like a release of weight he hasn't figured out how to name.

"You're unique," he says after a long pause. His voice is low. "No one like you has ever existed before, Lana."

I pull back slightly as he turns in my arms, coming face to face with me. His hands slide down to my waist, anchoring me. His jaw is tight, his brows drawn together.



“And that’s... a bad thing?”

“It’s dangerous,” he says. “To you.”

My chest tightens.

“You’re the only Made vampire. The only one with abilities like yours. There will always be people out there who would love to get their hands on you, to study you. Because if they could make more like you...”

His voice breaks slightly on that last word. It’s not weakness—it’s reverence. Fear wrapped in love.

“A secret that big doesn’t stay secret forever,” he continues.

“I’m terrified for Florence. If someone were to take her serum?

If they forced her to make more like you?

And if it gets out, this city? These people?

It won’t be long before someone comes looking to use you.

I’m not sure I can keep you safe here any longer.

And that’s all I want to do in life, Lana. ”

My heart pounds.

I look up at him, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. “That’s exactly how I feel. About you. This woman, she used you once; she’s said she’d do it again. And

everything else that's happened..." I shake my head, a lump forming in my throat.

We fall into silence, the air between us humming with truth. The kind of truth that's sharp-edged and undeniable.

"But leaving New York..." I whisper. "Everything I've ever known is here."

"And everything I own," he adds. "Businesses. Properties. And the ties we have here..."

My mind is spinning with the weight of it.

And yet... my instincts scream something different. That this—this possibility, this escape—isn't wrong. It's not running.

It's choosing peace.

I step back slightly, staring up at him, breath catching in my throat.

"Are we really considering this?"

His arms wrap around me again, pulling me close. His lips brush my forehead.

"So long as you're there," he says, "I don't care where we live."

I breathe in his scent, grounding myself. "We should sleep on it," I murmur. "Even though, you know, I don't actually sleep anymore."

His mouth tips in a tired smile. "Then come to bed with me anyway."

We walk hand in hand down the hallway, feet quiet against the hardwood, the glow

of the city behind us slowly dimming as we step into the bedroom.

We don't say anything as we change clothes. When I climb into bed, Ares is already lying on his side, arm outstretched, just waiting for me to climb in.

I curl into him, my face against his chest, my fingers resting over his heart—beating steady and strong.

The heart I almost lost.

He kisses the top of my head.

I close my eyes.

I don't sleep.

But for the first time in weeks, I rest.

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I don't sleep.

I don't need to anymore. Still, I stay in bed, curled against Ares, watching the first shades of gray seep in around the curtains. The city is quiet in that final hour before the sun rises, the world paused, like it's holding its breath.

My mind is a storm I can't step out of. But it isn't panic that keeps me awake. It's something else.

Clarity.

When Ares stirs, his brow creases, and he blinks slowly, eyes adjusting. He finds me immediately in the dim light, like he always does, and something passes between us—like a current, invisible and undeniable.

“I think we should move to Chicago,” I say softly.

He breathes out once. “I think so too, Vengeance.”

No hesitation. No doubt.

Relief crashes through me so hard I almost shake. I close my eyes. We're done looking. We're done chasing ghosts. We're choosing safety. We're choosing each other. We're choosing peace.

“What now?” I ask as I pull the blanket off and sit up.

He mirrors the movement. “We’ve got five days left. I’ll need to tell my staff, get a transition manager in place. There’s a lot I’ll need to sell. A lot I’ll want to keep.”

I nod, rubbing a hand over my arms even though I don’t feel cold.

“I’ll book our flights. Three days? That should give us enough time, right?”

To wrap things up, at least to a degree, tell everyone?

” My mind spirals as I start running through the list of people we need to tell.

“How the hell are we supposed to tell Florence and Clementine?”

Ares just exhales through his nose. “This is going to be the hardest part. I don’t imagine she’s going to take it well.”

“Let’s get it over with then,” I say as I get up and head for the bathroom.

We move through our morning in sync, brushing our teeth side by side, getting dressed. I comb through my hair, and when I walk out into the kitchen, Ares hands me a blood bag. I drain it in just a few gulps. Ares takes a minute longer as he drains four entire bags.

“Ready?” he asks as he dumps the plastic in the trash.

“Yeah,” I confirm as I sling my bag over my shoulder and pull the door open.

I nearly jump out of my skin when something... someone, moves on the ground.

“Sysco!” I say as I place a hand on my racing heart. “What are you doing?”

He's sitting in the hallway, his elbows resting on his knees. His eyes are a little bloodshot, dark bags beneath them like he hasn't slept. He looks like he's been out here a while.

"Couldn't sleep, had a lot of shit to think about," he says, sounding exhausted.

"What's going on?" Ares asks him as he extends a hand to his best friend and pulls him up to his feet.

"What are you thinking about all of this shit?" he asks.

His brows are furrowed, and he looks like he's been mulling all of this over the entire night.

"Is... is it worth it? Cause I'm not so sure it is anymore.

I mean, New York has always been my home, but lately, that doesn't feel like the right word anymore. "

"Sysco," I say in sympathy as I step forward and wrap him in a hug. He seems... pained. Confused. He wraps his arms around me as well, hugging tighter than I expect.

"We're leaving," Ares says, and his voice is a little tight. The words come out sounding a little surprised or dazed, like he can't quite believe he's saying them. "We're moving to Chicago."

Sysco lets go of me, backing up as he grabs my upper arms. "Really? You're not fucking with me?"

I shake my head and chuckle. "No, we're not fucking with you. We just decided this

morning. We're on our way to tell Florence."

A wild grin takes over his face. "Thank fuck. I'm ready to leave, too, but I didn't want to do it alone."

"Wait, really?" Ares asks, the excitement picking up in his tone.

"Hell yeah," Sysco says as his brows furrow and a manic grin takes over his face. "New York has lost its damn mind. Time to move on. But I wasn't going to do it without my best friends."

Ares steps forward, wrapping his arms around Sysco and smacking his back in a hug. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear it. You ever been to Chicago?"

They release each other, and it's kind of adorable how excited they both look. I can't help but smile too. "No, you?"

"No," Ares says with a laugh. "But it's got to be better than here."

"I think anywhere has to be better than here," Sysco agrees as we walk down the hall. He presses the call button, and the elevator immediately opens. We all step inside.

Ares nods. "I'll send you our flight info once it's booked."

"Perfect. I'll start figuring out my shit."

And for the whole elevator ride down, the two of them talk about what a mess this is going to be, trying to untangle their lives from New York.

I text Juliet.

We're doing it. Me, Ares, and Sysco, we're moving to Chicago.

She replies with a series of excited expletives.

You'll love it, I promise. Roman and I will head to the airport when we're done packing. See you in the windy city in a few days!

I grin at my phone as we step out of the elevator and cross to the doors. When we step outside into the brilliantly sunny day, they both slip on their special sunshades. "I'll text you," Ares calls as Sysco points in one direction, us in the other.

Sysco just gives a thumbs-up and hurries across the street before the light can change.

I turn toward Ares, mouth tilted in a crooked smile. "That was easier than I thought."

"Almost too easy," he says with a smirk. But I can tell he's just as stunned by the serendipity of it all.

But we still have one very big conversation to get through.

Florence.

Florence's office is sleek, modern, and cold in the way only billion-dollar pharmaceutical companies manage to be. Her assistant escorts us to her doors.

When we step inside, Florence's head is down, typing furiously.

She looks up, blinking with surprise. "Oh no. Is the world ending already? I swear, it's just one fucking catastrophe after another these days."

She's been debriefed on all the insanity that never seems to stop these days.



Ares nods and takes a seat across the desk from her. I sink into the chair beside him.  
“That’s kind of the point. We need to talk to you about something.”

Her eyes sharpen instantly, but she doesn’t say anything. Just waits.

“We’re moving to Chicago,” I say, keeping my tone gentle.

She stares at us. For a heartbeat. Two.

Then she lets out a sound that’s somewhere between a laugh and a groan.

“Oh, thank fuck.”

I blink. “Wait... what?”

Florence leans back in her chair and tosses her pen onto the desk.

“I’ve been wanting to move the company out of New York for over two years now.

Taxes, local regulations, the constant..

. drama. And this psycho bitch taking control of vampires?

Not only are my brother and sister-in-law vampires, but my wife is also a vampire.

Getting out of New York has been on my mind damn near every minute for forever now.

But I couldn’t leave you, Ares. Now, you two suggesting it?

” She points between us. “Maybe I can finally breathe again.”

“You’re really okay with this?” Ares asks, brows lifting.

“I’m more than okay. This is the opening I’ve been waiting for. It’ll take time—I’ve got a lot of operations to transfer—but I’m not kidding. I’ve been thinking about this for forever.”

“I was worried you’d be mad,” I admit.

Florence simply laughs. She does, in fact, seem... happy. “Mad? I’m relieved. Happy. I’ve been worried about you two since this all began. You’ve been trying to hold together a cracked city. And it’s terrifying, worrying about your wife being in danger all the time.”

“Amen,” Ares mutters in agreement.

Florence smiles, sitting straighter. “This is the best news I’ve gotten in weeks.”

I look over at Ares, and I can see it on his face.

This is just the next in a whole series of signs. Every door we feared would slam in our face is swinging wide open.

The universe isn’t just letting us leave. It’s clearing a damn path.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

One last goodbye.

It's the hardest.

The most toxic.

But it will bring the most closure.

I walk the familiar streets to Ophelia's apartment. Every step feels heavier than the last.

I used to love coming here. It was always a breath of fresh air with how new and clean it is. Compared to the old shithole I used to live in, this place felt so nice. It always smelled faintly of cinnamon and her vanilla body spray. It was the smell of comfort. Of fun. Of my person.

Now, it smells like betrayal.

Ophelia opens the door after three knocks.

Her face is pale. She looks thinner. There are no longer visible signs of the violence James used against her, but the darkness in her eyes is there as proof. When she sees me, her body stiffens. Her hand tightens on the edge of the door.

But I lift my palm in peace.

"I just have a few things I need to say," I murmur. "Then I'll go."

She stares at me for several long moments. I hear her pulse quicken. I smell sweat prickling along her skin.

But she stares at me. She searches me. And for just a second, I see traces of a person who used to love me.

She opens the door wider. I step inside.

Everything's as I remember it—but colder. A half-unpacked hospital bag sits near the couch. A blanket lies crumpled on the floor. Everything is just a little messy, and Ophelia has never been messy.

"I'm not here to fight," I say, turning to her. "I just... needed to do this."

She nods slightly, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Ares and I are leaving New York. For good," I say. "I'm not going to tell you where."

She opens her mouth as if she's about to say something. Her shock is obvious. But she contains it, as if remaining silent will punish me.

"There isn't room for both of us here anymore. Not after everything that's happened. You almost got Ares killed. You're the reason a lot of people died."

She blinks and her eyes drop to the floor for a moment. Guilt. Shame. I think that's what I see in her face. But she steels her expression, stubborn as ever.

"I don't forgive you," I add, and that lands like a stone in the silence. "But I'm not going to let what happened poison what's ahead. I won't carry it with me."

I step further into the room, toward the place where we used to sit with popcorn and wine and talk about everything—our dreams, our fears, our stupid exes.

“I wish things turned out differently,” I say, my throat tightening. “But for what it’s worth... thank you. For being my person for a while. For being my family when I had no one else.”

Tears shine in her eyes. “I...” she stalls, her lip quivering. She brushes the tears away, keeping them from falling. “I wish it was different. I wish everything could just get erased. But I don’t think I’ll ever understand how you can love a vampire.”

“I’m married to a vampire,” I correct.

That drops like a fucking anvil. This is news to Ophelia. She’s seen the ring on my finger for weeks. She’s heard me talk about my love for Ares. But as far as she knew, it was shallow. But marriage means something. It holds weight.

Once upon a time, she absolutely would have been my maid of honor. She was my person. My best friend. She should have been there with me, planning all the details and catching a thrown bouquet, the next to find her person.

But here we are instead.

She nods once. “Right. Lana, I...” she hesitates again, taking in a shaky breath. “I regret what I did. I wish I hadn’t touched his mind. I realize it now, how colossal a mistake that was. I was angry. I thought... Well, it doesn’t matter. I guess some part of me thought I was protecting you.”

I let that hang there.

I don’t believe it justifies what she did.

But I don't need to fight her anymore.

I step forward.

And I hug her.

Tightly. One last time.

She exhales, shaky and startled, and I feel her arms come around me.

When I pull back, I look her in the eye.

"The city's yours now," I say. "I hope you can find some peace in it."

Then I turn and leave, the door clicking softly shut behind me.

I walk away lighter—not because it doesn't hurt, but because I'm done carrying it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:40 pm*

The kitchen is silent except for the crinkling sound of the blood bag as I squeeze the last of it into my mouth. It's still so damn weird how natural this feels. The metallic tang, the surge of heat and energy that follows.

I lean against the counter, eyes scanning the open space of the penthouse.

Everything here is sleek and curated. Someone spent a lot of time and thought to make this place this beautiful.

The furniture is expensive, probably costing more than I made in all of the previous three years.

But none of it means anything to us. It was all here when Ares bought the place.

We didn't pick it together. We didn't argue over color palettes, or how many people we wanted to be able to seat at that dining table. It was all just here.

Now, we're leaving it behind.

Our suitcases sit by the door. Just two each. I shipped five boxes yesterday. That's it. A life condensed. Our memories and meaning don't live in these things, anyway.

Ares is currently with Sysco, who is helping him load Ares' motorcycle up for freight transportation.

He was smiling when he left this morning, like he was starting to believe this might be real.

A new life.

We're starting over.

But it still doesn't quite feel real to me. Maybe it's the fact that I've literally never lived anywhere but this island, and that I've barely even traveled off it. It's really hard to imagine a life anywhere else.

But I'm ready. I'm genuinely excited. I've been researching the city all night, looking up its different districts, its sports teams, what the seasons are like.

I think I'll enjoy Chicago.

I look over my shoulder when the front door opens, and Ares walks in.

Something's wrong. I feel it before I see the tension in his shoulders.

I straighten. "What happened?"

He closes the door gently, too gently, and drags a hand through his hair. "I saw her."

My chest tightens. "Who?" But I have a terrible feeling that I know exactly who.

"The therapist. It was... it was just like you said. I couldn't... I couldn't make sense of anything. Even while I was standing there. Her face slipped from my fucking mind even as I looked at it. I felt like I was half-asleep or like I was walking through a memory I never made."

My skin crawls.

"I might have cussed her out for what she helped make me do." And that sentence



alone ignites a wildfire of fear inside me. But Ares presses on. “She didn’t care,” he says with disbelief as he shakes his head. “She said it was the whole point, that I was just assisting with crowd control.”

“She seriously said that?” I ask, my lip curling in disgust.

Ares nods, the horror and disbelief of it all bright in his eyes. “She also said there are probably fewer than fifty vampires in New York City now. But she’d like to see that number drop.”

Fifty. There are fewer than fifty vampires in New York City. The population of the city is over eight fucking million.

“She’s been doing this more than we realize,” I say as I shake my head. “The Steele family was the big purge, and you took out five vampires for her. But she’s not keeping that number so low without purging a lot more frequently than we realized.”

Ares nods in agreement. “I called Harry right after, and he still won’t leave.”

“What?” I gape. My stomach turns. We’ve been trying to talk Harry into leaving New York since we decided to leave. Sysco has been on him nonstop since he decided to move as well.

But Harry is determined to stay in New York. He says he won’t bow to this woman.

“He’s even more determined that he’s going to find her and take her out,” Ares continues.

“I hate that,” I say, folding my arms over my chest so my hands don’t shake. “Why? Why would he risk his life like this?”

Ares shakes his head. “I think he has things going on here that we don’t know about,” Ares says. “A person. An arrangement. I don’t know. But he’s made it clear—he’s not afraid.”

I can’t stand the thought of leaving someone we care about behind. Harry is my friend. He is a good person. But he is also an adult. He’s very capable. He’s also very powerful. So, I’m going to have to trust that he can keep himself safe.

“I told that bitch we’re leaving,” he loops back to the therapist. “I told her we’ve warned the others. She said... nothing, really. She looked at me, and I felt like she was reading every thought in my head.”

“Did she say she’d stop?” I ask, heart pounding.

“No,” Ares says, his voice hardening. “She didn’t say one way or the other, just pointed out the number of vampires left in New York.

And then she wished us fucking luck in the move.

” He shakes his head, visibly disturbed.

“But being in her presence? That was enough, Vengeance. We’re doing the right thing. ”

I nod, my relief immediate and visceral. “Then let’s go.”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Let’s go.”

Billings meets us downstairs, already outside with the car. Our luggage is loaded into the trunk, and then we’re ready to leave. The morning is gray, the sky stretched taut with clouds. It’s like New York knows we’re leaving, and it’s holding its breath.

“You sure you’re good on your end?” Ares asks Billings, clapping him on the shoulder.

Billings nods. “I’ll finish what needs doing here, then I’ll be right behind you. Got a place lined up near the lake already.”

My chest swells a little. Billings has been with Ares for years. Knowing he’s coming with us—it means something. And it’s one more vampire that will be safe from that woman.

At the airport, Sysco greets us at the security entrance, sunglasses on, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

“You two look like you’re about to start a new empire,” he says with a grin.

“Maybe we are,” Ares answers, and they fist bump.

Sysco raises a brow at me. “How we feeling, boss lady?”

“Nervous,” I admit. “But in a good way.”

We check our bags. Security is fast. We board early, and I breathe a little sigh of relief as I settle into my first-class seat, Ares a comforting presence beside me. Everything feels seamless, fluid—as if the universe is trying to make our exit as smooth as possible.

The plane hums softly beneath us as we lift into the air. I grip the armrest. Ares takes my other hand and intertwines our fingers. I focus on the rhythm of our breathing.

I’ve only flown a few times in my life, so I’m not experienced. But this feels different. Like I’m not just flying across states—I’m flying into a new version of

myself.

A new city.

A new life.

A new beginning.

Ares leans close. “You okay?”

I nod as I look back at him. “More than okay. I feel relieved. We’re making the right move. I feel it down to my bones.”

He kisses my knuckles and rests our hands on his thigh. “I feel it, too.”

Outside the window, New York recedes. The skyline fades into mist, then disappears entirely.

As we make the three-hour flight, I think about what life in Chicago might look like. We still have to find a place to buy. But what will our day-to-day look like? What new friends might I make? What secrets about Chicago will we get the answers to once we’re residents?

I don’t have all the answers, but I’m okay with it. I feel delusionally confident that everything is just going to work out.

Chicago rises to meet us like a story unfolding. The lake is vast, stretching endlessly, reflecting the sky like glass. The buildings are bold, angular. There’s a rhythm to the streets, a kind of heartbeat I can feel even from above.

My pulse picks up.

This is it.

The plane touches down smoother than I expect. The moment the wheels hit the tarmac, I feel it in my soul—this is real. We’ve really done it.

Holy shit.

We taxi, shuffle off the plane, and make our way through the terminal.

I’m surprised that it doesn’t feel too foreign.

Chicago is still the third largest city in the country, behind New York and Los Angeles.

It’s not like I’m moving to some small, rural town.

We collect our luggage, and finally, we step out the doors to the pick-up area.

Juliet stands there in black combat boots and ripped jeans. She flashes a warm grin the second she sees the three of us, and steps forward. Roman stands beside her, stoic as ever, but there’s warmth in his expression.

I grin as I close the distance between us. “Homecoming committee?”

Juliet throws her arms around me. “You’re here. It was kind of hard to imagine you’d actually make it.”

“We’re here,” I breathe into her shoulder as I hug her tightly.

She smells like night air and sandalwood. Like Chicago.

Ares and Roman greet each other with a handshake and a shoulder clap. Men of few words, but the camaraderie is solid.

Sysco loops an arm around Juliet's shoulders. "So, where's the welcome party?"

Juliet smirks. "First stop: food. You haven't lived until you've had a deep dish from our spot."

I take a deep breath as we step outside. The air is colder here, sharper.

But it tastes like a beginning.

Like possibility.

Like freedom.

I grip Ares' hand as we drive into the city, and he glances over at me, his thumb brushing mine.

And I know.

We're exactly where we're meant to be.

Four Months Later

I smooth my hands over the black satin dress clinging to my body and glance at the mirror.

I look... different.

It's not the hair, swept up into loose, romantic curls, or the smoky eye makeup I've carefully perfected. It's not even the dress or the blood that runs through my veins now — rich, potent, supernatural.

It's my whole damn aura.

I feel like I've been reborn. Like all the bad that happened in my life is a totally different existence.

I'm not traumatized by my mother and sister's murder.

I didn't lose my dad when I needed him. I wasn't betrayed by my best friend.

I wasn't trafficked by a vampire. I didn't watch my husband die right in front of me.

No. I'm just Lana Hunt. The happiest, most confident, most rooted woman on planet fucking Earth.

Our townhouse in Old Town still smells like fresh paint and wood polish from the light remodel we gave it.

The floors creak softly beneath my heels as I move through the bedroom, past the bay window with its view of the icy street below.

I can hear fireworks being tested somewhere off in the distance—the early sparks of a city about to celebrate.

Chicago.

I never thought I'd live anywhere but New York. And now... I can't imagine being anywhere but here.

A door clicks softly behind me, followed by the sound of dress shoes across wood. I don't need to turn. I feel him before I see him.

Ares' gaze travels up my body like a caress, and when I turn to face him, his expression is so full of heat and reverence, it makes my stomach flutter.

“You're going to kill me tonight, Vengeance,” he says, voice low, playful. “Literally kill me. They'll find me in a corner of that party, heart stopped, cause of death: wife in a satin dress.”

I smirk and cross to him. “Well, that's no good. Juliet can only bring you back once. Maybe I should change into some sweatpants and one of your t-shirts?”

He wraps his arms around my waist, drawing me in. “Doesn't really matter what you wear. You always kill me with that body.”

My smile softens. I press my forehead to his. “Ready to ring in a new year with our not-so-normal family?”

He grins. “Wouldn't miss it.”



The Nocturne is nestled between much taller buildings.

It's terracotta-clad and dark. It's only eleven stories tall, and every single window is arched.

Gorgeous columns stretch up each corner of the building.

There are detailed carvings tucked into all the hidden corners.

It looks old and like something that should exist in Gotham City.

Inside, we walk into a big entryway. Great walls stretch above us, and a massive chandelier hangs overhead.

Straight ahead, there is a set of massive double doors.

And right inside, there is a beautiful ballroom.

Massive columns line the perimeter. The floor is aged and chipped marble.

The ceiling is crisscrossed with intricate beams. It's been decorated brilliantly.

Candles flicker. Music thrums low and elegant. Velvet and crystal catch the light.

And there are so many people.

Vampires. Gifted. Immortals and supernaturals. And yet, the energy here is warm. Welcoming. It still floors me just how many of them live in Chicago—how alive this city is beneath its surface.

“How do they keep this place secret?” I whisper to Ares as we make our way through the grand room.

“Goes to show how hard the Night Council works at what they do,” Ares says.

We’ve learned so much about this city since we arrived.

Like the fact that there is a Chicago Night Council.

Roman and Juliet are both members, as are some vampire twins—Mason and Elena, as well as a gifted woman named Sigrid.

“And Roman is terrifying enough, no one wants to deal with his wrath by talking about Chicago.”

It's true. The man is intense when it comes to Chicago’s security.

That was another surprise about moving to the city.

Within twenty-four hours of our arrival, Roman informed us that we had to get a tattoo.

I hadn’t noticed it at first, but every vampire in Chicago has a rose tattoo, and it has to be somewhere visible.

Roman’s is on his neck. Juliet’s is on her wrist, rising up her forearm.

It means you’ve been vetted and cleared to reside here, that you’re a vampire who can be trusted.

The ink is also mixed with blood, the magical blood of Sigrid’s son, enabling her to track every vampire in the city.

Roman takes security very, very seriously.

I now have a rose tattooed on the back of my neck. It matches Ares' exactly.

Sysco finds us first. He's dressed in a charcoal suit, tie undone like he's already had too much champagne—and there's a woman on his arm. She's all smiles, wearing a hot pink dress, her hair curled, her heels still not bringing her to Sysco's chin.

"Lana, Ares!" he calls. "Meet Holly."

"I think we met once when you came by the hospital," she says, and she's wildly upbeat. It would seem annoying if she didn't sound so genuine.

"Right, you're Juliet's assistant!" I put it together. I've met so many people since coming to Chicago, it's hard to keep everyone straight sometimes.

"Best job ever," she says, and her grin says she means it. "You're the newlyweds."

Ares raises an eyebrow. "What exactly has he been telling you?"

"Don't worry," she says. "He didn't gush too much."

Sysco shrugs, completely unapologetic. "I absolutely gushed."

They're both a little drunk. I didn't know vampires could get drunk, but here's the proof it is possible.

We're still laughing when Florence and Clementine walk in, both radiant despite the chill still clinging to their coats. Florence's cheeks are pink from the wind, but she looks happier than I've ever seen her.

"You made it," I say, embracing her.

"Straight from the airport," she breathes. "Half the company's transitioned. We'll

have it fully settled in another six months.”

“That’s amazing, Flo,” I compliment. “I always knew you were Wonder Woman.”

She rolls her eyes at the comparison but shakes it off. “Something weird is going on, though,” she says, immediately drawing all of Ares’ attention. “I keep getting a request from this man for a meeting. He’s… persistent. And definitely not human.”

“What’s the name?” Ares asks, ready to go to war for his sister if someone is bothering her.

“Some guy named Henry,” she says, eyes scanning the party. “Won’t give a last name.”

“That’s not concerning,” I say sarcastically.

“I know,” Florence affirms. “I think I’ll keep avoiding him. Something about it feels weird.”

“I keep telling her to listen to her instincts,” Clementine says as she looks at her wife with concern. “Don’t meet with people who make your skin crawl.”

“It’s not exactly that he makes my skin crawl,” Florence says. “Just… I don’t know. It feels… heavy. Serious.”

“Listen to your instincts,” I echo Clementine.

“How’s Harry?” Ares asks.

Florence raises one eyebrow as she looks over the crowd. “Practically king of New York,” she says. “He’s banded most of the vampires left together. They’re all on the hunt for this therapist.”

“He making any headway?” I ask.

Her eyes shift to mine, darkness clouding them. “No,” she says simply. “They still don’t even have a name. But Harry is handling it all well. He still doesn’t seem worried.”

I shake my head, hoping and praying he can continue to handle it. Either me, Ares, or Sysco checks in with Harry every day, just to make sure he’s still alive.

“That’s enough dark and heavy,” Clementine says. “Tonight is a celebration. Can we please just party like we’re normal people?”

Florence looks up at her wife, a grin taking over her face as she leans forward and kisses her as they walk backward onto the dance floor.

I just grin at their happiness and turn to survey the room.

Near the bar, I spot Juliet and Elena, their heads thrown back in laughter, each holding a flute of something sparkling and probably not human.

I join them without hesitation. Elena has been Juliet’s best friend for over a decade now, but she’s so bold and authentically herself, I felt like I fit right in.

It’s a perfect little trio now.

“Look at you,” Juliet says, looping an arm around me. “You clean up nice.”

“You’re one to talk.”

I raise my glass to Elena, and she clinks hers against mine with a warm smile.

“You fit in well here, Lana,” Elena says.

I blink, a grin taking over my lips. “Thank you.”

“You were always going to,” Juliet says. “Chicago likes women who bite back.”

That makes me laugh. It also makes me feel seen.

I’ve never been one for crowds. I prefer to blend in at a party, but here, with this crowd, I feel like I’ve finally found my tribe. I can just exist. I can be me. I don’t have to pretend anything, and they still like me for who I am.

The music shifts.

Softens. Slows.

I feel him behind me before he speaks.

“May I have this dance?”

I turn, smiling up at Ares, and nod. He takes my hand and pulls me gently to the center of the room, where couples are beginning to sway under the fairy lights strung across the rafters.

He draws me in, hands on my waist, my arms wrapping around his neck. The music melts into the air like smoke.

“You look like a goddess, Vengeance,” Ares says softly into my hair as he holds me tight. “Chicago has been good to you.”

“I feel like one, Venom,” I say, letting a soft smile pull at my lips. “It feels like everything finally slid into place. Like the universe had to upend everything to land us exactly where we were supposed to be.”

“I never saw it coming, but I absolutely agree.” His voice is a rumble I feel throughout my entire body.

I rest my head against his shoulder, and we sway. The lights blur. The music wraps around us. The crowd fades.

All I feel is him.

Everything was so heavy. There was so much violence. So much went wrong. There were so many times I thought I would lose this man who is my greatest vice.

But we fought tooth and nail. Through life and death.

We earned each other.

Suddenly, the crowd around us starts chanting in unison.

“Ten!”

Ares cups my face in his hands, his eyes burning into mine.

“Nine!”

My heart stutters.

“Eight... Seven... Six...”

“I love you,” I whisper.

“More than forever,” he replies.

“Five... Four... Three...”

I rise onto my toes.

“Two...”

His lips brush mine.

“One—”

And we kiss.

“Happy New Year!” The room erupts—champagne, laughter, joy—but I barely hear any of it. All I feel is the spark of magic between us, the heat of his mouth, the way his arms hold me like he’ll never let go.

When we finally break apart, I can’t help but grin.

This year nearly broke us.

But we’re still here. Stronger. Wiser. Whole.

Home.

And I know—deep in my immortal bones—that vengeance and venom are sometimes what it takes to write a perfect, happily ever after.

THE END