

BOOK 3

VAMP CHRONICLES

CHRISTIN LOVELL

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the chest up, looking thoughtfully to her left. She is holding a glowing lightbulb in her right hand. The background is a vast field of tall grass under a sunset sky, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The woman is wearing a white, short-sleeved top.

*Hit the
Road Jack*

Vamp Chronicles
HIT THE ROAD JACK
Book Three

Christin Lovell

Susie Hatfield, *editor*

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HIT THE ROAD JACK

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VAMP CHRONICLES

Diary of a Vampeen

Vamp Yourself for War

Hit the Road Jack

The Innocence of White (short)

Vamp Versus Vamp

Darkness Falls

Reflections (short)

Vigilante

The Break of Dawn (coming soon!)

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HIT THE ROAD JACK

Some hunt, and some are hunted.

With lives at stake, literally, Lexi travels the globe pursuing the element of surprise against her enemy. Unfortunately, it seems there's a mole in her tightknit group. Lexi is forced to reevaluate her relationships, old and new, as her target closes in on her. Can her friendships survive the pressure of the front lines? And can her relationship with Kellan survive a game of cat and mouse?

Predictions aren't always accurate, or are they?

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This book is dedicated to my cousin, Morgan. You're fierce. You have sass and class, just like Lexi. Continue to be bold, continue to pursue; continue to always be you.

—

Hit the Road Jack

Chapter One

“Ugh, school, again. I can’t believe the break went by so fast,” Mel groaned as we walked the crowded halls of Cooper River High School. The same reluctance was shared by most of the students catching up in stairwells, corridors and along locker lined walls.

“It went by fast for you. But then again you slept oh, a hundred hours or so whereas I passed only twenty that way,” I commented with a touch of sarcasm as we approached her locker.

“That’s not my fault Chiquita.”

“Yeah, yeah.” There was a pause of silence before we broke into laughter.

“Is this what I have to look forward to every morning?” Kellan cut in.

Absently, I lifted our entwined hands to peer at my gorgeous ring reminding me of my one true love, and vampire, Kellan. It never left my finger and he rarely left my side. The only exception was when Gabi and Mel came over for bonding time, boy chat, closet raids and makeovers. Lately the guys had made a habit of coming together and trailing us on our outings. I didn’t blame them or get irritated by their overbearing. Kellan, well all of them really, were shaken up over the last attack in my house Christmas Eve. Being vampeen doesn’t make me invincible despite being immortal. They all lingered around on edge. My only distraction was my schoolwork. So much so that outside my photographic memory I would have aced my exams still.

“Uh, Lex?” Mel passed a hand in front of my face as if to snap me out of a trance. I jolted my head and snipped at her hand. She jumped back. “Holy sugarplums Lex! I mean, geez Louise!” Kellan snickered trying to disguise his amusement. I on the other hand didn’t care. I was chuckling languidly, which set her off. “That was so not funny guys! Ugh!” She slammed her locker door and stomped ahead of us.

I shrugged. “I thought it was funny. Mortals,” I sighed mockingly shaking my head.

Halfway to first period she caved; her anger subsided and was replaced by shared dread.

“I hate this four-by-four system. The classes go on forever and are fast paced to get through a massive text book in half the school year,” she whined slowing her pace to catch our relaxed stride behind her.

“On the upside you don’t have classes you hate all year,” I added cheerfully.

She glared over her shoulder. “I don’t exactly consider that a consolation prize.”

“Someone’s a bit cranky today.”

We rounded the corner towards the science section of the building. With one fluid yank Mel was beside Kellan and I was pulled back to stay in place. He took a deep breath inhaling through his nose.

“What is it?” I whispered. My words ran together as my eyes filtered the hall for danger. Serum threatened to flood my throat.

“Vampire,” Kellan hissed.

“Dangerous?” I asked.

He cut his eyes at me. "We're all dangerous. You of all people should know that by now."

"This day just keeps getting better," Mel sighed. "I'm not standing here all day though so let's go." She freed herself from Kellan's grip, not that he fought to hold her.

"I'm going with her," I announced releasing his hand to pursue my hotheaded best friend.

"Why are you so on edge?" I pressed as we entered our new Chemistry classroom. It was a large room. All the desks were nearly piled on top of each other in the front to make room for the many lab tables and supply cabinets claiming the back seventy-five percent of the space.

"I... It was hard getting ready for school without my mom. The first outfit of each semester we usually picked out together. It was sort of our thing..." she trailed off. Just because her mom turned out to be a vamp assassin and tried to kill me didn't mean I was any less compassionate for my best friend, especially since I lost both my parents the month before. Truth was it had been hard on both of us but we rarely spoke of our similar grief. She wrapped her hand around the locket I gave her for Christmas; inside was a picture of Melinda, her mom.

"I'm sorry. I miss mine too." My voice was barely audible as we slid into seats side by side in the middle row.

The final bell rang just as Kellan whisked in. He settled beside me but never looked at me; he was staring straight ahead. I followed his emerald eyes to a pair of hazel eyes locked on us from the podium... from our new teacher.

I shifted uncomfortably and for peace of mind reached to stroke the chain of my necklace, a weapon capable of mass destruction and a gift from the Bladang leaders - Kai, Kalel, Gabi and Rafi. It was still intact hanging just below

my collarbone. The teacher grinned and gave a quick, unarmed nod.

“Hello class. My name is Mr. Jameson and, in the event you didn’t review your schedule or observe the lab in the back, this is Chemistry.” He stepped out from behind the stand exposing a lengthy, slink figure that looked like it belonged to a runner. He was fit but soft and feminine in a way. He ran a hand through his dirty blonde hair trying to force it away from his eyes. He appeared harmless enough dressed in a button-up shirt under a vest; it was the kind most ancient professors adorned; yet he could barely pass for thirty. That was clue number one that he was a vamp.

He began to pace the rows, weaving amongst us. He continued speaking of chemists, alchemy and future projects we could anticipate covering this semester. As he traveled down towards me, Mel and I stiffened and Kellan slipped releasing a low, territorial growl. Mr. Jameson stopped abruptly beside me and turned towards Kellan.

“Is there a problem Mr. Bancroft?” His tone held an innocent menace; concurrently his voice didn’t match his body. His gaze held Kellan’s for a solid minute, but he didn’t reply.

“Kellan, answer him. Don’t start trouble,” I projected the plea. He remained silent.

“Well, it seems we do have a problem then. Alexa, Kellan, both of you see me after class,” he ordered. At first I found it peculiar that he knew our names as identified with our faces, but given his demeanor I somehow knew that he had been aware of us for a while.

“But I didn’t do anything,” I rebelled.

“I’m afraid you’re guilty by association Miss Jackson.” His eyes danced devilishly. I suddenly felt uneasy. I would

have sworn the walls were closing in on me.

“Don’t worry babe. I’ll protect you,” Kellan’s thoughts entered my mind. I knew he would never abandon me, but hearing it silenced my anxiety momentarily.

Books were distributed, the roster was confirmed and unnecessary overviews shared despite the outline in the front of our textbooks. By the end of the period serum swelled my mouth in fear of what was coming, not only after class, but all semester.

Mel picked up on the threat and was a nervous wreck all through class; she was on the verge of a panic attack by the end to the point she texted Craig to come get her ASAP. I felt horrible. Granted she would transform as I did in March, but she wasn’t one of us yet and shouldn’t be subjected to the danger of it all.

“Call you later Lex,” Mel said as the bell rang. She followed the crowd of students scurrying out into the busy halls and safety.

Kellan and I were on our feet immediately. I tossed him my gold dagger. I pressed my palms to the sides of my charm, an upside down cross, activating my shield. I was grateful for the protection in this moment as I prepped myself for battle. Our eyes were glued to Mr. Jameson as heads bobbed between us; he was alarmingly attentive of our every move yet his expression was unreadable. He wasn’t intimidating but also not harmless.

As the last student fled, Mr. Jameson raised his arm up and out from his side. With the flick of his wrist the classroom door slammed shut and locked. I instantly tensed. Outside the buzz of conversations filled the air; in here it was silent tension. With one limber leap over the desk Kellan stood directly in front of me protectively. Mr.

Jameson paid him no mind; I was shocked as he turned away and in a half second settled in the office chair behind his desk.

“Sit,” he gestured his hand towards two seats in the front row. When we made no movement he added, “Keep your weapons out but please sit. I mean you no harm.”

“Then what do you want?” Kellan pressed, remaining in his spot.

“You are the chosen ones; the ones prophesized of, are you not?” He busied himself in a desk drawer searching for something.

“What’s it to you?” Kellan hissed between gritted teeth.

“Relax. He’s clearly not interested in fighting,” I said pressing a hand to his back to calm him.

“Sit and I will tell you.” Kellan refused to budge. Against his will I hopped into the next aisle over and made my way to the before suggested seats.

“I’m afraid we aren’t trusting due to some recent incidents so if you could just cut to the chase I’d really appreciate it,” I stated. He looked between Kellan and me for a moment. As the bell rang, officially making us tardy or absent from second period, I hadn’t decided yet, he removed a worn black book from his drawer. Gold embellishments laced the binding but no visible title was displayed. In fact, no words or symbols appeared anywhere on the cover. It was a solid black fabric stretched over hard ends offering no clue to its contents. He noted my curious observance.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am William Jameson and I am your Eislom or guardian of wisdom.”

“Eislom? What is that?” I interrupted.

“As I said, I am your guardian of wisdom; I am your guide, your assistant. My sole purpose is to ensure that you fulfill yours. I am here to provide you with the resources and knowledge you lack. Now have you read the prophecies?”

“Uh... um...” I stuttered trying to wrap my brain around what he claimed. Kellan was suddenly seated next to me.

“I figured as much; hence the journal. It’s written in Slavak, Old Russian essentially. I have taken the liberty of translating it for you.” He whipped out a large four-inch black binder filled to the brim with 3-hole punched paper. “This is sacred and confidential. You must guard it with your lives. It provides you the keys needed to unlock your powers together. Now we will need to meet regularly. There is much to teach and more to learn.” Kellan and I sat motionless with dumbfounded looks on our faces.

“Is he legit? Is this real?” I asked. *“Dr. Zhan never mentioned an Eislom.”*

“I don’t know. I’m reluctant to trust anyone right now.”

“Oh wonderful, you’re already linked! You’re right on schedule with that feature. As for your hesitance, please confirm my participation with Dr. Zhan and anyone else you deem necessary to trust me. It’s imperative that you trust me.” He pulled out a legal pad and began making notes.

“Now I see you’re engaged or at least promised to each other. Have you claimed each other physically?” He was businesslike, as if he were conducting a job interview.

“Huh?” we exclaimed simultaneously.

“You’ve swapped blood but it seems you carry the blood of many vamps Alexa so I need to know if you two have mated.” He didn’t hesitate; he was direct in his explanations and didn’t waste one second on questioning us.

“Mated?” I stumbled peeking at Kellan whose forehead showed the same worried creases and cheeks flushed with embarrassment and rage on the subject.

“Yes, mated. Oh for heaven’s sake. Have you two had intercourse?”

“How old are you?” I smirked, allowing the outrage to subside. It seemed to lighten his mood a bit.

“Three hundred and twenty-three. I suppose the reference gave it away. However, I must know if you’ve had sex. Is that the modern term?”

“Yes, that’s the modern term and no we haven’t done it,” I spewed the information trying to withhold emotion.

“Oh dear, now I am not an advocate for adolescent promiscuity; however, I must insist that you two do this as soon as possible.”

“You *insist*?” I didn’t know whether I wanted to laugh, cry or scream over the suggestion.

“I’m releasing you two at once. You must go home with the journal. Read through it. You must consummate your union in order to unlock the powers between you,” he babbled. He seemed overwhelmed by the thought; almost flustered by the parallel.

“Are you serious?”

“Do I appear dishonest to you? Would I, a professor of academics, typically promote such recklessness early on?”

No, of course not! Go home at once and study this journal. You will need it to bring all you ought to pass.”

“We have classes. We’re in a school you know?” Kellan chuckled. I could tell he wasn’t buying into the story. I didn’t know for sure if I was either. Given everything I’d heard, seen and experienced the last couple months though, I couldn’t just discredit it as nonsense.

“Go home. I will file all the papers for you and obtain your assignments. Meet me tomorrow morning at 7am here in the classroom. Come through that back door there. It will be unlocked,” he said standing to pass the binder and journal to us. I looked at Kellan. Our glances were similarly shocked and yet not shocked, both receptive and ejective. Mr. Jameson gracefully approached us and set the books on the desk in front of me. “I know you are uncertain at this time, but please hurry along. We have no time to waste. 7am,” he reiterated with urgency. I nodded my head.

“So do we leave or stay?” I eyed the books before me, shifting impatiently in my seat. Kellan seemed to be just as restless.

“We will take your word for what it is: possible truth. If we choose to believe you then we’ll be here tomorrow morning.” He stood and reached for the items. His gaze was on me the entire time expectantly watching my reaction.

“Very well then,” William agreed rising at the same time as me.

“You do realize that encouraging students to skip school doesn’t make you a very good teacher,” I stated and asked moving to collect my book bag slung on the back of my chair.

“I encourage traditional students to attend class daily however you two fall within another category. Your future success relies not on this nonsense. Quitting tomorrow would further expand your learning opportunities in fact. Alas, we will take one step at a time and the first step is to trust me,” he explained. He slid his hands in his pockets and relaxed his stance. He was calm and comfortable despite our threats.

“Where are you from?” I looked at him quizzically.

“Can’t you tell by the accent?” he teased with a grin.

“England?”

“Very good. London to be exact though the London of my time versus today is quite different I’m afraid.” He spoke but his lips pursed and forehead wrinkled showing signs that his mind was elsewhere. I simply nodded.

As we left I realized I wanted to trust him, this Eislom as he called himself. Without my parents, I was lacking an authoritative guide. Sure the High Authorities and the Bladang Leaders stepped in and out, but with them it was usually all business. With Mr. Jameson, I felt like he would be more like my dad. It sounded foolish, even now, but it’s the feeling I got with him. I was apprehensive to trust anyone, but the emotional side of me, the human part, was overwhelmed at the idea.

“It’s not foolish babe. I know you miss your parents. Just remember that in our world emotions are weakness. We need to be careful,” Kellan warned pulling me into his arms as we roamed the empty halls towards the parking lot.

“I know you’re right. I’m trying but it’s hard to go against what dominates me. I am seventy-five percent human, remember?”

“You’re still twenty-five percent vampire and have had more vamp blood in you than anyone I know.”

“Point made,” I sighed pushing open the doors to freedom.

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Chapter Two

“His story checks out. Dr. Zhan confirmed everything,” Kellan announced as he entered the family room. Craig, Mel and I quickly turned our attention to him as he plopped down on the sectional beside me.

“What did he say?” I jumped on the subject instantly.

“That we should listen to everything he said. He actually worked with the prophet before his assassination. He fled with the journal and has spent his years studying and preparing for us to arrive and connect.” His words came out with confidence but I could tell he was still trying to comprehend the reality of the news.

“Jiminy croaks!” Craig exclaimed scooting to the edge of the sofa cushion waiting for more.

“That sounds... it actually sounds like something out of a book of Victorian society scandals,” Mel shrugged struggling to define the situation.

“So then the uh... the umm... bed... stuff is true?” Kellan nodded once. Nerves instantly set in; I began fidgeting with my fingers, twisting my ring in circles.

“Bed stuff?” Mel asked, an eyebrow rose showcasing her confusion and curiosity.

“Are you skirtin’ about Miss L riding your jolly lolly?” Craig winked.

“Jolly lolly?” Mel and I cracked at the same time. Kellan groaned covering his face with his hands.

“Pah. You know. Shackin’, riding the disco stick; doing the bippity boppity boop, playing knight rider?” he smiled

devilishly.

“Seriously?” Mel scrunched her face exhaling with sarcasm. Craig shrugged. Abruptly they both looked at us anxiously. “Well?” she prompted.

“Well what?” I tried to side step the horror in this topic.

“Is that what we’re piddlin’ about?” Craig pressed.

I looked to Kellan; his eyes peeked between his fingers. He slung them down heavily onto his thighs and ran his hands up and down towards his knees. Seeing his discomfort brought out the protective side of me.

“Mr. Jameson said that we need to have sex, that since I have so many other vampires in my bloodstream, it’s the only way for us to unlock all our powers together,” I said leaning into Kellan for support. I felt myself blush with embarrassment.

“Merry Christmas, Brother Ben!” Craig’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Uh, wow! Umm... Craig, we should go. I need to get home for... uh... Kyle! He’ll be home soon and can’t be alone.” Mel stood and tugged on Craig’s arm prompting him to come along. “I’ll... uh... we’ll see you tomorrow guys.” She waved and scurried past us to the door.

“Uh... okay?”

“Bye!” she called.

Within seconds they were out the door. I turned to look at Kellan who began laughing. “Oh gosh. Those two are perfect together.”

“Yeah, that’s an understatement,” I agreed. We both got quiet and just looked at each other. We gazed at each other like star-crossed lovers though we’d never gone that far. He reached over and tucked a few strands behind my ear. He ran his fingers along my cheek giving me goose bumps.

“I’d like nothing more than to take you to bed right now, but I’m not going to,” he mused caressing my lips with his fingers.

“Why?” I asked breathlessly.

“Because I want you to want to. Right now you’d be doing it because you feel you have to and this sort of thing should never be a chore.” I couldn’t help but smile at that.

“You’re great, you know that?”

“Yup. You forgot smart and sexy too,” he smirked.

“Pompous airhead,” I smacked his arm playfully.

“Hey, careful. You’re pretty strong these days,” he chuckled.

“So I’ve been told.”

He sighed. “I guess we should get busy. Looks like we have a lot of reading to do.”

“Sure. You want a beer?” I got up and went to the fridge to retrieve my second favorite form of blood: bottled and chilled.

“I’d rather have your hot blood than a cold bottled substitute,” he replied at my side in a split second inhaling the scent at my neck.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

He sighed in frustrated defeat. I broke away to answer my cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Leka, you have to get out,” Kalel warned.

“What’s coming?” I asked immediately alarmed. Kellan was at my side in a flash listening in.

“More assassins; Jack has hired more.”

“How do you know?”

“We caught one lurking around here for you. He’s being tortured as we speak. I don’t know how many there are. Grab some clothes and come here. Claire is out of town for another week so there is nothing keeping you there.” His words were rushed; he was on edge. Despite admitting to feeling something for me Kalel had taken to playing the older, big, well, muscle-head big I mean, brother role in my life. In all that had happened to me, it was him and Kellan that were the most protective and proactive. I looked up at Kellan. His face was solemn; he gave nothing away. I knew it was bad though because he blocked his thoughts.

“We’ll be on our way.” I heard myself speak but it’s like my mind was separated from my body. The color drained from my face and the serum threatened to flood my mouth.

“Hurry, Leka. I won’t relax until you’re here.”

“I will.” He hung up and Kellan took off upstairs. One minute later he returned with a duffle bag in hand.

“Grab our book bags. I’ll carry the books,” he ordered. He was detached as well. It hadn’t even been two weeks since I fought the last assassin.

“I take it vacation is not in the vamp dictionary,” I huffed.

“Afraid not babe,” he confirmed as we raced to my car.

Kellan leapt into the driver’s seat tossing the bag and journals in the back seat and pressing the garage door opener simultaneously. I copied placing our back packs in the back. I started pressing all the buttons and activating all the tech savvy software, satellites and shields installed in my car by the Bladangs. I was literally driving a military speed machine disguised as my Mercedes coupe. Kellan reared the car into reverse, pulled out and put the pedal to the metal. We were just speeding off when a loud sound broke through behind us. I turned in time to see an assassin chasing the car and firing his gun aimlessly.

“Thank God for the shield,” I sighed facing forward as we ducked out of sight.

We parked in the underground garage a solid mile from their lakefront home. We traveled the long cement hall to the door. I pressed my hand to the keypad and waited for the lock to click open.

I had the entire ride to stew. I was angry, upset with my life being turned upside down yet again. I barged into the living room and dropped the bags on a chaise lounge. Kai ran upstairs from the torture chambers below to greet us.

“Hello Leka,” he smiled slightly. “Kellan,” he nodded once acknowledging his presence but no grin was present in this.

“Where’s the bastard?” I demanded.

“Nice to see you too,” he offered sarcastically scorned.

“Sorry Kai, but I’m sort of pissed off right now. Will you please just take me to this *pendejo*.” He sighed but motioned for us to follow him.

We trudged downstairs to the hallway of doors, each highly secure with a different code to enter. Every time I came down to these rooms I was reminded of when I first arrived and met the Bladang Leaders. He went to the third door on the right, pressed a few numbers and pushed it open.

Inside the round room of marble I quickly spotted my assailant. A tall, dark brown African man towered over Kalel and Gabi; he could easily be passed for an NBA player. His eyes though, they were rare. He had the ice blue eyes of the scanners, those vamps with an x-ray vision of sorts.

“I’m not an assassin. I am a scout. They send me in first to scan the properties and locate the target. I do not participate in the capture or slaughter of creatures,” he explained. He carried an accent that crossed into British domain.

“What’s in it for you then? What sick pleasure do you get from this job of stalking?” Kalel was stern, trying to keep his composure.

The man’s arms were roped together behind his back. He had fresh cuts and burns along his chest and arms, a sign of torture. I knew limbs would be chopped soon if this vamp didn’t give a good answer.

“I get no pleasure from this. It is merely a job. It is my way of paying the bills for my family.” His eyes closed and his head bowed as he mentioned his family.

“Back off. It’s my turn with him,” I cut in moving toward the battered soul. I yanked Kalel’s dagger from his grips. I turned to the others. “You all can go. Clear out now.

I'll call you if I need you. Kellan unblock me just in case," I ordered. They passed glances amongst each other debating whether or not to oblige me. "Now!" I yelled.

"Don't be stupid with him. He's dangerous," Kaleb warned.

"I'll decide that, now go!" After a few muffled choice words from the grumpy bunch, they cleared the room. I looked around at the tiny gold lions lining the bridge between the wall and tiled floors.

"Sit." He hesitated for a moment before settling Indian-style on the cold floor. I copied sitting directly in front of him a good two yards away. "Why would you choose to work independently rather than for the vamp army? The pay is steady which is what a family man should seek." I studied him as he responded. He didn't hesitate. He was well rehearsed.

"I make more money for less work. The biggest draw is the time. Less work means less time at work and more time with my family." I stood and walked behind him. I took in his bound hands. On his left ring finger sat a plain yellow gold band.

"Your wife is vampeen?"

"No. She is vampire too."

"Then how is it you have children?"

"I do not discuss my children with enemies."

"So you would rather not return to them than to speak of them and have a chance." He was silent. "You're protecting them," I stated when I drew the conclusion. "Would you like to call them?" His eyes lit up at the opportunity but he quickly buried the pleasure leaping from

the idea. I pulled out my blackberry and placed it on the floor in front of him as a form of temptation and torture. He was going to weaken at some point; I was going to see to it. I went and sat on the floor with my back against the door to wait out his deterioration.

The hours passed with nothing but silence between us. He was wearing down. He was staring at the phone before him more often and for longer periods.

“I’m not going to hurt them. If you haven’t noticed I have other things to worry about. Plus, I’m not that kind of monster. I only take a life if they first threaten to take mine, hence why I haven’t already killed you.”

“You cannot trust in this world. Mind games are our best weapons. You can’t even be sure I’m telling you the truth,” he stated locking a dark glare on me.

“You’re not lying. Your eyes momentarily lit up when I mentioned the phone call,” I countered.

“You are observant.”

We fell into the quiet abyss for another hour. I was shocked the neither Bladangs nor Kellan had checked on me yet.

“My wife was attacked one day on her way back with water for us. The well was a few miles from our hut but she made the journey regularly. Nightfall came and she hadn’t returned. I knew something was wrong but I couldn’t abandon our children to search for her. Several months passed before she returned.” He paused and I sat up straight anticipating what I knew was coming.

“She returned with water in minutes instead of hours. She cooked but never ate. She was physically there, but she had changed. I called in our tribe’s Shaman to cast out

what I thought was a demon in her. It didn't work. It was one day when a pack of rabid hyenas closed in on our tiny village that I discovered her new identity. She killed and drained the creatures of their blood. She saved us all and that's when I knew she wasn't possessed by a demon. We sought the Shaman once more. He detailed the ancient discrepancies of vampires. Most believe they are descended from a demonic plague; but we believe they are of angelic grace for even angels fall into hell and rebuke innocence and embrace evil as most vamps have."

"She changed you," I said.

"Yes. We couldn't doom our children to forever. Once they reached the age of maturity they were offered a choice. My son accepted it readily. He became cocky though. He boasted his new abilities, drew attention to himself as a form of power. It was his ignorance that got him killed by the mortal men of a nearby tribe he taunted. Our daughter chose to remain human. She grew older, got married and bore children. We have watched our grandchildren grow, marry off and have families of their own. Our youngest granddaughter's daughter died giving birth to her third child. Her husband was killed hunting months before and her siblings disowned her for the man she chose." He took a moment to subdue the emotion brimming at his surface. He inhaled and exhaled a few times though the oxygen we breathe is not necessary for a vampire; they get oxygen from the blood they drink. "They rebuked her children so we took them in. Narahna stays with them while I travel, working to provide them the best life I can," he finished.

"How old are they?" His face hardened at my dig for more personal information. He knew I had more than enough if I was going to do anything though.

“Kaja and Neobi are eleven and eight. Her only daughter, Meosha, is three,” he sighed.

“If I untie you, will you attack me?” I asked watching him for signs of brewing violence or potential threat.

“There would be no purpose in doing so. I have no escape from this asylum.” I shook my head in agreement and made my way to him. With one slice his rope was cut and he was free.

He spun quickly, too fast, and lifted me at my neck against the wall. He laughed devilishly. “You foolish girl. You should have heeded my warning. I told you our greatest weapon lies in mind games. You were but a pawn in my well-rehearsed play. Vampeens,” he spit out the word with disgust. “You might as well be humans with your sick emotional surrenders.”

I laughed in his face causing confusion. “You laugh at death?” He became serious, his face taut and features sharpened.

“No, I laugh at your stupidity.” I kicked the wall sending the tiny darts flying from the mouth of every lion around the room. Me being pinned off the floor led to this violent vamp saving my life. The needles shot into his feet and calves. Within seconds his grip released as he fell dead to the floor.

“That’s what you get for wasting my time and threatening me,” I grumbled as I made my way past him. The door opened before I got to it. The four men raced in. “I’m afraid your services aren’t needed gentlemen. Thanks though,” I smiled as I brushed past them.

Chapter Three

I grabbed Kellan's hand as the others stared at me in astonished confusion. I'd been in the room for quite a while and then just like that I had the vamp killed. It wasn't like me. Since my parents' deaths, I'd found myself becoming colder; I was losing my humanity slowly and consistently, and I couldn't allow that to happen.

We went up to a spare bedroom. I paced the room; so much was running through my mind. First and foremost was William's recommendation.

"What do you think?" I asked, shifting uncomfortably at his side. I gazed into his eyes, searching for an answer. I didn't want to do it out of obligation, though I knew I wouldn't regret it.

He pursed his lips and pulled me to him. "I think we should forget this crap and go to the beach." He smiled, leaning in and stealing my lips.

I chuckled. "You do realize it's January and freezing cold?"

"You do realize you're a vamp and completely unaffected."

"I'm a vampeen, and I am a little affected."

"Fair enough. How about a movie then? Just you, me and a dark theatre," he nuzzled my neck, inhaling me. I stiffened, my breath becoming ragged with his move. Scenting vamps at their neck is an intimate thing; you have to trust the one you've bared yourself to, for they could rip you to shreds in an instant.

"Uh..." I cleared my throat trying to regain my composure. "Let's go see a movie." He pulled away smiling deviously. "Don't look so smug," I scolded half-heartedly. I rolled my eyes when he gave me a cocky wink. It was nice to know time hadn't changed him. And regardless of his confidence, I still loved him.

"I love you too," he said, pulling me towards the garage.

"I'd love you more if you warned me before you read my thoughts."

"I'm reading your thoughts." He offered me a cheeky grin, his dimple on display. All I could do was smile and shake my head. I knew he was trying to distract me from the intensity earlier. He was doing a good job too.

We saw a movie and wandered around the mall for a while. I tried not to get sad when we passed my mom's favorite store. It'd been hard getting through some days without my parents. I had this hole, a void, inside me that I didn't think would ever heal, regardless of the time that passed or number of supporters around me. Children need their parents, or at least one of them, regardless of their age.

"Shall we crack this thing open and read our fate?" Kellan asked shortly after we got home.

I looked at the thick binder lying on the bed taunting me with its bulk. "Yeah," I sighed, grabbing it and plopping down on the bed. Kellan followed suit taking the vampire's prediction while I read the vampeen's; we stuck with our own race.

It was strange reading something that essentially was detailing my life, my future. It didn't seem real; it read too

much like a myth. I just couldn't make the connection despite the uncanny resemblance in the first few chapters.

I knew we'd both reached the same spot when my breath hitched and his face turned to pale stone. I re-read it several times hoping I'd missed something or misinterpreted it. Alas, I hadn't. I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat and the tears quickly welling. I looked at him, taking in the beautiful man predicted to be taken from me too soon. He sat still as a statue staring blankly down at the page before him.

I studied my ring, not wanting to believe that the one who gave it to me would leave me a widow. I couldn't accept it; couldn't wrap my mind around it. He couldn't leave me too. It had to be wrong.

"It has to be wrong," I stated breaking the silence. He turned towards me, a tortured expression on his face. My heart broke as I scrambled for a way to sooth his anguish, but really, how do you comfort someone who's just read about their death?

In a second of victory, all shall be lost, for a lone stray shall have his way. A shot shall echo through the forest floor, an impact so strong he shant steal a chance. The question is not can he survive, for he surely does not; the question is who shall carry on holding her up in her despair, for her anger shall cause her enemies to weep; her own grief shall slowly consume her shall a new prince not resuscitate her. It ought to be known that no one shall love her the way he did; no one will fight with the heart he possessed. But alas, he shall pass her on to the finest suitor with nothing left but his final breath.

I read the paragraph again. What hit me was that everyone knew. Everyone who knew the story, had heard it, read it, was familiar with it, even our parents, knew our

fate. So many yet not even one had bothered to warn us. How could they not warn us?

I promptly closed the binders deciding we'd read enough. I pulled him next to me on the bed and curled up into him. I ran my hand over his chest, breathing him in. It had to be wrong I decided. I couldn't imagine not doing this forever with him.

I woke a few hours later to find myself alone. I rolled over nearly jumping at the sight of Kai hovering in the doorway.

"He went for a walk."

"Alone?"

"With Rafi." I nodded my head.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would you have believed me?"

I sighed. "Probably not." Just then my phone went off. Looking at the time I figured it was Kellan. "Hello?"

"Meet me in an hour," Auggy ordered. He was one of the three High Authority leaders, the head haunchos of the vamp army.

"The usual?"

"Back door."

"See you then," I said quickly disconnecting. I grabbed my shoes and bypassed Kai heading downstairs.

"I'm going with you. You shouldn't be alone until we get whoever's out there."

I looked at him, offering a knowing smirk and an eye roll. "That's fine."

"I'm not letting you go a-" he cut off when he realized the argument was unnecessary. "Well, let's go then."

We walked in silence out to the cars. We still had feelings for each other though his were stronger than mine, and I was completely committed to Kellan. It was hard at times given the pull I felt with Kai. Had I never met Kellan, I could picture myself with Kai, at least for a little while.

"We'll take mine," he said pressing the keyless remote for his Maserati.

I slid into the cool, leather passenger seat. He activated the security features and shields before pulling out. The second we reached the main road he pressed play on his iPod. *I Want To Sex You Up* pumped through the speakers. I narrowed my eyes at him. He wagged his brows and winked. I shook my head not necessarily in disbelief because Kai was very forward, but in slight awe of his persistence given the fact that he knew my status and my future husband.

"Listen Kai, I've messed up before with you and probably hurt Kellan too due to my own stupidity though he never said anything. While you're a fun fling, Kellan is my forever and I need you to respect that."

He burst into laughter. "You sound just like him with that crap."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't sweat it Leka. Your vamp's already laid down *the law*."

"Oh," I stumbled. "When?"

"A while back; he's only a sissy with you. Gotta give him credit, he's got a mean streak even I didn't know he

had."

I scrunched my forehead, trying to figure out when this could have taken place. I knew Kellan wasn't a wimp, but he was passive with me most of the time.

"Didn't know you were engaged to a thug, did you?" Kai smirked.

"You, hush!" My mind was spinning. I was caught off guard. The man I was going to marry has just shocked the heck out of me. I wondered who else he'd talked to.

"He's talked to any guy you have regular contact with, even the High Authorities."

"What? When the -"

"You know, you do have to sleep... and he doesn't."

"Oh. My. God." I studied him as if he were under a microscope. I took in his profile, the slight upward curve of his lips proclaiming his cockiness. His brown eyes were staring at the road ahead, but I could tell they were dancing with amusement nonetheless. "You're lying," I bluntly declared, praying he was.

"Talk to him," he shrugged.

"Ugh," I groaned, my stomach was doing flips.

We parked in a garage near King Street in downtown Charleston and then headed towards the back entrance of the vamp army headquarters. Kai insisted I walk; well, really we were running, ahead of him. He claimed he could look out for me better that way. That was only after he slipped and said he could look at me better that way. I ignored him and focused on business as much as possible. Oddly, it should have worried me to have the assassins still

out and searching for me, yet I wasn't scared. I knew I couldn't change fate.

The moment I thought it, Kellan immediately popped up in my mind. Okay, revision, I could change fate, but I couldn't control it.

I sighed and gripped the 'Emergency Exit Only' door handle outside the headquarters. I waited for the light to flash and the lock to click. We walked through and headed down. After passing the security checkpoint we headed straight to the back office conference room.

"Finally!" Auggy exclaimed.

"It hasn't even been an hour," I chuckled. Auggy was always intense, the epitome of a muscle-head in that sense.

"Kai," he greeted.

"Augustine," he nodded in return.

"So what have you got for me?"

"Oh, it's damn good. We've finally located Jack." His eyes lit up with devious delight.

"So who is this Jack character?"

"Only the oldest vampire on earth today. He's survived all these years by more than sheer wisdom though. He's tied up in a lot of under the table deals and controls nearly all of Europe. No one's seen him in nearly a decade; we only know he's still out there because of his signature attack method." Kai moved towards the table displaying the globe with strategic red dots on the projected image through Europe.

"Which is?"

"Black ninjas."

“But they could belong to any society. Aren’t they big in Asia?”

“We know it’s him because of the symbol on their uniforms,” Auggy said.

“Which is?”

“This.” He pulled up the image on the screen.

“A black spade?” I wrinkled my brow studying the clearly defined yet intricately designed piece.

“Yes. That’s the image stitched in black thread on the upper left part of their tops. It’s a black spade to signify a black Jack of spades card; it’s his signature Leka.”

“Oh. So he’s a powerful vamp with a black ninja army?”

“He’s more than that. He’s the Hitler of the vampires. These black ninjas have sold their souls to him in order to save their families.”

“What do you mean Auggy?”

“He’s cruel and ruthless is what I mean.” I watched his features stiffen as the anger spread over his face in disgust.

“He takes a family hostage, kids and all. He gives the male the opportunity to save their lives if he will join his army. If he refuses the first time, Jack will kill a family member, usually a child first. Then he will ask again. If he still refuses, he continues to kill the family one by one until the male either agrees or is killed himself. If he agrees a tiny bomb is injected into the wrist of each of his family members. If he doesn’t give one-hundred percent of himself to Jack’s cause, they are detonated.”

“How the heck do you inject a bomb into someone’s wrist?” I was flabbergasted, wringing my hands anxiously trying not to picture what they were explaining.

“He’s lived for nearly three thousand years Leka. He has interest upon interest in his accounts, more than anyone in the world. That kind of money gets you access to nearly anything you could ever want,” Kai stated.

“These males, does he turn them?”

“Of course.” Auggy flipped the image to a picture of one of the ninjas. “What he doesn’t tell them though is that if he gets angry or simply because he feels like it, he will detonate the bombs, randomly killing the family members regardless of performance.”

“How can he get away with that?”

“He owns most of Europe. Anyone in power has come in contact with a member of his camp at a certain point for sure. Prime ministers, Presidents, Kings; they’ve all been blackmailed by him.”

“So, what would a guy like this want with me?”

“Think about it Leka. You are bringing the larger empires of our kind together; creating alliances. Gain enough of them and he could be overthrown. We’ve already got enough manpower to take him on, but not enough smart technology to surpass what he has invented and invested in.”

“Oh.” It hit me all at once. I hadn’t thought about it like that. I swallowed the serum slowly climbing the walls of my throat. I couldn’t run from this; I knew that. I probably couldn’t hide either. Unfortunately I’d called attention to myself without meaning to. “So what’s the plan Auggy?”

“I’ve already briefed Kellan and Rafi. You’re going to Europe.” I felt Kai stiffen beside me. I could feel the tension radiating off of him.

I grabbed his hand, balled into a fist, and gave it a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “When?”

“Tomorrow night. We’ve already notified your school this afternoon and your Eislom is aware as well.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “So you knew the full story too,” I accused.

“It’s just a story Alexa. Don’t let that fluffy shit get to you.”

I sighed. “You have a point. Did Kellan really talk to you about me?” Auggy looked to Kai. They passed a look between them. “No way. Don’t look to him for answers. Just tell me straight.”

“I don’t get in the middle of relationships. You got a problem with your fiancé, take it up with him. Don’t put me in the middle of that shit.”

I cut my eyes at Kai. “Fair enough. What can you tell me about William? As of right now he seems like a stiff Giles knockoff.”

“Who the hell is Giles?”

“Buffy; it’s a TV show. Forget it. Just tell me what you know about him.”

“He was born in London in the late 1600s. He worked for the prophet directly until he was assassinated. Then he moved to Basque Country and has worked for our Embassy ever since then. He was the Executive Director of Historical Records & Archaeology. When he got wind of your little match up, he knew it was you and Kellan. He put

in his notice and hopped on the first flight to South Carolina.”

“So he’s legit and safe?”

“As far as I know. Never turned on us or accepted a bribe throughout his entire employment.”

“Awesome.” I looked around searching for a clock. “What time is it?”

“4:36am,” Kai offered.

“Okay. I guess just print a copy of the stuff I need to know about this guy before we head out. Do we have a plan of attack in place yet?”

He smiled deviously. “That, my dear, is all up to you. I’m relying on you to work your magic and get close to the bastard.”

Great. How was I supposed to get close to Hitler?
Thanks for giving me the easy job Auggy.

“Anytime,” he smirked.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be reading my thoughts,” I frowned.

“You don’t block it; I’m going to read it. That’s just the suspicious old government conspiracy theorist in me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I rolled my eyes. “Just give me the papers.”

“They’re set to self-destruct in approximately twenty-four hours. Don’t lose them,” he advised as he handed them to me.

“Never,” I smirked.

“Get out of here,” he ordered.

“Bye Auggy,” I gleefully waved. Auggy and I had a strange relationship. In a lot of ways he was like a bossy older brother. The military intensity only added to that role.

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Chapter Four

Kai placed a firm, guiding hand on my lower back and walked me out. Since the alliance I'd officiated, the Bladangs had been to the compound regularly and knew it inside out.

The second we hit King Street outside the back exit my phone went off.

"Hello?"

"Tell me you are not leaving me to go chase some hot-headed, power-hungry bastard with a cockiness complex," Mel demanded.

"Ugh, well, I am, but I could tell you I wasn't if that'd make you feel better."

"Lex! How can you risk yourself like this? You are just getting over the Christmas attack and your parents' deaths. Why, oh mother of Mary why, would you put yourself in the line of fire again?"

"Because they're already after me Mel. I have no choice. It's either they come to me or I go to them, and if I can save you or anyone else around me by going to them, then I am."

She sighed. "I don't like this one bit Lex. Craig told me a little about this vamp and he sounds like the devil himself."

"So I've been warned."

"Any chance I could bribe you out of this?"

"With what?" I laughed.

“Delicious, aromatic blood from your very best friend?”

“Mel! You know I’d never drink from you.” I was horrified.

“I know. I’d offer myself freely though if it meant you’d stay.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll be fine, really. Don’t worry about me.”

“Well it’s my job to worry about you. And when the heck were you going to tell me about this Miss Cleo crap?”

“The predictions?”

“Whatever you call it, yes.”

“I just found out about it last night.”

“Well if you ask me it’s a load of crap. It’s a crock of bull balls in a stew pot. Nothing is going to happen to you or Kellan, especially if you listen to your somewhat tortured, psychotic bestie who’s pleading with you to stay here.”

“Thanks, but I really can’t worry about that right now. It bothers me, but I can’t stop living especially right now with my present life being threatened.”

“True. Alright. You win this round, which is rare. Promise me you’ll be safe.”

“I will. You too.”

“You better get your little butt over here before you leave too!”

I smiled. “Of course.”

“See you later then.”

“Okay.” I hung up. Kai was waiting patiently by the car. I sped to catch up having been distracted by the call.

“You shouldn’t get so wrapped up in her.”

“What do you mean? She’s my best friend.”

“Which automatically puts her life at risk.”

“Don’t remind me.” He sped off, maneuvering with ease down the empty streets of downtown. His biceps were bulging through his shirt as he ground his teeth. “You’re irritated. Why?”

“You shouldn’t be pursuing this. You don’t have to take every mission they offer you.”

“They’re pursuing me. What do you want me to do?”

“Let me handle it.”

“I can’t do that. I’m not willing to risk anyone else in my life when it’s me they want.”

“Don’t be so self-righteous,” he scoffed.

“I’m not! I’m trying to protect my friends and what little family I have left.”

“By throwing your life at their feet and begging for mercy?”

“You know that’s not what I’m going to do!”

“You damn well better not,” he growled.

My serum rushed into my mouth. He infuriated me. Why was someone always trying to control my life and me?

“I’m not trying to control you,” he sighed.

“Will everyone stop reading my thoughts!”

“Put up a block.”

“I agree with Gabi; it gives me a headache.”

“Then don’t complain when we read them.”

“You really did a one-eighty,” I frowned, showcasing my disapproval. Kai was always moody, but this was a bit more than usual. I studied him as he drove in silence.

“What’s really going on? This whole thing has really hit a hot button for you.”

“Talk to Gabi about it.”

“You won’t tell me?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” I faced out the side window.

“Object repelled,” the robotic voice of the security feature for his car announced. “Bullet repelled. Bullet repelled. Object repelled. Bullet repelled.” Kai and I looked at each other simultaneously.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed, flooring the gas pedal. I turned around to see a black Range Rover with illegal black tint on the windows. They sped up, easily keeping up with Kai’s Maserati, which was impressive considering everything was nearly a blur around us with my vamp vision. “They had to have altered the engine. No way could they keep up with a Maz ordinarily,” he grumbled.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked, staring at all the buttons and controls.

“Fire back. This is the switchboard for the missiles built into the back. Make sure you don’t hit anything other than their car if you can,” he said, pointing the middle panel in the center console. “Use the camera to aim,” he

said pressing a button that slid out a 7" LCD screen from what looked like a CD or DVD player. I used the short joysticks to lock in on my target on the dual columned screen.

"Object repelled," the voice stated. "Bomb detected."

"Shit!" Kai abruptly hit the brakes and pulled a hard left as they flew past us. I lost my grip on the joystick as I was thrown into the passenger door. So much for my seatbelt.

"Where is it?" I panicked.

"That was the object repelled," he said as he flew down the interstate going the wrong way on the wrong side.

Not even five seconds after he sped off in the opposite direction the forest near where we just were exploded. Smoke quickly covered the sky as a fire broke out along the forest wall. A semi-truck headed in that direction came to a screeching halt as we flew past him.

"How much longer are you planning to go the wrong way?"

"Until now." He suddenly spun us around sending me flying into the passenger door again. We sped in the right direction and got off at the next exit, right before the catastrophe we barely avoided.

"Uh, so I take it this thing isn't bomb proof?" I asked as I worked to control my erratic, yet still slow compared to normal, heartbeat.

"Very few things are, and they wouldn't melt under heat to become pliable enough to make a car out of it. We have a shield but it can only protect us from so much."

“Figures.”

“Yeah.”

Kai took back roads to my house.

“What are we doing here?” I asked as he pulled into my driveway.

“Checking on things and packing the rest of your stuff.”

“Oh. I guess I will need more clothes just in case.”

“Pack everything. Even if you don’t think you’ll need it, take it. I want this house nearly empty. You’re safer with us anyways.”

“Kai, you can’t protect me from everything.”

“I’ll try my damndest too as long as I can.” I looked at him, his face set, his tone final. I didn’t want to argue. I acquiesced with a nod.

I pulled out my phone as I went upstairs and called Kellan.

“Lex? What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice full of concern. I could tell he was on edge; apparently everyone was.

“Nothing, sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I’m at my house with Kai to pack the rest of my stuff. We just got done talking to Auggy.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Kellan -“

“You’re not winning this one babe. I don’t care what you say; I’m going with you. Auggy booked us both a flight.” He was firm. As much as I would enjoy having him

with me, knowing he was safe, I would be worrying about his safety around every corner.

I froze when I heard a car pull into the driveway. "Hold on," I said, running to the window.

"Relax. It's just me, Craig and Mel."

"Oh, okay. I'll see you in a bit." I ended the call.

"Hey dagger mate," Craig greeted Kai downstairs.

"Hey Kai," Mel chimed behind him.

"Hey," Kai said, not sounding the least bit enthused. He'd been on the phone at the same time as me relaying the recent events to someone.

A few seconds later Kellan came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he nuzzled my neck.

"Do you know how sexy you look from behind?" he purred, nipping my neck. A chill ran down my spine.

"Apparently good enough to excite you," I replied, feeling him pressed against my lower back.

"Always," he chuckled lightly. I spun around and took him in. The look on his face quickly became tortured as we locked eyes. Something was bothering him. "They tried to bomb the car. Really babe? You couldn't tell me this when you first called?" he growled.

"Lose the block so it's an even playing field," I ordered. He quickly opened his mind to me.

"Why does it feel like you're always in danger?"

"I don't know," I mentally replied, gazing into his emerald eyes.

"Promise me you won't do anything too risky in Spain."

"Is that where we're going?"

"That's what we're booked for."

I sighed. *"Promise me that you won't do anything risky in Spain."*

He smiled, his dimple beginning to reveal itself on his left cheek. *"That's my line."*

"I can steal it if I mean it, and I do." I looked down at the green diamond on my finger. *"I don't want to lose you."*

He pulled me to him. *"You'll never lose me, regardless of what some crazy vamps wrote."*

"I love you," I said, locking my lips with his. His mouth gently caressed my own. I swept my tongue along the inside of his lips, tasting him, savoring him.

"I love you forever," he projected, pulling me tighter into him. His right arm wrapped around my waist, holding me firmly to his; his left hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers splayed amongst long dark brown locks.

Our breath became labored as we explored each other. I raked my nails along his upper back. I could never get enough of him.

"Get a room you scallywags!" Craig yelled. Kellan and I chuckled together, slowly breaking away with soft pecks.

"We're in a room Craig," I called back.

"Get one where I don't have to hear you suckin lips and bumpin bits with my mate."

"You do realize you're in my house, right?"

"Oh, but you're torturing this innocent dandy."

“You mean Mel?” I looked at Kellan, smirking over his crazy best friend. He was entertaining to say the least.

“Oh, yeah, her too.”

“You’re full of it man,” Kellan chuckled.

“Full of love for my love, right doll?”

I heard Mel giggle. “Oh brother,” I rolled my eyes.

“Let’s cut the crap. Pack your stuff Leka,” Kai sternly interrupted, clearly not amused in the slightest by the banter.

“Somebody missed their hand grind today, ay?” Craig commented.

“I’ll be in the car,” Kai announced. I heard the front door slam behind him.

“You really want to stay with that?” Kellan asked as we moved into my closet.

“Not really, but I don’t see where I have a choice right now. As much as I hate to admit it, I am safer with them. We don’t have any security aside from an alarm that a kid could disconnect with ease, let alone a vamp.”

He nodded, gathering my shoes and stuffing them into one of my suitcases. Five minutes later my room was empty of everything important. All my clothes, shoes and accessories were stuffed into two huge suitcases; I carried my picture of Gran and me, my scrapbook from my birthday, my mother’s photo albums of me growing up, and a few pics of me and Mel. Kellan carried my luggage and had Craig come upstairs to grab my Paris picture off the wall behind my bed. I looked around at my room. It looked so stark now, despite the large furniture anchoring the space. It felt like I was leaving forever; a sense of

permanence had settled in. So much had changed over the last couple months. I'd lost so much, yet gained so much at the same time. I was closing the chapter on my childhood, despite being sixteen, and starting a new one, forced to be an adult a couple years early.

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Chapter Five

“Mind if I ride back with Kai?” I asked as we loaded my stuff into Kellan’s Beamer.

He looked at Kai, sitting alone and annoyed in his car as he texted someone. “I’ll see you there,” he sighed.

“Thanks,” I leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. “You going to get your stuff from your parent’s?”

“Yeah. I gotta talk to my dad too.”

“Okay. See you later. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“You know this so does not count for the whole seeing you before you leave bit, right?” Mel checked, standing beside the car with her hand resting on her hip.

“Of course. Care to tell me why you’re not in bed sleeping though?”

“Cause I’d be missing all the action. I swear so much more happens at night with you guys.” She turned to Craig who was standing behind her.

“I guess. Promise me you won’t make a habit of this. You really do need your sleep.”

“Yes mother,” she droned, rolling her eyes rebelliously.

I laughed. “Later gator.”

“After a while crocodile,” she smiled. We gazed at each other reliving the memory years ago. That was our daily goodbye throughout all of sixth grade. There was so much history between us. Her eyes suddenly began to well with

tears. I held my arms out to her, welcoming her embrace. "Promise me you'll be safe Lex. I seriously need my best friend. Sometimes I feel like you're all I have left," she cried, her voice muffled by my shoulder.

"Of course. Take care of yourself Mel. It'd be too hard without you."

"Yeah it would," she smiled, pulling away with a few snuffles. "I really am your guiding light on so many things," she chuckled.

"Okay, yeah you kinda are." We laughed together.

"Alright. Enough of this sappy pasty puff," Craig interjected, pulling Mel into his arms from behind. "Lexi, doll, I'll see you on the flip side of the rip tide."

Kellan and I both snickered as Mel rolled her eyes. "See you later guys," I waved. I gave Kellan one last kiss before climbing into Kai's car.

"About time," he complained.

"Yeah, yeah." I buckled my seat belt ignoring his mood.

Kai and I relayed the earlier events to Gabi, Rafi, Kalel and Art. Art agreed to scan everyone he came into contact with. Gabi and Rafi said they'd alert the troops and send a few to my house to house sit.

Kalel stepped towards me; he picked up the charm on my necklace, an upside down cross, and studied it. "Don't forget about this."

"I won't, thanks."

"Don't worry too much. You'll be safe with us."

"Well, uh..." I didn't know how to break it to him.

“She’s going after him,” Kai bit out. He fisted his palms and ground his teeth in disgust and anger.

“After who?” Gabi was immediately on alert. Her brows rose yet furrowed, she turned towards me expectantly.

“Him,” Kai stated.

“As in him, him?”

“Yeah.”

I watched Gabi’s eyes widen as she ping-ponged between Kai and me. She ran her hand through her hair and tugged at it before she began to pace. She stared at the floor as she wrung her hands anxiously.

“Gabi? You okay?” I asked, looking at her and the others for some sort of response. Clearly they, or at least she, had some knowledge or interaction with this vamp.

“You can’t go Lex. Seriously. You... you,” she huffed. “You just can’t!”

“Calm down Gabi. I’ll be fine, really. Kellan’s going with me. We’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know him,” she argued.

“I’m sorry Gabi. As much as I would like to say I’ll heed your advice, I won’t. He’s after me Gabs. Everyone’s given me warnings and tried to offer me a reason to stay, but if he’s coming after me anyways, why does it matter if I go to him or if he comes here?”

“I really hope you know what you’re getting yourself into Lex. He’s definitely not us. Don’t think for one second that if he catches you that he’ll show you any mercy.”

“Thanks for sharing.” I offered her a weak smile.

“Of course. You take care of yourself okay. Don’t let him get you,” she said, pulling me into a hug.

“I’ll try.”

Right as I pulled away Kellan walked in. “I’m just going to drop this stuff in the room and then we can go.”

“Sure.”

“Where are you two running off to?” Gabi asked.

“To meet up with our *Eislom*,” I said, accenting William’s title.

“Ooh. The name sounds old and boring so I won’t bother being nosy.”

I laughed. “You got the old part right. Not sure about the boring yet.”

“Let’s go,” Kellan called as he sprinted down the stairs.

“Bye guys,” I said, waving. They all said a quick bye in return as Kellan grabbed my hand and led me to his car.

We drove to the school in silence, merely our hands laced. We parked near the back door to the classroom. He walked up and opened the door, peering in cautiously despite everyone’s reassurances.

“I was beginning to wonder –” William began.

Kellan cut him off. “We had official business to discuss and bombs to dodge.”

“Oh. I see,” he said, coming around from behind his desk. “Did you complete your reading assignment?”

I studied his attire: khakis, a blue oxford and brown loafers. While he appeared harmless, I got the feeling that Mr. Jameson had far more in his back pocket than he openly suggested.

"Yes. Why didn't you warn us?" I narrowed my eyes, awaiting his response. It's not that I didn't trust him, now that we'd verified him, it was just an uneasy feeling I had coming back into this. Perhaps it was just nerves related to my upcoming assignment though.

"You will quickly find that it is not my place to warn you of what's to come; it's my place to prepare you for whatever may come," he riddled.

"That doesn't even make sense. Wouldn't warning us help prepare us?"

"No. It would merely have you scrutinizing every aspect of nothing out of paranoia, especially when it comes to your mate. You don't need to know the future; you just have to be prepared for it."

"Then why have us read the predictions?"

"Because it's a pertinent part of vampire and vampeen history," he smirked, his brows raised as if to challenge me should I press on his answer.

Kellan stiffened. "I think you're full of crap."

"You ready to go?" Mr. Jameson asked, completely dismissing Kellan's outburst.

"Where?" Kellan shifted beside me.

"To pack. I understand we're going to Europe."

"We?" I furrowed my brows and unblocked my thoughts. *Is he really coming with us?*

I felt the flow of energy, our vibrant connection, the moment Kellan did the same. *Not if I can help it. We don't need anyone weighing us down.*

"Yes, we. You're going to need me," he stated, putting on his blazer. He grabbed a few books and papers off the desk.

Brow raised, Kellan and I exchanged a questioning glance. "Um, no offense, but how is it exactly that you're planning to help us?"

He brushed past us, opening the back door with his backside. We stared at him expectantly. "Well, don't just stand there. Come along," he said nodding his head outwards.

Kellan sighed in frustration. *He's already working my nerves.* I chuckled as I followed him out.

William walked right up to Kellan's car and stood by the back door waiting for it to be opened. I paused, looking to Kellan for his reaction.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Kellan demanded.

"With you of course. Why else would I be standing here waiting?"

"What about class? You can't just leave," I added.

"I was just a sub."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You mean to tell me you forced us to sit and listen to your long, drawn out lecture of crap for the semester for no reason whatsoever? I don't know if I like you after that Will."

He smirked, surprising me with a bit of charm. "You love me Lexi, or at least you will. I glamoured the real teacher to call in sick. And I actually delivered *his* boring monologue; so you would have had to suffer through it anyways."

Kellan harrumphed. "So this whole thing -" he gestured generally in William's direction with the flick of his wrist - "was just to get to us?"

"Well, yes; yes it was."

"Why not just approach us like this?" I asked.

"You would have been more inclined to attack me." He turned his wrist up to check his watch. "Listen, you can interrogate me later. We really ought to be off given your value."

"Huh?"

"You're unaware of your own bounty?"

My heart began to flutter as much as a vamp's can. I swallowed the serum that rose. "What bounty?"

"The one-hundred million dollar bounty. How could you not be aware?"

"Shit!" Kellan ran his fingers through his hair, looking around anxiously at our surroundings. "Why didn't you say something sooner? Let's go." He immediately hit the remote to unlock the doors and we flew into action. I was thankful that Kai had the same security features installed in any car I had the potential to ride in, and, to think, I'd made fun of him for going overboard.

Before my rear even hit the seat Kellan had the car started; the second I sat he sped off leaving me scrambling to close my door. I turned to him, brows furrowed and eyes

narrowed in frustration. His eyes were focused on the road as his hands flew about initiating the security system. He ground his teeth, huffing like an angered dragon. Whatever it was, I knew it was bad because he'd blocked his thoughts again.

Kellan. I grabbed his hand off the shift; he had a death grip on the steering wheel, and his whitening knuckles worried me. I breathed a sigh of relief when he entwined his fingers with mine. I caught him glance down at my ring, firmly in place on my left ring finger. *What's wrong? Talk to me.*

That ring on your finger is my promise to protect you at any cost. The fact that you have a bounty on your head and were nearly killed this morning means I'm failing miserably. You deserve better.

Stop it right there! It's not your obligation to protect me; I'm not some damsel in distress, and this ring is your promise to love and cherish me forever. Nothing more; nothing less.

Is that really all you think that is Lex? He scrunched his nose, snarling his lips. And just like that he locked me out again. He was angry and I'd just made things worse. I knew it was the stress getting to him, to us, but it still hurt.

He released my hand, his fingers flying over his phone on the dashboard.

"Hello?"

"Dad, we're swinging by. Lexi has a bounty on her head," Kellan bit out.

"Oh, okay," Alejandro replied, clearly caught off guard.

The moment we arrived at their house, we raced inside. Alejandro stormed forward and yanked William up by the collar off the floor. "Who the hell are you?" Alejandro roared.

"Claims to be our Eislom," Kellan shrugged moving past them. He headed straight for his room.

"Oh," Alejandro said, dropping him. "Sorry."

"Where's Beth?" I asked, glancing around.

"She's out of town visiting her parents," he replied, still studying Mr. Jameson.

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't even stop to think that she could still have family alive."

"It's quite alright. Understandably you have a lot on your mind."

"Uh, if I could just interrupt this little family tree bit with a dash of reality. There are men, many of them, out searching for Lexi right now. Her very life is in danger as we speak. Now what do you presume we do about it?" William pressed, returning Alejandro's harsh gaze.

Kellan returned with a black duffle bag stuffed to the brim. "You coming with dad?"

Alejandro's phone suddenly rang. He held up a finger as he answered. "Bancroft."

I smiled at the sound of Auggy's voice booming through the speaker. "Bancroft, pack your shit. You're following your kids to Basque Country tonight. You tail them, but don't join them. They need people watching their backs against this Jack bastard. And don't spill the beans or show yourself in front of them. I don't want them thinking they're weak."

“It’s a little late for that. They’re right beside me and can probably hear everything,” Al offered.

“Hi Auggy,” I chuckled. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Put me on speaker Bancroft.” Al pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speakerphone. “Don’t fuck with me Lex. I’m protecting your ass not mine. Kellan, have you finished the boot camp yet?”

I cocked my head, eyeing Kellan questioningly. “Yes. Last week.”

“Good. Now all of you pack your shit and get ready. I’m having guards meet you at the airport to provide weapons and permits to you. They’re military permits so don’t act like floozy civilians.”

“Yes Dad,” I chuckled.

“Don’t mock me Lex. I could buy you and sell you.”

“I love you too Auggy,” I smiled.

“Just be ready, and for God’s sake don’t get yourselves killed.”

“We’ll try. Now where are our plane tickets?”

“Kellan has them.”

“Oh.” He was full of surprises today it seemed.

“Send me a text that says ‘Rome has fallen’ when you arrive safely. Until then people, stay quiet.” He immediately hung up.

“Only you could talk to him like that,” Al smirked. Not even a second later he sobered. “Alright. Let me pack.”

“Wait. How many tickets did Auggy give you Kellan?”

“Two.”

“Don’t worry Lex. They e-mailed me my ticket and itinerary. I just have to print it,” Al advised as he stepped into the master bedroom.

“And you?” I looked at William.

“I have resources,” he smiled curtly.

“Well heck,” I furrowed my brow.

Kellan finally smiled. “You can’t say heck; you just have to curse.”

“It’s actually quite lady like of Lexi to say heck.” He turned to me. “Although I’ve always found the British form of cursing to be a bit more appropriate for women. Bloody hell is much more civilized than fucking shit.” My eyes flew open. William smiled innocently at me.

I chuckled. “I do believe you’re full of surprises Will.”

“Thank God you didn’t call me William, but the nickname is Wills, not Will.”

“Why?”

“Because you wills call me Wills or I will have a bloody fit.”

“Okay, Mel would totally kill me if I didn’t call you out on that one.”

He flipped open one of the notebooks in his hands. “Ah yes. Melanie Marie Hartford, your best friend, who is currently dating Craig Alexander Scott, Kellan’s best friend.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, serum rising and hands fisting. “How the hell do you know about her?”

“Relax Alexa Lorrayne Jackson and Kellan Alejandro Phoenix Bancroft. You can find names anywhere if you know the vicinity and associations of which you’re searching.” William closed the notebook.

“Wait. Can you search for Jack that way?” I asked. Kellan perked up beside me at the idea.

“I already have my dear. I told you you would need me.”

“What did you find?”

“I found out that his name isn’t really Jack. It’s Jacques Lenore Ambroise.”

“He’s French?”

“Ah, wi, wi.”

“Not funny Will.” Kellan rolled his eyes.

“Cut the shit. What else do you know about this guy?”

“That’s it. He literally doesn’t exist beyond his name and the assassinations he’s marked.”

“That can’t be good,” I groaned.

“We’re starting from nothing basically,” Kellan agreed.

“Not necessarily. Do you have all the terrorisms he marked throughout the years?” Al returned with a black book bag and a few sheets of paper.

“Of course. That’s what’s in this binder,” Will pointed to the bottom of his pile.

“Good. We can study his work. See if there are any patterns or at least use it to try to predict any future attacks he might aim at us.”

“You’re brilliant. He’s brilliant,” Will beamed approvingly at us.

“Now let’s get out of here. I’ll call Beth on the way,” Al said.

“Don’t compromise the mission by saying too much,” Will warned.

“She’s my wife and his mother so I’ll tell her whatever I want. My phone scrambles the line when I call her though so don’t concern yourself.”

Kellan avoided me all the way to the Bladangs. I tried not to be upset about it, but it bothered me. After all I’d learned about him today, I almost felt like I didn’t even know the man I was prepared to marry. I twisted my ring around my finger as I listened to him, Will and Al discuss the situation.

When we arrived, Craig, Mel, Gabi and Rafi were deep in conversation.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Don’t think you were gonna squiggle away from my loveable lup,” Craig chuckled.

“I told you I would hang out with you before I left. We don’t leave until tomorrow night.”

“No, we leave tonight,” Kellan bit out as if I had committed a crime.

“Oh, sorry.”

“What’s up my testy toast?” Craig asked, standing and clapping Kellan on the shoulder. He looked directly at me giving me a tortured look.

I'm sorry. I really am sorry, I projected. He sighed and sat on the couch next to Craig.

“Okay. Well, I think us ladies should go upstairs and leave the boys to do whatever boys do together,” Gabi suggested, studying Kellan and me with curiosity. I knew I was going to be drilled.

—

Chapter Six

The moment her bedroom door shut they started in on me. I explained it all from start to finish. In a way I was hoping it was nothing, that they would find something I didn't, but I wasn't so lucky.

"Well, honestly Lex, you've known from the beginning that Kellan had a dark side. I thought you'd already seen it and knew about it, but I guess not," Mel said.

"I don't really think it's a dark side though. I think he's frustrated. Every guy has a god complex in some form. They think they're the know all, do all and be all. He's probably upset that he can't protect you how he wants. It doesn't help that Kai and Kalel are so willing to step in and do his job for him," Gabi added.

"Yeah, but it's like I told him, it's not his place to protect me."

"Lex, it is his place to protect you. You're his mate. Do you feel a need to protect him?" Gabi pressed.

"I hate that you're right. I just don't want him running around behind my back, going to the ends of the earth risking himself to protect me. I'd rather lose my life than him lose his."

"And he feels the exact same way about you *chica*. You don't ask someone to marry you because you like them. It's because you love them and can't picture your life without them."

"You're right," I frowned.

"Don't be so upset. I'd be jumping up and down if Craig felt that way about me."

I grabbed her hand and smiled. "Don't worry, he will one day."

"Um... I should go talk to him." I finally understood where he was coming from. It's sad that it had to be pointed out to me though.

"Don't feel bad. Go talk to him now before you leave. You don't want to go out risking everything without resolving this spat," Mel said.

"Thanks." I left them and went downstairs to where Kellan was.

"The sooner we leave the better," Al stated, pacing the Bladangs' living room.

"I agree." Kalel stood with his arms crossed defensively beside Al. His face was set, a statue god somewhat angered and certainly determined.

"Do you have your stuff packed and ready Leka?" Kai asked.

"Not yet. I just got back."

"I'll help you," Kellan offered. I nodded and headed upstairs. He hadn't unblocked his thoughts and was still giving me the cold shoulder.

"I'm really sorry," I sighed placing myself in front of him. He stepped past me avoiding eye contact as he separated my clothes into a luggage bag. "Kellan."

"Don't push Lex. I really don't want to talk about why my fiancé thinks the ring I gave her is just for show."

"I know it's not just for show, but it's also not a contract for me to rely on you entirely for everything."

"I never said you had to," he snapped, turning around and racing towards me, stopping inches from my face. My heart skipped a slow beat as a bit of serum rose up within me. His fists clenched at his side; his emeralds eyes narrowed on me. "I said it meant it was my responsibility to protect you, and that's nothing more than you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we both feel the need to protect each other, only I put a ring on your finger to remind you of how I feel." He ground his teeth, looking around the room.

"I already know how you feel Kellan," I said, taking his fists into my palms. "I don't need a ring to declare that or remind me. I know it every day because of everything you do for me, how you treat me and of course the kisses you give me," I smiled. He faced me, his features slowly softening. "I love the ring, and I love that you love me enough to give it to me. I don't see it as a symbol of what you owe me though. You're not an employed security guard; to me this is a promise of a future filled with love and happiness with you." I gazed at his eyes as they slowly darkened with desire. Apparently my words were setting in.

Abruptly my back was against the wall and my legs wrapped around his waist as his lips crushed mine. He opened his mind to me; his thoughts overwhelmed me. I returned the favor.

"You have no idea how much control this is taking."

"I believe I do." I tightened my grip, his mouth scorching mine.

"Holy bubbling blowfish. Can't keep your fiddle sticks off each other can you mateys?" Craig asked as he barged in. We separated like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. "You ready love? They're waiting on you."

“Did you pack everything?” I checked with Kellan.

“If not I’ll buy it,” he replied. I shook my head once.

“Alrighty then my cuddly cupids, let’s get you two to the big birds’ play land.”

“The what?” I laughed as I grabbed my bag. Kellan immediately took it from me.

“The airport,” Kellan clarified, shaking his head in amusement at his best friend. He placed a protective, guiding hand on my lower back.

“Oh, okay. Let’s go.”

Mel ran right up to me the second I hit the bottom of the stairs. I knew she was coming to see how things went, but the second I saw the bag in her hand, my mind refused to focus on anything else. “Where do you think you’re going?” I was a tad harsher than I meant to be.

“None of your business mother,” she rolled her eyes.

“She’s not coming with us, is she?” I looked to Kalel and Kai to read her thoughts. Kalel nodded his head once letting me know she intended to. “You are not coming!”

“Don’t babble blubber. I already talked the tansy out of her and somehow she nickered me into another squabbly.”

“A what?” I was agitated.

“I talked him into another deal without him realizing it,” she smirked. “I’m coming Lex. I’m good bait. I can distract.”

“Not if you can’t catch up,” I smiled victoriously crossing my arms over my chest.

“But you wouldn’t leave me alone and defenseless in a foreign country.” She smiled way too sweetly. This was the closest we’d come to a catfight.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Lock her up and don’t release her till after I leave.”

“Don’t you dare put your grimey paws on my girl,” Craig bit out between Kai and Mel.

“Mel, you can’t be serious. I won’t let you risk yourself like that.”

“It’s my choice,” she defiantly declared.

“Does your dad know?”

“Yes. He said he knew you would protect me.”

“Wow. No pressure.” I looked around, but no one offered me an answer. I finally turned to Kellan behind me on the stairs still. He shrugged his shoulders. *What the hell?* No one was willing to step in and back me? “I don’t like this one bit. Do you know how devastated I would be or how guilty I would feel if anything happened to you?”

“Do you know how I would feel if anything happened to you and I didn’t try to help? Do you even know how much guilt I carry around still for what my mom did?” She sighed. “Look, we have nothing to worry about; nothing’s going to happen.” She skipped off towards another suitcase.

Butterflies danced around my stomach as an uncomfortable feeling settled in. This was one time I wished vamps could vomit. Mel was making this much more complicated. As much as she was going to hate me, I was going to have to leave her and Craig behind somewhere, and I knew he was coming. He wouldn’t leave

her in this situation. I didn't know what kind of view she had of the vamp world, but it was definitely skewed.

"Who's taking care of Ruby?"

"Kyle. Paid him ten bucks up front and promised him twenty more if he did well, which basically means she's still alive, not missing any chunks of hair though color was exempt, and had a little food and water in her dish."

"What about school?"

"My dad's a vamp. He got me the time off no problem. I'll have to catch up later, but you can help me."

"I'm so not a fan of your dad anymore. I really can't believe he let you go." I was lost in disbelief.

"Auggy thought it was a good idea too," she shrugged.

My eyes flew open, fists bunched faster than the speed of light as serum gushed into my mouth. "What?"

"My dad mentioned it to him since he's running the whole mission. He thought it was a good idea. He said it would keep you focused if my life was on the line too."

My breathing was shallow, heart racing as if it was still in a human body. "Get her out of here now," I calmly ordered.

"Our flight leaves in two hours. We have to go," Al cut in.

"I'm doing this because I love you," I said to Mel before heading out to the car quickly. I was about to lose it any second. I couldn't believe Auggy would stoop so low. Clearly he and the High Authorities had no regard for human life anymore. All they could do was sit on their high horses and flick orders at the ants not caring who survived.

The second I saw him again, he was in for it; he could send me to a concentration camp if he wanted to, but he could not and would not decide the fate of the ones I loved.

By the time Kellan and Al were there, my vision was watered over. I couldn't believe she made me do that. I couldn't believe Auggy set that up; he was definitely on my shit list now.

"You did the right thing," Al said placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"He's right. I'm proud of you," Kellan projected. "That wasn't easy, but you did what you had to in order to protect her. She knows that."

"Thanks." I stopped and looked around suddenly realizing William was missing. "Where's -"

"He said he'll meet us there," Kellan cut in having read my thoughts. I didn't even bother asking how he was getting there.

Somehow we were able to skip security and receive a bag of weapons for carry-on. Come to think of it though, the vamp army probably glamoured a few leaders somewhere along the line. Usually I would be opposed to this entirely, but in this case, I was relieved that we weren't walking in with only my necklace.

I looked down at my ticket as we boarded the plane. "Why are we in first class?"

"It's the best way to fly," he said. I swung around to Kalel and the rest of the gang behind him.

"Where... How... What?" I couldn't believe they were here.

"You didn't think we'd let you face Jack alone did you *chica*?" Gabi smiled. "Move your ass Kai. I want to get comfortable before the plane takes off."

Kai looked directly at me. "I'll always have your back." My heart pounded in my chest as I gazed back into his big brown eyes.

Kellan cleared his throat. I shook my head, breaking my focus. "Thanks everyone, but if any of you get hurt or killed, I will never forgive you, and I give you permission to haunt me."

"Don't encourage the lot," Will said as he went to the seat behind me.

"Ooh, great cackling Casper! Who could skitter at such a gelato of a gapper?" Craig exclaimed, racing onto the plane right as they were getting ready to close the door. I gasped, choking at the sight of him.

"Where is she?" I asked. He stopped beside Kellan and me.

"I locked her up and called her dad to get the code from Art."

"She's going to kill you."

"As long as she doesn't get killed I'll take whatever lashing she lacquers on me."

I cocked my head, looking at the blond Australian surfer who'd just saved my best friend's life at the risk of his own happiness. "Thanks." I tried to control the tears that quickly gathered. "*He loves her.*" I looked at Kellan, lost in awe.

"*And I love you.*" He kissed me softly, pulling me into him.

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Chapter Seven

Two stops and nearly twenty-four hours later with the time change, we arrived at San Sebastian Airport. A black van picked us up; apparently they were prepared for us.

“I’m branching off on my own. I won’t be far if you need me,” Al stated. I was caught off guard by his announcement, despite what Auggy had ordered.

“Take care Dad,” Kellan said, clapping his dad on the back. Al looked at his son, respect in his eyes despite the concern on his face.

“You too. Take care of her,” he lifted his chin towards me.

“Always.”

“Be careful Al,” I hugged him briefly. I felt a tug at my heart. He wasn’t my father, but he’d stepped in and played an important guiding role in my life over the last couple months. He waved at the others before heading to a taxi a few cars down. I returned my attention to our transportation.

“Hello. I am Matteo, and I will be your driver while you are here,” he introduced, his accent slightly marring his English. He was young; tan skin, jet black hair and dark brown eyes that stared directly at me as he spoke. I shifted uncomfortably at the attention as nearly every male around me bristled.

“We’ll be renting cars after this,” Kai bit out.

Matteo glanced at Kai before returning to me. I slid behind Kellan who instantly straightened himself at my need for protection. I couldn’t fathom what was so

interesting about me. I looked down at my VS Capri sweats and white tee sticking out below my pink American Eagle hoodie. I was completely covered with no make-up and my hair up in some sort of mess I was sure. I didn't find anything attractive about me or on me.

I jumped as Kellan burst out in the native tongue, a biting tone echoing around us in the airport exit corridors. I heard the trunk doors open out. I peeked around to find Matteo averting his eyes as his head hung.

"What the heck did you say to him?" I projected the demand.

"I told him to stop staring at you and do his job."

"You didn't have to be rude about it."

"He was being rude to you. You don't ogle people."

"Ogle? Never heard you say that before." I couldn't hide my amusement. He raised a questioning brow in my direction at the smile on my face. *"You're cute you know that?"*

"And you're beautiful, but mine. And I don't like people ogling my stuff."

"Can you two stop the head chat and get in the van?" Kalel asked, standing impatiently by the open back door. Just as I was about to walk past him, Kalel touched my arm. "Be careful what you think around here. Being together doesn't protect what you project. You projected part of your thoughts just now."

"What's the difference between thinking and projecting?"

"Projecting typically involves a conversation. You're projecting what you want to him," he lifted his chin towards

Kellan, "To pick up on an open frequency."

"You're in the capital of your kind. We're outsiders here. The French quarter is vampire territory. Because of that you need to be cautious of how you interact with us. It is still widely frowned upon here," Will advised, notebook in hand.

"Basically, you're the only thing standing between them kicking our asses," Rafi jumped in.

"Even the embassy?" I checked.

"Especially there. That embassy was established by the original family."

We drove in silence to the hotel, which was far from fancy, yet still quaint and comfy. It felt homey. Matteo cleared his throat at the door to mine and Kellan's room. I looked to him; he was fidgeting in the doorway.

"The embassy has requested a meeting with you." He passed a quick glance at Kellan before adding, "Alone."

"Why?"

"I do not know the reason. I am only the..." he stopped, peering off at nothing, as if he was trying to find the right word. "Uh, message. I only bring the message."

"You're only the messenger," I offered the phrase.

"Si," he smiled sheepishly.

"She doesn't go anywhere alone," Kellan barked. I put a calming hand on his chest as I turned to face him. He stared over me at Matteo. *"I don't trust him."*

"What do you think he's going to do?"

"Does it matter?"

"Whoa! What's wrong? You've been on edge this entire trip. We both knew it wasn't going to be a vacation. You knew the itinerary, so what's up?" He finally gave me his attention.

"It's hitting me. We're here now and it's all hitting me at once. We have no backup except the ones we brought; we have no one else to trust, and I'm even leery of them sometimes."

"Even Craig?" I cocked a brow.

"Not him, but all the others." He brushed his hand out, flicking it suggestively.

"Kellan, they chose to come. If they wanted, they could have slapped a tracker on us, sold our location to the enemy and left us defenseless, but they didn't and won't. They're going above and beyond risking themselves for us, for me, and truthfully, I feel better knowing they're here to back us. It means there's less of a chance I'll lose you." Tears began to gather despite trying to hold them off. I'd acted foolish with my relationship, dismissed Kellan and his feelings, hurt the one I loved over the one I liked. I couldn't picture my life forever with Kai like I could with Kellan. I didn't know what I'd do without him.

He dried my cheeks with his thumbs. *"Don't cry babe. We agreed, no more tears. You're right. This is something we'd have to face eventually and I'd rather do it with back up. And for the record, I let you go off with Kai. I knew I had to step back, no matter how much it hurt me, so you could decide for yourself who you wanted."*

"I forgot you could read what I didn't project." I smiled as he wiped away my last stray tear. *"Which reminds me, I can't possibly look cute right now."*

"I didn't think cute, I thought -"

"I know!" I yelled, breaking out in laughter. "I replaced the word."

"Can't handle the thought of yourself being -"

"Kellan!" I smacked his upper arm.

"Uh, everything is good, yes?" Matteo checked. I faced him, my face flushing. I'd completely forgotten about him.

"Yes, sorry. I will go with you alone." I turned to Kellan, waiting for his protest.

"I don't like it, but yes, you can go alone." His expression was full of concern and worry even as he contemplated the answer he'd just given. "Promise me you'll be safe."

"I will. I promise." I reached up and kissed his cheek.

"If anything happens to her, it's on your fucking head!" Matteo stiffened at Kellan's words; clearly he understood his implication.

"We should go, yes?" Matteo checked.

"Yes, let me change clothes and grab my stuff, then I'll meet you at the car."

"Want me to follow you?" Kellan asked as I turned towards the luggage on the bed. He came up behind me, his arms wrapped around my waist as he nuzzled my neck.

"I'll be fine. I can fend for myself. I'm a vamp too, remember?" I smiled as he kissed my pulse point.

"I remember. How can I forget?" He inhaled me sending a shiver down my spine.

"I should go babe." I turned in his arms to face him. He stole my lips before I could take a breath. I responded

quickly, eagerly as he devoured me. I dropped my wallet on the bed to freely run my fingers through his hair. His hands traveled south, cupping my rear and squishing me into his growing desire.

At the sound of a throat being cleared, I pulled away earning an agitated growl from Kellan. His head snapped towards the door where Kalel stood, arms crossed, lips pursed and brows nearly a straight line as he scowled.

"I'm going to take a cold shower," Kellan grumbled. "Be safe." He kissed me one last time before escaping to the bathroom.

"Sorry to interrupt," Kalel relaxed his stance.

"It's ok. I need to change and leave anyways."

"Where are you going?"

"The embassy with Matteo."

"I don't trust the kid."

"Apparently no one does. Kellan said the same thing."

Kalel narrowed his eyes. "You're going alone?"

"He said they only wanted me."

"They've made exceptions before and allowed vampires in." His frown deepened. "I agree with blue balls. I don't like this."

I cut my eyes at him. "Be nice, and don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"Not alone against a multitude of vampeens whose strength blows yours away."

"I'm not a weakling, Kalel," I said, busying myself by picking out an outfit from my bag.

"You're also not old enough to be stronger than most of them."

"I have my necklace," I countered. I palmed the upside-down cross beneath my hoodie.

"Raise the shield before you even get in the car with the waffle."

"What's up with the names?"

"I'm frustrated. Now change and stop by my room so I can wire you. This way if you get in trouble, we'll know."

"Fine, now go." I shooed him out, shut the door and locked it. One minute later I was at his door dressed in wide-legged gray cotton-wool pants, black ballet flats, a fitted cream sweater and my hair freshly wrapped in a bun atop my head with my passport, debit card and phone in my pockets.

"Come in and shut the door." He handed me a pair of diamond stud earrings. I handed him my pearls in return.

"Don't lose those. They're my mom's." At the mention of her, a wave of sadness hit me.

My parents' deaths had hit me harder than I liked to admit. Rather than wallow in sorrow all the time, I tried to distract myself to avoid thinking about them. There were times when Kellan was out with Craig and my aunt was away, times when I was alone in our house that I broke down, but never in front of anyone. I'd broken down too much, been too sappy right after my transformation. The doctor said it was all the body and hormone changes, but I felt weak. Crying seemed like a weakness, especially when it was in front of vamps that tended to look down on emotion.

"Focus Leka," Kalel cut into my wander. He held up a lapel pin. "This is the camera; your earrings are the speakers, recorders, whatever you want to call them. They pick up the sound and match it to the video feed, which I can get on my laptop and phone. And before you ask, no, you won't be caught by security."

"Okay." I turned my head as he pinned the camera on me. As soon as he finished I looked forward to him gazing straight at me, an odd expression on his face. I swallowed hard, feeling exposed almost. He shook his head and pulled away. "Let me make sure it's working." I merely nodded my head, trying to ignore the flutters in my stomach.

Focus on Kellan. You can't screw this up with him again. Kalel gave me an odd appraising look. "Um, yeah, check it," I stumbled, trying to get him to focus on anything but me.

Two minutes later I was set to go. "Be careful Leka. I'll be watching. And make sure you keep your thoughts blocked."

"Thanks." I left with an uneasy feeling. They were all so worried about me going some place that was essentially like the vampire White House or Pentagon. I just didn't understand the hype. Aside from Keira, I hadn't really faced anyone who strongly disliked opposite vamps. I'd been warned, but hadn't experienced. For some reason, I had a feeling I'd learn very soon.

"You took long," Matteo stated as soon as I got in the van.

"I'm a girl. I take a while to get ready." He started the car, giving me a sideways glance before pulling out.

"I do not understand why you are important. They talk like you are royalty. I expected a queen, Angelina Jolie,

someone much more than you." He finally rubbed me the wrong way.

"Well you got me," I bit out; my tone was harsher than I intended, but I didn't bother softening. He'd just insulted me. I knew I was none of those things, but it was rude of him to blatantly throw it in my face in a demeaning way. I wasn't calling him a servant, chauffeur or 'the help.'

"You're mad," he observed.

I ignored him as I stared out the window at the scenery. The houses were close together, reminding me of most old European cities like Paris and London. Their colors broke up the similarities as nearly all of them boasted the same design, windows overlooking their neighbors and tiny balconies. Homes gave way to apartments of the same design with multiple residents. The area had more hills than I remembered; the streets winded from cobblestone to concrete and back as we navigated towards the center of town.

We rode in silence until he parked on the street in front of what appeared to be an old European church complete with a bell tower and clock.

"This is it?" I checked, staring at the multi-tonal brick structure.

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Chapter Eight

I didn't know what to expect as we entered, but I was quite surprised to follow Matteo into an actual church. Wooden pews lined the center aisle and stained glass windows amplified the magnificence of the cathedral ceilings. A large marble cross with Jesus nailed to it hung in the center back wall with a depiction of his crucifixion in the small glass window above it.

"Come," Matteo stated.

I followed him through a side door next to the candelabra on the stage. Immediately we entered a tiny pass through. There were no lights, no photos, merely the wooden floors that covered the entire church carried through the short hall leading to another door labeled with in an unrecognizable language.

"It reads 'Cleaning Supplies,'" Matteo offered, as if he could read my mind.

I watched him grab and hold the door handle. Seven seconds passed before a light flashed and the lock clicked. He led me down a set of narrow concrete steps; I could only picture the spooky steps leading down to a dungeon as we descended. The darkness surrounded me as a chill ran through me. My nerves returned as serum made its presence known in my throat.

A single hurricane lantern greeted us at the bottom of the stairwell, illuminating a concrete door with a rectangle cutout resembling a mob peephole. Nothing was visible through it though. I nearly leapt into Matteo's lap when a large blue scanner hummed, the grid of light passed over us.

"You are not going to live through Jack if light scares you," Matteo smirked, a merriment of cockiness, amusement and, surprisingly, concern, dancing in his expression. I scowled as the door creaked open.

The door opened to a TSA-type security setting. Vampeens in navy blue uniforms labeled 'Security' in multiple languages on the left side over their hearts dominated the space with several large pieces of screening equipment amongst them. Everyone had an array of weapons encompassing their waists via utility belts. Despite the high level of precautions in place, the atmosphere was much lighter than the vamp army headquarters.

"Hey Matthey," greeted the blond male closest to us. They broke into the native language, shaking hands once he stepped through the x-ray machine. I stood staring at them, slightly annoyed as I waited for my cue.

"Come," Matteo stated. I walked through right as everyone fell silent. Unease pimples my skin as I followed their gazes to the far right corner. Relief washed over me at the sight of Auggy and another male dressed in fifties-style military attire.

"Skip the shit and get your ass over here Lex," Auggy ordered. Matteo and his friend glared darts at me. Matteo had already made his opinion of my regard known in the car so it didn't surprise me.

Matteo mumbled under his breath something I couldn't translate. That had the blond Ricky Martin beside him agreeing as he stared at me openly with anything but friendliness in his eyes. I rushed through the maze feeling elated the second I reached Auggy.

"Glad you made it Jackson."

"I'm glad to see you, but I'm still pissed at you."
Several vamps gasped, whispers broke out at my casual grumble to the High Authority leader. I wasn't sorry after what he suggested with Mel.

He studied me for a brief minute before shaking his head once. "I knew you would be. I also knew it'd drive home just what you were risking on this mission. Hartford was in on it, but there's no way in hell he was letting his daughter go. So Miss Pissy Pants, you're just going to have to get over the fact that you're an emotionally driven vamp. That's both your greatest strength and your greatest weakness. Now don't let it become your downfall. Jack is brutal."

I opened and closed my mouth several times. My knuckles were white, clamped tightly in a fist at my sides; my features pulled taut as Auggy laid into me.

I jumped when, *"Don't be emotional. You're further proving his point,"* filled my head like a thought plugged in. Auggy's brows furrowed as all the anger gave way to shock. *"Don't blow our cover. I'm connecting to you through the earrings. It's Kalel. Kai, Craig and Kellan are here too."*

I plastered a smile on my face, trying to cover up my mistake, though I was reeling at the idea of Kellan, Kai and Kalel all in one room trying to work together. I was praying they didn't kill each other. If they tried, hopefully Craig, Will or Rafi would step in.

"Jackson!" Auggy bellowed. I quickly gave him my full attention again.

"Um, you know, you're right Aug. I am too emotional sometimes. Now am I going to get a tour of this museum or what?"

"What kind of shit shenanigans are you pulling?"

"Me? What about you? You're the elephant, I mean vampire in the room."

He chuckled. "That sounds more like you. And for your information, I'm a vampeen. You only assumed I was a vampire."

"Huh?" I swore my brows reached my hairline.

"Fix your face and follow me Lex," Auggy said, turning to speak to the male beside him.

"You know, it's extremely rude of you not to introduce us Auggy," I stated as I followed them out of the room.

"So sorry your highness, but introductions will have to wait."

"What for?"

"For everyone else; we're going to a meeting. They are very interested in how you plan to take out Jack." I groaned internally, my heart skipping a few slow beats. This didn't feel right at all.

"Don't give them any strategic information. They are not to be trusted." A knot formed in my stomach. I thought about it for a minute realizing they were probably right. If only in case of a mole, I couldn't divulge anything. Who knew what they would do with that information, though truthfully I didn't have much of a plan formulated.

I followed the men down a long, non-descript hall lined with painted portraits of distinguished vampeens. None of them stood out to me, but, then again, I wasn't exactly caught up on my vampeen history.

Auggy and the other vamp stopped in front of a pair of solid oak double doors with a flag in a stand on either side. One I recognized as Spain's; the other was merely navy

blue with a large white symbol in the center. Auggy caught me with my head cocked sideways studying it.

“It’s the vampeen flag,” he stated.

“What does the symbol mean?”

“It’s the vampeen race’s symbol. It means vampeen when translated in any language.”

“It’ll translate the same in every language?”

“Did I stutter?” I cut my eyes at him, rolling them when he offered me an amused smile.

“But what about the languages that don’t use symbols, like Spanish?”

He pulled the flag straight out for me to study. It was then that I noticed in the right bottom side of the symbol, there was a word. “Oh.”

The vamp said something to Auggy after checking his watch. Auggy released the flag stating, “It’s time Lex. Behave. And do me a favor, don’t talk to them as brashly as you do us.”

“I won’t even ask you to explain that.”

“Good,” he grunted, pushing open the double doors. I stepped in behind him and abruptly stopped in awe of the sight before me.

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Chapter Nine

The room was large, carpeted in the highest grade cream color. A large oval table took up the center of the space. The room was highlighted by a magnificent silver and crystal chandelier. It was unique with translucent green and blue crystal droplets. The real show stopper was the back wall, which was curved glass revealing the ocean and its inhabitants beyond it. I was amazed because somehow they had built the place below the city and it ran into the ocean far enough to remain hidden and undiscovered by the residents here.

When I finally brought my eyes back down, I saw a table full of vampeens all situated in their black leather chairs staring at me. “Uh, hi,” I waved awkwardly. I felt myself flush slightly. I couldn’t believe I didn’t notice them at first. What a way to make a great first impression, by ignoring their presence.

Auggy pulled out the chair at the head of the table facing the window and indicated for me to sit. I sat, trying to avoid direct eye contact with anyone.

“Relax. Everything will be okay, babe.” I smiled knowing it was Kellan talking to me. He gave me the confidence I needed.

I lifted my head and looked at each person around the table. They were of varying races, yet their age was the same in physical beauty. To know their true age, I had to search their eyes, watch their mannerisms, and possibly the funniest and strangest, look at their choice of pen. They all sat with paper of some sort in front of them, but some had quill pens, others the ballpoints of today. Several were using what appeared to be a tool or an instrument carved

of stone and dipped in ink, but most used a dip pen; and one stood out having a basket of berries and a mortar and pestle. I toyed with the idea of asking everyone about their choice of utensil, but opted to remain quiet.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask?” One man broke out near the opposite side of the table. His fiery red hair stood out against his pale skin; his light blue eyes danced with amusement and mischief. Given his lilted accent, I knew he had to be Irish.

“I was trying to be polite,” I smiled.

“Told you she’d be nervous laddies,” he grinned. “Now pay me me owings.” Several grunts and groans later, the man had a large pile of money sitting in front of him.

“I suppose we ought to introduce ourselves to the girl,” a woman stated. She was one of four out of twenty-one; certainly a minority. Her blonde hair and blue eyes could put her in many places, but her accent hinting towards British said either the United Kingdom or South Africa. “To answer your curiosity, I am from Johannesburg, South Africa, and no, I cannot read your thoughts. I specialize in the ancient art of emphatic readings.” I had never heard of it, but regardless understood she was picking up on my emotional roller coaster. She nodded once in confirmation. I tried not to worry, holding back the shiver creeping up my spine. Another woman directly across from her was intensely focused on me and seemed to be reading me in some manner as well.

“Be careful with these women.”

Auggy cut in and took over. “Let’s get to it and stop wasting time. You know me. Sterling, you’re next. Introduce yourself,” he ordered, pointing to the general who’d walked with us. They went around the table

introducing themselves one by one with their names, birthplace and true age. The youngest was thirty-seven, and the oldest was six hundred eighty-two.

Abruptly the doors swung open and a male walked in, a swag in his step and careless grin plastered on his flawless face. His hair was a disheveled mess of dark brown with hints of auburn. While everyone else was in business attire, he donned dark blue jeans, black Converse shoes, and a red polo shirt that showcased the slight swell of muscles beneath with the collar popped up. Perhaps the cockiest part of his outfit was the aviator glasses still in place blocking his eyes.

I swallowed the emotions welling inside. There was something about this vamp; I felt it. He walked straight up to me and grabbed my left hand. Goose bumps broke out over my entire body; my heart pounded in my chest. He stopped mid-lift at the sight of my ring. I could only imagine how Kellan was reacting to this. The vamp barely shrugged, the only indication that he wasn't deterred, and proceeded to kiss the back of my hand. I felt his eyes piercing me through the glasses.

"Ello love." His smile was breathtaking. I even caught the hitch in my breath. I immediately blushed. No one had affected me like this since Kellan; not even Kai. I swallowed hard, saved from having to speak when Auggy cut in.

"You're late... Again!" Auggy barked.

"Why rush when you 'ave forever mate?" His gaze burned me. At his wink, a small, shy smile, partly of embarrassment, crept from my lips. His in return quickly turned devilish.

"Move your hand now!" I immediately yanked my hand away as if I'd been electrocuted. He didn't falter though. I

already knew I was in trouble. Deep trouble.

“Sit your ass down John and stop flirting with the guest. And in case you are truly blind, she’s taken!” Auggy yelled, exasperation in his tone. I turned my head to study the military vamp that headed the vamp army. By the fire in his eyes, I could tell John annoyed him for sure, but also, for the first time, I realized that Auggy really did like Kellan; particularly the idea of me and Kellan together. I smiled inwardly at the discovery.

John forced Chen, the female vamp from Taiwan, over so he could squeeze his chair in beside me. I scooted my chair away, wanting distance, needing the breathing room to avoid starting a fire.

Throughout the grill session, I avoided answering as many questions as possible. There was no shortage of revisions in an attempt to uncover information. As much as I was trying to break away from John, he came to my defense and blocked the pry of Bogdan, a five-hundred year old Russian, who gave me bad vibes; so I was grateful for him in that sense.

Two and a half hours later, Auggy rescued me from the interrogation.

“Alright, clearly Lexi has rehearsed her lines and isn’t going to budge. Let’s break.”

Relief washed over me, though it was quickly replaced with uncertainty. Despite our interaction, I didn’t make a single impression on anyone. No one warmed up to me, aside from John, throughout the meeting. It’s not that I was cocky, but I wasn’t used to that.

“You did good,” John stated.

I narrowed my eyes. "What happened to your Australian accent?"

He smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?" This time he sounded exactly like Matteo.

Auggy came up behind me. "This crazy is the only vamp with multiple personalities."

"Not really, but I've gotta keep you on your toes old man," John countered. At least he sounded American this time.

"Where are you from?"

He leaned in close, my body all too aware of his position at my pulse point. I felt his breath skimming over my skin, his heart beating steadily over my breast. "Wouldn't you like to know," he whispered, soft and sultry. My heart, barely beating as it was, stopped.

I hadn't realized I'd stopped breathing too until Imara, the woman who sat across from the empathy queen, cautioned me to breathe. *Oh God. I'm in big trouble. Huge trouble. God why do you continue to tempt me?*

"Go," Imara ordered. At once John left.

"Do not allow your body to confuse your heart," she stated, her Indian accent seemed to emphasize the meaning more. Her gold sari appeared to play off a bright aura I couldn't quite see, but felt. I could trust her. Somehow I knew she was trust-worthy. "You are confused. Why?" she asked, leading me away from the groups conversing around us.

"I'll catch up with you in a bit," Auggy said, heading towards Ibrahim, the oldest vamp in the room.

"I can-"

“Stop.” She put a hand up; my eyes were drawn to the intricate ink cascading across her palm. She closed her eyes for a minute. I nearly screamed when she opened them, covering my mouth to contain it. Her pupils were dilated and her irises were lost in a field of white.

“You have lost much, but will lose much more if you continue down this reckless path. You are impulsive like a vampire, yet led by your emotions like a human. Very little balance exists in you, unless he is around. You need him, more than you acknowledge. And when he is gone, you will know the truth of my words.”

“Define gone.”

“You cannot keep what you shun.”

“Do I?”

“You claim love, but your eyes wonder.”

I swallowed the lump of guilt. She was right. I folded my arms around myself, wishing I could hide in a box. I was ashamed, especially after the way I reacted to John. Kellan didn't deserve this. I looked down at my ring, the brilliant green making me think of his emerald eyes, clear and beautiful, staring into me, beyond my surface and into my soul. It wasn't fair for him to be tied to me when my eyes betrayed him. I knew I had some serious thinking to do.

“You love him, but your immaturity distracts you.” She closed her eyes again. Cocking her head to the side, she frowned. I began to fidget anxiously. I was in some way, waiting for the destruction of my future to be revealed. “Be still, girl.” She held out a hand, remaining focused on her powers. “You are complex, more than your surface.” She paused again, her brows furrowed, as if she was trying to solve a complicated equation beyond her mental capacity.

Suddenly, her features untwisted and understanding calmed her. "It is fear that burdens you. Your eye wanders for someone else, not to love now, but to love later, after he is gone. You fear being alone." She opened her eyes. "You have much to learn and far more to see, yet are blind to what is in front of your already. You analyze, yet you see nothing under the microscope."

"You're not talking about my eyes are you?"

"I am speaking of your eyes, but include your spiritual eyes. Your gift holds more power than you accept. Don't fight the blessings of the gods; they can easily withdraw their gift, your gift." I nodded once, unsure of how to respond. "We shall meet again Lexi. Until then," she bowed her head slightly before leaving me stunned and confused with a world of pressure on my shoulders. It was my nature to analyze every word she'd spoken, yet for some reason I didn't. I allowed them to sink in; allowed her voice to surround me knowing that I would uncover their truth later.

"*Mi amore,*" John swept in, taking my hand again. Traitor that my body was, it tingled under his touch. He lifted my palm towards his lips.

"Stop right there," I cut in, proud of the strength behind my voice. He froze, his eyes looking down at me through his shades, waiting for some sign of approval to continue. Cocky vamp that he was, he was convinced I would cave. I sighed, and he dove right in, capturing my palm to his lips in several spots. When his tongue swept out over the veins at my wrist, heat pooled, but reality smacked me in the face at the same time. I withdrew my hand from his grip.

"Oh, you hurt my soul," his French accent poured out, as he dramatically placed his hands over his heart.

“You’re trouble.”

“But you like trouble Lexi. You chase trouble,” he smiled deviously, knowingly. I swallowed the serum that rose in my throat at the reminder of my mission.

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Chapter Ten

"I... I think I should go, John," I stuttered, knowing I needed to get away from him.

"Don't call me John. I hate being called John. Call me Johnny. When people say Johnny, they think of Depp, and when you compare our looks, well," he snickered, completely full of himself, "Clearly I come out on top."

"Okay, *Johnny*. I need to go. It was nice meeting you." I turned and walked away, forcing myself not to look back.

"You can't run from me forever Lexi. I know you feel it."

I froze in place. He felt it too. I took a deep, shaky breath forcing my brain to thoughts of Kellan. I couldn't do this. First Kai, now John. Why couldn't I stay focused on Kellan? I knew I loved him. I knew I was going to marry him.

"You are misinterpreting it," Imara said as she passed by me. My face flew in her direction. She nodded her head once, confirming that she was speaking to me. God I hoped she was right.

I made a beeline for Auggy, ready to get out of here. Forget the tour, I just wanted to get back to Kellan as soon as possible. I needed the comfort and reassurance that his arms brought me.

"Ready for that tour?" Auggy asked.

"Actually, I'd rather skip it, and get back to Kellan." I didn't mention the others though he could easily discover them if he checked the hotel's logbook. We were smart and

all checked in under one fake name Kalel set up, but there were ways to find out those things.

He studied me for a bit before nodding his head in agreement. I was trying not to think about, or worse, get upset about, the fact that Auggy surrendered me and my top-secret mission to a group of vampeens who could easily be rats. Look at how many traitors and underground deals existed in the vamp army, let alone in the political headquarters for an entire race.

Much like the army quarters, we exited a different way than entered. It consisted of a walk-through metal detector, though I didn't take anything off before walking through to the metal push door.

"I won't ask what's wrong, but don't fuck up this mission because of personal drama," Auggy stated, right as my hands hit the release bar for the door. I didn't reply, only nodded my head. I could feel his eyes scorching my back; I could hear the wheels turning in his head.

I pushed through the door and took a deep, relaxing breath.

Matteo was already outside waiting when I stepped out. I'd completely forgotten that I'd have to deal with him again. With a sigh, I followed him through a few backstreets to the car. He wasn't exactly going slow, not bothering to hide his supernatural abilities. I knew he wasn't my biggest fan and was probably attempting to lose me, but, alas, he didn't.

The second we got to the car I had to leap in as he was already taking off. It had been a long couple days and Matteo was only making things worse. I was on the verge of tears or a temper-tantrum, or perhaps I'd lose my temper and shed tears. I was frustrated.

I slammed the door with a huff and turned to face the coward. He was avoiding eye contact, studying the road as if something would pop out of the sewers and attack. I now understood what the others had picked up on earlier. There was definitely something I didn't like about this vampire.

"Listen Matteo, I know you don't like me, and quite frankly, I'm not big on you right now either; but let's just chalk up our differences and at least be civil." He mumbled under his breath in Euskara, knowing I wouldn't understand. Arms folded defensively across my chest, I stared out the window. I further tensed when I realized we were going away from town. "Where are you taking me?" He finally looked over at me, a wicked grin on his face and gleam in his brown eyes. "Stop the car right now!"

"As the American's say, fuck you," Matteo snickered.

I knew it was bad when the doors locked of their own accord. Serum filled my mouth making it nearly impossible to breathe; my body recognized danger.

"Either stop this car or I'm going to kill you," I ordered, surprised by the strength in my voice. I leaned away from him against the door. It wasn't until then that I realized the guys had been silent for a while, and I could really use them right now, even if only in support.

"You are nothing without the others. You are the beauty but they are the brains. I have no worry, but you do," he stated, not deterred in the slightest by my threat.

Oh God. I didn't like the vamp, but I hated killing. I knew it would be self-defense since he was kidnapping me, but I still felt sick to my stomach. It could be avoided.

"I'm giving you one more chance Matteo," I said, grabbing my necklace. I swallowed a mouthful of serum,

anticipating his response, praying he surrendered his pride under the circumstances.

"You are the boss of no one, and you are not the boss of me." He rammed his foot into the gas pedal.

I took a steadying breath and pressed the horizontal sides of my necklace. With one swift move I decapitated Matteo, but would never forget the last second gasp he exerted, the one that was cut short by my actions. Blood sprayed me and the car, making the surfaces slippery. I yanked up on the emergency break stationed beside the gearshift in the center console. The breaks squealed as the vehicle swerved and finally derailed landing in a divvy.

With the car still, Matteo's head lying between his feet, the seat scorched where my laser landed beyond his neck, and the entire space closing in under the cover of blood, I broke down. Tears flooded my eyes, chasing each other down my cheeks, streaking Matteo's blood on my skin. Time passed, but I paid it no mind.

When I finally pulled myself from my wallowing, it was completely dark, not that it was early afternoon when we left. I looked around; somewhat frightened as I saw we were already a mile or so outside town. Ahead of me lied a few cobblestone houses, their chimneys pumping smoke into the cool night air. I couldn't approach them though. I was covered in blood and would probably set them off. I pulled out my cell phone, praying I could catch a signal, but of course I had a large 'X' where the signal bars should display and a large triangle to the left saying I was roaming.

I tried to push open the door, but only managed to dent the metal. I stared forward, dread washing through me, at the windshield highlighting the fact that the hood of the car was in the ditch. With an exaggerated sigh, I

unbuckled myself and wrapped my arms around the back of the seat behind me. I lifted my lower body, scrunching myself horizontally. With a swift outward kick, I broke the windshield and slid through the escape hatch I'd created. Glass shards slashed at my clothes leaving me slightly vulnerable to the elements. Wrapping my arms around myself, I glanced towards the city and started the trek.

It was quiet out here, the sounds of city life too far off in the distance. It forced me to think, to evaluate myself and the situation I'd gotten myself into. I knew I was weak when I broke down like that after the kill. How was I going to face Jack who was a million times worse than Matteo? I needed to stop being so emotional; I needed to embrace my vamp side, especially if I wanted to survive in the vamp world. It's not that I was going to let go of my humanity, but I needed to let go of my weakness. I had to face the fact that my human life was behind me.

I walked at the traditional human pace in case anyone was around. People tended to be nosy and do strange things at night in the country, which consisted of hiding in strange places with binoculars and shotguns or knockout darts. I could survive it, but I didn't want to chance it.

Half a mile in my right shoe broke. I took them off and kept walking. I had no idea where I was heading; I didn't even know the name of the hotel or its address.

Just as I reached the city limits, or so I thought the sign said, an SUV pulled up beside me. The back door flew open and out came Gabi and Will.

"I told you I could locate her," Will stated.

"And I didn't say you couldn't; I just said to hurry your little British ass up," she replied exasperated. "I swear Lex!

Ugh!" She grabbed my upper arm and pulled me into the backseat with her.

"Dear Lord you're a fright mess," Will exclaimed, scooting as far away from me as possible.

Rafi studied me with a raised brow in the rearview mirror. "Bad day?" he smirked.

"The worst," I replied, no humor present.

"My God Lex. What the heck happened back there?" Gabi asked, brushing miscellaneous debris off my hair and clothes.

"Where are the guys?"

She rolled her eyes. "At each others' throats. Someone at the oval table got smart and blocked their signal with you. We all divided up to find you when you weren't back after three hours. And boy were those a tense three hours. Kellan and Craig are in one car, the brothers in another, and the smart bunch in here actually found you."

She turned to face me head on. "Now don't think I didn't notice your change of subject. What the heck happened, Lex?"

"I think Matteo is a double agent. He turned ugly real fast. When I suggested we be civil, he said, I quote, "As the American's say, fuck you." Then he slammed the gas pedal and headed this way to God knows where to do God knows what. When I told him to stop the car or I'd kill him, he laughed in my face; said I was pretty, but had no brains. I gave him one last chance that he threw in my face again so I killed him. Since he was driving, the moment I offed his head the car swerved and ended up in a shallow ditch between the road and the surrounding farmland," I explained, trying to provide all the highlights.

“Oh, is that all?” Gabi smiled as if I told her I had a great day.

“Really Gab? That doesn’t at least warrant a frown?”

“Please allow me to interrupt. What do you believe Matteo’s second boss will do when he doesn’t show up?” Will asked, flipping through his memo pad full of notes. Anytime Kellan or I were around, he was writing things down in it, and I assumed many others the way the man wrote.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Allow me to rephrase. What do you think Matteo’s second boss will do to you when he finds Matteo’s dead body on the road to deliver you?”

“Well, gee, thanks, Will; just add more dirt to my pile.” I gave him a look of disapproval. He meant well, but I didn’t need more stress. Now I had to worry about Jack and Matteo’s other boss on top of black ninjas and everyone’s safety.

“You know what you need Lex? A night out on the town. Rafi, take us back to the hotel so Lexi can clean up and get Matteo’s stench off of her.”

“Ugh, I’m glad I can’t smell myself.” I scrunched my nose, feeling bad for the other vamps.

“How very lucky you are,” Will stated, rolling down his window.

“Are you crazy Brit boy? Roll that thing up! Anyone could see her through there,” Gabi huffed.

Will was too polite to tell her off, but I saw the muscles in his jaw flexing. “Anyone with vamp vision can see her whether the window is up or down.”

“Well don’t make it any easier for them.” Gabi rolled her eyes. “Men! I swear, they’re always thinking with the wrong head,” she scoffed facing Rafi. “Step on it, Raf, and stop being a busy-body.”

Rafi burst out laughing. “Yes, mother.”

“Stop it right there mister. You know I hate that, and I especially hated your mother; God rest her soul in hell.”

“Okay. Someone didn’t take her Midol this morning.” I patted Gabi’s shoulder, trying to reign in her inner bitch.

“Sorry. I guess I am a little on edge,” she sighed, calming quickly.

“Definitely,” Will agreed. She cut her eyes at him.

“Window!” she yelled. He sighed, but complied by finally putting it back up.

“Um, did anyone let the guys know you found me?”

“I figured I’d let them sweat it a little longer.”

“Gabi!” I pulled out my cell phone. We were within the city limits already so I had a signal again, as well as several voicemails. I decided to text them all rather than deal with a second interrogation over the phone.

With Gabi, Rafi and Will. Meet us at the hotel.

I’d barely hit the send button when my phone rang. It was Kai. I stared down at the screen debating whether or not to answer it. I knew what was coming if I did.

“If you’re not going to answer it, at least be courteous and silence the bloody thing,” Will said, irritation vivid in his tone.

I couldn't stop the chuckle that broke through my lips. "Curses sound so strange coming from you, Will. Do you feel dirty when you let one slip?" I silenced my phone to avoid another loud ring echoing through the confined space.

He pursed his lips, glaring at me as if I were an annoying pest he wanted to squash. "I resent that remark." He tilted his chin up, realigning the buttons on his crisp white oxford before straightening the stack of papers in his lap.

"Sorry Will. I do appreciate you, but you're an easy target too with how prim and proper you always are. It's unnerving to us normal vamps."

"I certainly wouldn't place you in the normal category Lexi." He offered me a small smile with the truce.

"I would hug you-"

"No!" he shouted, scooting further away. I was beginning to wonder how much more space he could squeeze out between himself and the door. As it was, his legs were nearly crossed and his right shoulder was forced forward.

"If you'd let me finish, I was going to say that I would hug you, but don't want to mess up your *pristine attire*." I said the last two words with a prissy English accent. He visibly relaxed at the knowledge.

"Oh, well, thank you."

"Oh Will, I can't wait to rough you up," Gabi smirked, a calculated gleam in her eye. I frowned shaking my head. I didn't even want to know what was going on in that mind of hers.

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Chapter Eleven

“The hotel’s around the corner,” Rafi announced.

“Finally!” Gabi exclaimed, sitting up straighter in her seat.

“Holy sugar plums!” Aw, that made me think of Mel. I was dying to talk to her, but I knew she would need a few days to calm down given how she was left.

“What?” Gabi jumped as Rafi slammed on the breaks and Will held onto his precious papers for dear life, tucking the pile against his chest.

“Sorry.” I felt my face scrunch with embarrassment. “The guys blew up my phone is all.”

“Lex, I swear we need a code or something. Never have an outburst like that under the current circumstances,” Gabi scolded. She was definitely in rare form tonight.

“I said sorry.”

“We’re here,” Rafi said, officially putting the SUV in park.

“We have eyes too you know.” She shook her head already opening the door. “Rafi, change into something fancier. Will, go re-iron your shirt, and Lex, you’re coming with me so I can help you scrub off that crap.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me from the vehicle right as Kellan and Craig pulled in. I was surprised to see them driving a BMW over here. I didn’t even want to know where or how they got it.

Kellan was at my side in an instant, but Gabi kept dragging me towards my room.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been worried sick!” he said, easily keeping pace with Gabi.

“No questions Kellan. Can’t you see the girls’ been through hell?”

“I’d back off man,” Rafi added.

“Gabi stop.” I gave my hand a swift tug, halting her. I turned back towards Kellan, wanting to comfort him. “I’m fine babe. I had to kill Matteo though because he tried to kidnap me.”

“I never liked that sapling wonker,” Craig smiled. “You’ve done us a mandosimo favor love.”

“You okay?” Kellan asked, studying me closely. He took in my disarray before meeting my eyes. I saw the concern reflected in his, the stiffness of his muscles, the flare of his nostrils as he breathed me in.

“Yeah,” I breathlessly replied, nodding to confirm my answer.

He shook his head. “Go shower. We’ll keep watch out here,” he offered.

“Thanks.”

Gabi resumed her mission. I couldn’t help but drink Kellan in though as she pulled me from him. His black jeans hugged him perfectly while his black polo solidified his advertisement of strength. I was dying to run my hands along the outline of his pecks. His black DCs and watch completed the ensemble. My mouth watered just looking at him. His hair was disheveled; I could tell he’d been yanking it and running his hands through it frequently. His hair

proved his earlier angst. My heart melted when he winked at me.

Oh God I was in such a mess of trouble. I was still deeply attracted to Kellan, obviously; Kai had allure too, and now John was fresh to the mix. I was hoping to conceal the last one, but wasn't sure how much the guys had seen and heard before the signal was cut. I sighed inwardly. I really hoped Imara was right when she said I was misinterpreting things. Well, except with Kellan.

"Usually I'm not a fan of bleach, but you may want to make it your friend." Gabi wrinkled her nose as we entered the room. Kellan had handed her the key outside.

"Point taken. I'll stick with my antibacterial and body wash though."

"Whatever. Just hurry. I'll pick out an outfit for you."

"Can you hand me my antibacterial and body wash? They're in the small front pouch of my luggage." She retrieved it, dousing her left hand with a pile of the clear gel. The room instantly scented of rubbing alcohol supported by a lingering hospital-like scent. She handed me the bottles before rubbing the liquid all over her hands, wrists and forearms.

"A vamp germaphobe," I smirked. "Who would have thought?" I chuckled lightly.

"It's not like I'm OCD about it, but I do like to be clean and be in clean."

"Okay. Well, I'm going to get clean." She shooed me towards the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later I felt almost new. The memory of today would haunt me for a while, just like all the other

deaths I'd witnessed, but at least I had no physical reminders.

I tried not to relate Matteo's violent end to my parents'. It was just as abrupt for them though too. Perhaps the most traumatic was my mom's though. I'll never forget the scene I walked into: my mother lifeless on the bathroom floor, a dart in her chest and my father's blood dripping all over her face and upper body. My dad hovered over her, offering her all the protection he humanly could, sacrificing his lifeline of blood in an effort to save her. The razor blade was shaking in his hand, lines crisscrossing up his underarm from his wrist to his elbow. His cries bellowed from him and echoed off the tile; his cry was soulful and haunting. All of him was in it, every ounce of despair released in either blood or tears.

I shook my head wiping the steam off the mirror. I looked at the girl reflecting back at me. My hair clung to my shoulders, back and chest. Despite a flawless complexion, I could still see the shadows beneath my eyes aging me.

"Lex!" Gabi banged on the door. "Did you drown in there?"

"I'll be out in a sec." I took a deep steadying breath and opened the door.

"The dogs, I mean guys, are nipping at me to check on you." I smiled at the annoyance in her tone. She was sure to say it loud enough for their sensitive ears to hear even a few rooms down. "Anyways, so I picked out this super cute chocolate sweater dress and cream colored tights with your pearl necklace and earrings and your navy blue suede pumps. She laid out the outfit on the bed, accessories and all and was rechecking her decision. "God I envy your figure. I wish I could wear this outfit."

“You could. I would just make the dress a little longer to hit just above your knees.”

“I love it, but this type of material adds bulk to my already bulky frame. It’s just all wrong. I love the idea of it though.” I heard the longing in her voice.

“If it makes you feel better, I know how you feel, or at least I did. I used to watch Mel dress in her size zero designer duds while I bummed around in oversized tees and hoodies with jeans.”

“No offense Lex, but I don’t give a crap about you understanding or not because right now I’m looking at a skinny you and a bloated me who will never receive the miracle you did.” She handed me the clothes and walked out the door.

I’d hit a nerve. I knew first-hand how sensitive an issue weight was. I remember Mel offering me compliments, suggestions, encouragement and acceptance, but it didn’t change how I felt. In fact, it sometimes made it worse. Jealousy was my constant friend through all of middle school, despite her best intentions. And I did receive a miracle many would argue I didn’t deserve, but I couldn’t change that. I was grateful that my fat curse was over, but I paid the price in other ways.

I got dressed and wrapped my hair in a bun atop my head. The second I opened the front door the guys were there staring at me. I began to fidget, their intense gazes making me feel like I was under a microscope. “Um, you guys ready to go?”

“Will you gentlemen please stop ogling the lady? I’m famished,” Will interjected. I grinned noticing that he did indeed re-iron his shirt.

“Great creakily conchs mateys. Lavish the love with air,” Craig said, slapping Kellan and Kalel on the back. Kalel glared at Craig who quickly took his hand back.

“Let’s go guys,” Gabi called from down the hall.

The guys disbanded allowing me to leave. Kellan grabbed my left hand and kissed my ring. Luckily it wasn’t hit with blood since nearly every other item on me was.

“Oh Kalel.” He turned back towards me. “I’m really, really sorry, but the earrings and pin were sort of splattered with blood. I didn’t know how to clean them and not mess up the techy part of them.”

“It’s okay Leka. I’m glad you’re okay.” I smiled, nodding my head.

“Lex.” Gabi came and took me from Kellan looping her arm through mine. She had changed into a high-waisted black skirt, dark teal button up shirt with a ruffle detail lining the front center and collar, black tights and gorgeous red pumps. She’d straightened her hair and it was shining beautifully as it framed her face. Feather earrings ranging in color from dark red to burnt orange and dark yellow dangled from her ears and her black glitter clutch completed the envious ensemble. “This’ll just take a sec K. Run along with the boys for now.”

“*Si hefe,*” he chuckled. He walked ahead of us, hands in his jean pockets pulling them tight over his rear. It made me want to squeeze it.

I unblocked my mind. “*Nice rear view handsome.*”

“*Thanks. Yours is pretty damn sexy too.*” He turned slightly and winked.

“Close your mind and focus Lex,” Gabi interrupted our flirtations.

“Sorry.” I felt myself flush at being caught. I quickly blocked my mind again.

“Listen Lex, I’m sorry about earlier. Mel showed me the pics; I know you understand my body issues. I guess in a way I’m jealous because you got thin and I’m stuck like this forever. I’m going to get strange looks, disgusted looks when I walk into stores for all of eternity.”

“I’ll admit your situation does suck, but you have to realize that you’re fierce in other ways Gabi. You have a collar and leash on every one of these men. When you walk into a room, you command attention for something much better than outward perfection: inward beauty, your personality, you! And I know how cliché that sounds, but you have a strong voice and a strong presence that I’ll never match.”

“Awe, I love you Lex. I hate you, but I love you,” she laughed, pulling me into a hug.

“Egh, you know you have nothing but love for me.” I waved my hand down, emphasizing that I wasn’t concerned.

“I’d like to eat something this century,” Kai grumbled, tapping his foot expectantly by a second SUV. Gabi and I looked at each other, rolled our eyes and burst into a fit of laughter.

“Girls ride shotgun!” she declared.

“Um, I’ll ride in the back Gab. I love you, but you’re a horrible driver. I think even the devil himself would sell his soul to get out of your car.”

“Well!” she scoffed, dropping my arm and hugging her hip with her hand.

“You know we love you, *mi amor*, but your driving does scar the shit out of everyone,” Rafi attempted to pacify her. He pulled her into his chest and captured her lips so she couldn’t further protest.

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Chapter Twelve

Ten minutes later we were seated on the outdoor patio of a steak and seafood restaurant right on the water.

“This is gorgeous,” I stated, taking in the serene view.

“Definitely,” Gabi agreed.

“I hate to damper dinner, but what are your plans in regards to Jack?” Will asked, dipping a chunk of bread into the special red sauce we brought with us.

“I was hoping to use your computer expertise Kalel and possibly tap into a few networks around here. Maybe we could pick up something.”

“Sure,” he replied, ripping off a chunk of bread as opposed to Will’s delicate slicing with a knife.

“Craig and Gabi, you’re great at socializing so maybe you both could visit the clubs. Listen in on the conversations; see if anyone has any info, especially vamps. Basically network with the locals. Are you okay with that?”

“You bet your dapply dops I am,” Craig said. He said beside Kellan, completely relaxed and looking the opposite of a very edgy Kellan.

“That works for me,” Gabi agreed.

“Thanks. Will, you worked in the vampire headquarters, so if you and Rafi could pay them a visit and listen out, maybe poke around a bit, that’d be great.”

“I will see what I can do,” Will replied noncommittally.

“Sure.” Rafi nodded, cuddling close with Gabi. His body was relaxed, but his jaw was flexing as if he was tense

about the situation.

“Kai and Kellan, you’re with me or whoever else needs you. I don’t want anyone going off alone. We have no allies here, and regardless of who we befriend, they’re not to be trusted. Your goal is to locate or find sources or information on how to locate Jack; it’s my mission to deal with him.” Kellan stiffened beside me, his hand gripping mine a bit tighter.

“You are not facing him alone,” he projected. I opened my mind.

“I’m not saying I will or won’t; I am saying that I’m more concerned with you and everyone else’s safety over my own. This is my fight, my responsibility.”

“You need to stop being so self-indulgent. It isn’t all about you Lexi. It’s about both of us. We’re an item now, as in one.”

“I don’t want to argue babe. I just know how I feel about the situation and especially about you, and I’ve learned that guilt can destroy love.” He nodded, closing himself off to me again. It was hard being separated mentally so much. That’s how we’d strengthened our relationship over the last couple weeks. We had open communication and a clear understanding of each other’s intentions and desires. Nothing was lost in translation or mixed up in delivery. At the same time, I was glad to have a little alone time with my thoughts, particularly the ones surrounding this mission. I’d rather lose my life than for Kellan, or anyone else, to lose theirs.

“Wow, I must admit I’m rather impressed. You have thought this through,” Will smiled, offering me his respect.

“Thanks. Everyone is to carry weapons twenty-four seven. Don’t unpack; be ready to go at a moment’s notice

day or night.”

“What do you plan to do until Jack is located Lex?” Gabi asked. For some reason Imara and John popped into my head.

“A special assignment. I want to track down a family torn apart by Jack’s league of black ninjas.”

A tiny gasp escaped Gabi. I locked in on her. We were the only ones sitting outside in the cold so I planned to take advantage of it.

“How do you know Jack Gabi? And don’t change the subject, avoid it or feed me bull crap,” I pressed.

She visibly tensed as her breathing became shallow; I heard her pulse speed up. The table was silent, all eyes on her, waiting; anticipating. She swallowed hard, glancing around the table. I never knew Gabi to be afraid of anyone or anything. She always seemed so in control.

“I, uh... Well, we...” She fidgeted, separating herself from Rafi and fussing with random things as she built courage. “We, um, had a one-night stand. I didn’t know it was him until the next morning, and the second his cover was blown he disappeared. I never heard from him again.”

Eyes were a bit wider around the table, yet no one spoke.

“Where did you meet him?” I leaned forward, the wheels turning. Where she met him would give us at least some indication to his lifestyle choices.

“At a masquerade ball nearly eighty years ago, but it was a friend of mine in Spain who was human; Jack and I were the only vamps.”

“Okay, so either he was scouting, hunting, socializing or horny. Well, that narrows it down,” I sighed.

“Actually it does. Clearly he’s a vampire that will take a risk and show himself in public, and most likely it will be where vamps aren’t since his personal mission, regardless of its basis, never involves them,” Will explained, penning notes even as he spoke.

“Okay. So that’s the plan then. We seek out human only locals.”

“Great gippidy googals!” Craig nearly leapt out of his seat with joy. Half the table responded with a raised brow. “I’m a vamp, but I don’t like those damper drankulls.” Now everyone had a brow up, including Kellan. “Except you mateys,” he grinned wide.

“Uh huh.” Gabi rolled her eyes.

“Actually, now that I think of it, why didn’t we send Craig with Lexi to the embassy?” Will prompted.

“They wouldn’t have trusted him and probably would have separated them,” Kalel stated. “It was better the way we did it, despite the end results after she left.”

“I agree,” Craig said. “Plus, I couldn’t bite my tongue hard enough. Kellan knows that.” Kellan shook his head in agreement.

“Where is our food?” Will harrumphed.

“Well, we know who gets cranky when he doesn’t eat,” I chuckled.

“The waiter is coming now,” Kai announced. I looked at him across the table. He’d been fairly quiet this evening since we arrived; well, quiet for Kai. In studying him, I saw something in his eyes; some sort of emotion he was trying

to suppress, but was failing to do so. Kai was always unpredictable, but he seemed almost emotionally unpredictable, which was strange for a vamp. He lifted his head pointedly gazing directly into my eyes. I was locked into his hold. I felt like he was stripping away my outer layers as he exposed his vulnerable side to me.

“Eight rare pasta filets,” the server stated as he walked out; a waitress followed after him to help deliver.

Kai glanced away, breaking the spell. I blinked a few times and looked at Kellan. He’d been watching us. I felt it; I knew it by the way he was staring at me. It was as if he was trying to tell me it’s okay, but he held an edge of curiosity behind it too. I knew, had I asked, that he would have said that he trusted me, but not Kai.

The servers delivered each of us a small salad bowl and a large bowl of spaghetti marinara with rare steak filets thinly sliced and fanned across the top with a sprinkle of parsley and oregano. The aroma that filled the air was enough to make my stomach growl, a rarity for a vampire. My serum levels remained low though since I’d downed eight pints before we left for the trip.

“Anything else is needed?” the waiter asked, his English a bit broken. He was polite though. When he discovered I didn’t understand Euskara, he spoke as much English as he could. I couldn’t help but be touched by his generosity. Most wouldn’t think much of it, but I appreciated his effort and would be certain to leave him a nice tip to show it.

“No,” Rafi said. The server gave a quick nod of his head and returned to the warmth of the indoors.

We passed around blood gravy we brought along with us. We all liberally covered our dishes with the delicious

sauce, mixing it into the pasta sauce. I giggled as Will tucked his linen napkin into his shirt collar to protect himself.

“I refuse to walk around looking like a frumpy mess,” he said, defending his actions.

“I know. I’m not making fun of you; just amused because only you would do something like that. And I can’t help but think if you had a wife and kids you would be doing the same to them.”

“Perhaps.” His response was low. His features stiffened and his eyes stared down into his bowl of food. I’d hit a nerve, which meant he did have a wife and kids at one point.

“When you’re ready to talk about them, I’ll be ready to listen,” I offered him a small smile, gripping his hand and giving him a gentle squeeze. He returned my gesture, but was already pushing down what I’d inadvertently brought to the surface for a bit.

“O.M.G. This is the best steak and pasta I’ve ever had,” Gabi exclaimed, drawing my attention down the table. Everyone was chowing down.

“No prayer?”

“I’m not going to feel guilty for that this time around,” Gabi said, continuing to devour her food.

“Said a quick silent one,” Rafi smiled.

“Me too,” Kalel added.

“Oh.” Brows furrowed I said a quick silent thanks for all I’d been blessed with thus far. Regardless of the god you serve, or beliefs you have, being grateful for what you receive is a must.

The rest of the meal was filled with stories, memories and lots of laughter. It felt like an Italian family dinner; the one they have every Sunday at Mama's house. These people, even Will, were my family. They were the closest thing I had next to Aunt Claire and Mel. Loss was inevitable, but occasionally, so were gains, and I'd certainly gained a wonderful group of people to have in my eternity.

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Chapter Thirteen

“Since we’re already dressed up, we should go to a local club. Hit the town and see what info we can dig up on Mr. Jack,” Gabi suggested, as we climbed back into the SUV.

“We’ll have to spread out and mingle with the natives, but I’m game,” I said.

“I guess,” Kai frowned. My brows furrowed as I looked at him. He was sitting in the back, arms folded across his chest looking every bit the dangerous vampire he was.

I looked to Kellan, opening my mind. *“Mind if I sit next to him? I can tell something is and has been bothering him.”*

He took a deep breath and curtly nodded once. He leaned in and planted a solid kiss on my lips, a clear display of his ownership. Regardless I leaned into him and savored his touch. His hand was gripped firmly on the back of my neck, his thumb splayed on my cheek, pulling me in at the precise angle he wanted to take me. His tongue carried a merriment of flavor as it dipped and played with my own. I waited, allowing him to set the pace and determine when enough was enough. I knew he needed this since Kai was the last person he wanted me beside, regardless of what my mind showed him in regards to my feelings and choices.

By the time he broke away we were both breathing hard. I swallowed hard at the intense gaze of his emerald eyes on my own honey brown.

“Talk about suckling succotash, let the lady breath mate,” Craig laughed heartily. I instantly blushed at his announcing our PDA. Not that I didn’t know they knew

what was going on; we all had sensitive ears and perfect vision after all, but saying it out loud caused me to flush. Another quick kiss on the forehead and Kellan released me to sit beside Kai in the back row.

The second I rounded the corner to the last row, Kai narrowed his eyes at me. I ignored him and sat between him and Kalel who was clearly amused by the entire thing.

“Give a vamp some bloody room Craig. You don’t have to sit in my lap,” Will fussed. Craig scooted closer to Kellan, though there wasn’t much room to spare given they were sitting where two people should be.

“Calm your nuggling nippers mate,” Craig replied. I shook my head at the pair acting like little kids arguing over something frivolous.

I leaned in close to Kai, my chest firmly pressed to his upper arm muscles. “What’s wrong?” I whispered, trying to at least offer the idea of privacy. He gave me a quick sideways glance only to turn and look out the window instead of reply. “Kai.” He ignored me. I said back on the seat, crossed my arms over my chest exactly as he had. “Fine, if you want to be an ass, then be an ass. I’m just trying to be a good friend. The least you could do is say you don’t want to talk about it instead of ignoring me completely.”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” he bit out.

“Fine,” I huffed, turning my head the opposite direction. Kalel chuckled, a broad grin on his face and mischief sparkling in his brown eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” He tried to cover his smile.

I sighed. “What’s wrong with him Kalel?”

“Trust me when I say it’s not the time or place to discuss it.” I nodded, allowing my hands to fall into my lap.

It seemed Rafi had become the official chauffer while we were in Spain. He quickly pulled into a parking spot along the street about a block from the club.

“Go ahead; we’ll catch up,” Kai said, grabbing my hand and holding me in the seat.

“Have fun you two,” Kalel smirked. He winked as he slid past me.

“You going to be okay?” Kellan asked. I shook my head. He didn’t look happy, but he wasn’t upset by it. *“See you inside.”*

“Okay. Love you.” His head shot towards me. It’d been a little while since I’d said the words. He grinned goofily.

“Love you too.”

“Hurry up mate. The ladies won’t wait forever.”

“Hey! You’re taken remember!” I shouted, reaching forward to smack his arm.

“Ouch! Creepin’ parakeets love.” He made a scene of holding his hand over his arm where I’d attacked.

“Oh hush. You’re fine. You won’t be though if you dare cheat on my best friend while we’re here though.”

“Hurry up Ellen before she starts bitin’,” Craig pushed Kellan out the SUV.

Will turned back and stared at the pair of us, a strange look upon his face. It’s as if he knew what was coming; knew something we didn’t, but couldn’t share it. Goose bumps broke out over me at his lingering appraisal. Serum began to climb in my throat; I began to feel uneasy. Just as

I was about to explode, demanding information, he closed the door and walked away.

“What’s been bothering you?” I immediately asked, cutting straight to the point.

“I don’t want to worry the others, but something doesn’t feel right about this mission. I have a bad feeling Lex.” He pretended to study his hands, though his eyes kept swaying towards me every other second.

“That’s not it Kai. I’m calling your bullshit. You don’t give a crap about worrying the others. You would have been the first to blurt it out if something was off. Now what’s really going on?”

“Do you plan to...” His face twisted, showing a cross between disgust and anger. “Do you plan to consummate with him anytime soon?”

My eyes narrowed at him. “Really Kai? That’s what’s got your panties in a bunch?” I scoffed. I couldn’t believe he was really asking me that question.

“I know it’s none of my damn business but do you know how fucking hard it is seeing you with him all the God damn time? You’re the first and only woman I’ve ever loved about,” - he quickly amended - “like this. I feel like a crazy person. I can’t look the other way Lex. Hell, I’d even share you with him if he’d be open to it. That’s how much I fucking care.” He yanked his hair at the roots, disrupting his ponytail.

I knew I was staring at him, mouth open in shock. I couldn’t help it. Share me? Where the heck did that come from? Who shared a woman? Better yet, what territorial vamps actually shared a woman? I thought we’d gotten past this; I thought we had an understanding. Clearly I was wrong. Clearly he wasn’t ready to understand my side of it.

I wasn't asking for support of my relationship with Kellan, only acceptance and respect. This wasn't him respecting it though; this was him playing with my head, messing with my heart.

"We should get inside," I whispered though I didn't move a muscle. I continued to look at him in utter amazement and despair.

"Yeah. I guess we should." He opened the door and leapt out. He stood beside the door waiting for me, but he wouldn't look at me. He looked everywhere but at me. I brushed past him, heard him shut the door, and headed for the club.

The clubs here didn't look like the ones in America. It reminded me more of a café from the outside, despite the ropes, line of people and security at the door. We bypassed the line thanks to Kai glamouring a guard at the door.

The inside was blue with shades of green and white. The tiles were traditional blue and white with a yellow design painted on a few. A wooden bar took up most of the right side of the club. The entire first floor was a dance floor despite a large step down a quarter of the way into the space. Beyond the bar was a set of stairs leading to the roof I'd noticed from outside.

I weaved through the sea of people swaying to a catchy hip-hop song, surprisingly playing in English. The noise, the voices and conversations echoed throughout the space, and quickly knocked me with a headache. This was definitely one of the times I wish I could turn my vamp hearing on and off; heck, I'd even accept a mute button.

Kai headed straight for the bar, not bothering to look back at me, so I made my way to the back steps and up to the rooftop terrace.

The roof was just as busy as below. Unlike the tiles inside though, the roof was covered with wood, perhaps to avoid anyone slipping if it rained. Music could be heard from downstairs, but no one seemed to be listening to it. Tables and lounge chairs covered the space that overlooked the water and the city's landscape. It was nothing like NY or even Charleston; the tall buildings were all apartments and condos, dwellings, not businesses.

I quickly located Kellan in a corner chatting with a local female. My heart skipped a beat when she planted her hand on his bicep and gave it a squeeze of admiration. Serum flooded my mouth; my hands formed fists without my knowledge. My body was reacting, yet I was trying to suppress the emotions trying to surface.

I couldn't get jealous. I wasn't supposed to get jealous. We were on assignment, and tonight's assignment was to get as much information from the locals as possible.

I cocked my head slightly studying the girl. She wasn't ugly. Long, straight black hair flowed down her back; it was pretty, but seemed to dwarf her petite frame. She donned skinny jeans, a tight red shirt that bared her mid-drift and black stilettos. Her olive skin radiated, lighting up as she laughed at something Kellan said. I looked at him, checking if his expression was the same. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. His cute dimple didn't make an appearance on his left cheek, which it typically did if he was genuinely smiling.

Abruptly he turned and looked directly at me. I froze up. He'd caught me red handed spying on him. Not that I was listening to his conversation. I couldn't with all the other humans chatting so animatedly around me. He said something to the girl. She frowned as he left her standing there and headed directly towards me.

“Do I detect a bit of jealousy in that glare?” he smirked, pulling me into his arms. He leaned in, breathing against my neck. “It’s sexy as hell.” Goose bumps scattered across my forearms. I smiled against him. He gently kissed my neck, a sensual touch of his lips that sent heat straight into my lower stomach. I swallowed hard. Dear God he drew out a desire I didn’t know I had within me.

“Uh, we’re...” I cleared my throat. “Um, we’re supposed to be on assignment. We... we need information on Jack.” He chuckled, pulling my body flat against his; he placed a second sweet kiss on my neck. I nearly cried out when he licked my skin erotically. I couldn’t control the whimper though. Satisfied with my response, he stepped away.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “That wasn’t nice.” I squeezed my thighs together, trying to rid myself of the sudden overwhelming need I had to pounce on him. *“You’re just doing this because we’re in public. Try that behind closed doors and you’ll have to finish what you start,”* I challenged.

“I guarantee I’d have no problem with that.” His eyes pierced me, his own desire prevalent in the darkening of his irises. A dark teal seemed to bleed slightly from his pupils.

Our moment was broken when a guy approached us. Kellan immediately closed his mind to protect us. I didn’t understand what the stranger said, but heard him say Jack, which put me on alert immediately. Kellan said something to him before grabbing my hand and pulling me with him.

“I’m opening my mind. I’ll translate for you. I don’t know how I didn’t smell this guy coming, but he’s a vamp so be careful.”

"Where are we going?"

"To an alley down the street. He's got information. We need to be careful though. He heard what you said and picked up on it."

"Crap. I majorly messed up there, but if we get information, then it's worth it."

We followed the vamp through the club and out the door. I noticed the others mingling with the humans on our way out; even Kai was saddled up to a buxom blonde at the bar. A couple blocks down, we took a left into a dark abandoned alley between two apartment buildings.

A quick glance around gave me an uneasy feeling. We were discussing our enemy with a stranger beyond a crowded street in a dark, abandoned alley. Despite being a vamp, I clung to Kellan's arm. I glanced warily at the vamp before us. Unruly dark brown hair hung down into his eyes further shadowing his face. A long black trench coat only added to the cliché of the situation. I watched him and Kellan exchange words, reading Kellan's mind to understand the conversation.

"Last I heard he was in London. That was about two months ago," the vamp offered.

"Who's your source?" Kellan folded his arms over his chest, bulging his biceps, reminding the stranger of his strength. It must have been a human habit because the skinniest or fattest vamp could out-do you sometimes.

"I'm not a rat. You're going to have to take my word or nothing."

Kellan narrowed his eyes. The stranger crossed his arms nonchalantly as he leaned against a building, one leg bent and his foot flat on the wall.

"I don't think I trust him," Kellan said.

"We haven't come across anyone else with info so far and there's no guarantee we will."

"I'd rather have no info than bad info."

"But we don't know for sure that it's bad."

"We don't know if it's good either."

"Ask him what part of London." He translated the question.

"Do I look like a free GPS? You want more, it'll cost you."

Kellan tensed. "Price?"

"Five thousand US dollars."

"Five hundred and not a penny more. Even that's too much for possible bullshit," Kellan countered. The set of his jaw told me he was walking if the guy tried to negotiate further. Apparently he recognized it too because he pulled out a piece of paper. Kellan pulled out a wad of bills and handed the equivalent of two hundred and fifty dollars. The vamp began to protest when Kellan held up a silencing hand. He opened the paper and read it before returning his attention to the vamp. "You knew what we were looking for before the club, now tell me how before I snap your neck," Kellan bit out.

The vamp didn't flinch. "You're not the only ones looking for him." He proceeded to pull a stack of papers out of his pocket, flashing the words on each. They were all the same. Kellan threw the other two-fifty at him, grabbed my hand and whisked us back out onto the main street and down towards the crowd again.

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Chapter Fourteen

Looking at the angry, determined set of his jaw as he dragged me alongside him was one of the sexiest faces he'd made. His muscles coiled and were ready to rip someone to shreds should they offer themselves up. Power radiated off of him, a dominance required to command any presence or control amongst vamps. He was a force not to be reckoned with in this moment.

Kalel and Will met us outside the club.

"Where were you?" Kalel immediately asked.

"Checking out a source," Kellan replied. He didn't loosen up at all, holding tightly to my hand still.

"What information did the source provide you with?" Will pressed with his notebook and pen ready in hand, an eager expression upon his face.

"This." Kellan handed the paper to Kalel. He quickly read it and passed it to Will who transferred the information to his pad. I was curious, but didn't bother questioning why he was so insistent on documenting everything.

"What's your take on it?" Kalel asked, chin slightly raised towards Kellan. His hands comfortably slid into his pant pockets; his gaze was calculating the risks of staying versus going.

"I say we hold off for another day or two; see if we can confirm it at the least." Kellan copied Kalel's stance to the extent of his left hand in his pocket and his chin slightly angled upwards.

“We could run the risk of missing him and not confirming or uncovering anything new,” Kalel countered.

“We could run the risk of chasing a bad lead and missing a good one,” Kellan pressed, puffing his chest slightly. He was already worked up from the soliciting vamp, and now it was as if he was trying to start something with Kalel, who was only trying to help.

“Calm down. He’s just trying to help us weigh the pros and cons.”

“I know. I’m just pissed because I don’t know what the hell to do right now.”

“Listen guys, we can nit-pick over the information, back and forth on whether we stay or go all we want. Regardless we’re running a risk of some kind. In this case, I’m actually all for tossing a coin. It may not be the most practical idea, but it will stop us from over analyzing and wasting precious time.”

The guys abruptly sniffed the air. I couldn’t smell anything out of the ordinary, which meant either blood or a vamp was nearby.

“It’s my dad,” Kellan stated. “He’d only show himself if something was up.” Butterflies broke loose in my stomach as my serum level rose. I looked over Kalel’s shoulder just as Al broke through the crowd, his brows furrowed, but face unreadable.

“Let’s go,” he said, breezing past us. Kellan immediately tensed, rolling his shoulders to no avail.

“I’ll call Gabi and Rafi, you call Kai and Craig,” Kalel ordered, already catching up with Al.

“I’ve got Craig,” Kellan stated, pulling me alongside him.

I pulled out my cell, scanning the crowd with paranoia, praying Kai would answer.

“Yeah?” He bit out. I guess he was still pissed about earlier.

“Trouble. We’re leaving.”

“Be there in a sec.” I hung up, clinging to Kellan as we headed back down towards the SUV. Up ahead I saw Kalel and Al leaning over the SUV, staring down at the slashed tires.

“Shit!” Kellan cursed, kicking up a chunk of the cobblestone street beneath him.

“Kellan!” He let go of my hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. Forgetting all human facades, he raced to the vehicle.

“Figgling monkey fingers!” Craig exclaimed, coming up behind Kellan, both vamps taking in the tires at the same time.

“What’s going on Al?” I asked, dread pulling me down.

“Vamps. Three. They moved so fast I barely saw them. Even worse, a couple ninjas left a note for you.” He paused, glancing at Kellan momentarily, debating whether or not to divulge where.

“Where was it left?” Kai demanded. His arms were crossed defensively in front of his chest. He didn’t look at me. I tried not to get hung up on it, tried not to let my feelings get hurt, but I was somewhat vulnerable right now. So much was going on and the last thing I needed was someone shutting me out over something childish.

Al took a deep breath, his gaze honing in on me and me alone. There was a gentle concern in their gaze, but everything else about him sung anger. "It was taped to her hotel room door."

"God dammit!" Kellan burst out.

"Calm your nibbles mate. We got your back. No ninjas are gonna touch our girl, right mates?" Craig placed a heavy hand on Kellan's shoulder and squeezed. I offered him an appreciative smile.

"What'd we miss?" Gabi asked as her and Rafi caught up with the group. Her skirt was a bit lopsided at the hem and her hair was no longer perfectly sleeked and styled, but rather a borderline bird's nest.

"Apparently we missed more than you did," I chuckled nervously. She didn't even bat an eye. She tossed her hand dismissively.

"Oh posh. Now tell me what the heck's going on."

"Jack's caught up with Lexi. He seems to be playing a game of cat and mouse based on this note though," Al explained. I was surprised he hadn't ripped the paper in half given the way his fingers were compressing the thin sheet.

"What does it say?" Gabi pressed.

I closed the gap between Al and me in a split second and snatched the paper from him, quickly stuffing it into the side of my bra. "Don't worry about it. I'll... It's my problem. If the ninjas have caught up with us, then it's time for you all to go."

"Like hell," Gabi blurted, hands on her hips.

I looked around at my wonderful friends, landing lastly on Kellan. His fists were clenched at his side; murder was his focus it seemed. They'd already been through enough. I appreciated all they'd sacrificed to come here with me, but I didn't know what was ahead, especially now that Jack had the upper hand. I couldn't lead them into a trap with me. I had to ditch them.

"Don't even think about it." Kai got up in my face, his voice a low growl. A chill ran down my spine. "You even think of leaving us behind or sending us away Leka and I'll hunt you down and torture you myself." I swallowed the lump in my throat. His eyes pierced my own; he was baring his soul to me and demanding the same in return. He shot my nerves to hell and all the passion within me to my surface. What was up with me and the alpha male attraction tonight?

I struggled to find my voice to respond. I felt like a Chihuahua staring down a Rottweiler; I was bound to lose, and did.

"So it's settled. We'll play his little game, *for now*." Kai looked pointedly at me. "In the meantime, let's head back to the hotel. Pack your stuff and let's head out. Stick to the back roads cause we're going to have to abandon this thing." He glanced at the car before checking his plans silently with everyone else.

"I'll catch up; let me just get my books," Will said.

"I'll stay behind with you. I don't want to chance any kidnappings."

"No offense, but you're not the strongest vamps in the bunch. We'll wait," Gabi smirked; her attempt at lightening the mood had no impact.

The guys walked across the street, chatting, whispering plotting together. I tried to ignore them. Gabi followed me towards Will.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I quietly groaned.

“It could be worse,” she shrugged.

“I don’t even want to think about it.” I nearly bumped into Will, standing on the sidewalk staring at the back door. “You okay?”

“My gut is telling me something is wrong,” he frowned, anxiously playing with a button on his shirt. His blonde hair hung towards his eyes as he studied his hands.

I didn’t know much about Will, but I knew that he knew a lot more than he shared. For him to be open about it, it must be serious.

“Gabi, go stand with the guys. Will, step aside.” Gabi narrowed her eyes at me, before obliging. Will didn’t bother questioning me, quickly moving several feet away from the SUV.

I leaned into the glass, peering through the window into the space. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary inside. A few of Will’s books sat stacked in a neat pile on the center row of seats. I grabbed the door handle. A quick peek at Will showed him focusing on my actions, a look of distress on his face. He was making my anxiety skyrocket. I’d never seen him so uncertain and afraid. He had his nervous Nelly moments, but nothing to this degree.

I was ready to get this over with. The serum was rising in my throat, my pulse speeding up to a normal human rate. I returned my attention to the window. I blew out a breath and pulled the handle. The second I did, that’s when

I saw the red light blink and heard three subsequent beeps.
Shit!

I heard the commotion of shouts across the street, heard Craig and Al fighting to pull Kellan away from the scene. I was glad they were smart enough to run away. I would feel a million times worse if they were hurt.

Thinking as quickly as I could, I released the handle, turned face, getting a few steps away before the final ding raced through the wiring. I leapt, diving as far away as my feet would propel me right as the bomb exploded. I landed in a harsh splat as my skin scraped along the pavement. The single explosion set off a row of ignited fires to the surrounding vehicles. I felt the heat surround me as glass shattered all around me. I felt the pricks along my skin; heard metal and plastic of the vehicle's body fly into the air, ricocheting off the brick buildings and soaring into the street.

This mission just tripled on the danger scale.

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Chapter Fifteen

I felt the heat surrounding me, heard the explosions that followed from nearby cars, felt the rumble of the earth below me. Glass splintered my skin as it darted about. Fumes filled the air as screams began to carry from down near the club.

I rolled over, glass and metal puncturing my skin, digging deeper as my weight shifted. Through the corner of my eye, I saw the smoke wafting into the night sky. I stared upwards into the night, until he came into view.

“I knew you were trouble the moment I met you,” John chuckled, British accent in tow, leaping out of a third floor window of the apartment building beside me. He hovered over me, arms crossed, a smile playing on his lips as he stared down at me.

I gazed up at him, unable to speak. I couldn't think. I could only hear; even the stinging pain shooting through my body wasn't registering; it was a dull void in the background. Abruptly he frowned, his brows furrowing as he studied me.

I felt the rumbling along the street in the distance. I couldn't hear them, but I knew they were on their way. Any minute the guys would get here. But I couldn't process it.

John squatted down beside me, concern edged in his regard. “Are you okay?” he asked in what was probably his regular tone, gently sweeping stray hairs away from my face.

“Get away from her!” Kellan barked, subsequently shoving John away.

“You okay, Leka?” Kai checked, helping me into a sitting position. I shook my head, trying to clear the fog of what just happened. I knew what had happened, but I almost didn’t want to believe it.

I looked at the apartment building, surprised to find only a few broken windows on the first floor and no flames engulfing it like the line of cars along the street.

“We need to get out of here *now*,” Al warned. We all heard the sirens off in the distance and saw the citizens slowly starting to flood the street from their homes nearby.

“I got her,” Kellan said, stepping in and lifting me in one swift move. I winced, feeling as though my skin had been scraped along a bed of nails.

“This must be *him*,” John stated in broken Asian American. I caught him rolling his eyes at Kellan behind his back.

“I’m fine,” I croaked, surprised by how hoarse my throat was. I frowned up at Kellan. Vamps were never croaky.

“Let’s go,” Kalel ordered a bit louder, finality ringing in his tone.

Everything was a blur of motion until we got back to the hotel. Everyone was in a scramble to pack up and get out.

“Why can’t I think straight?” I muttered, unaware that it was aloud.

Kalel used a pair of tweezers to remove a few pieces of glass from me. He dropped them into a bowl and squeezed a few drops of a blue liquid before pouring half a bottle of

water in with it. Kai stood beside him, his gaze traveling back and forth between the bowl and me.

“Just what I thought. They laced the windows of the SUV with curarine,” Kalel announced.

“And that means what in English?” Kellan lashed out, clearly on edge. He paced in front of the bed where he’d sat me against the pillows.

“It’s a natural anesthetic. It reacts differently in vamps versus humans. With us, it slows down the way we process information. It makes us vulnerable because while your body can still move quickly, your brain won’t tell it to react in enough time to defend yourself. Basically they wanted us rendered helpless in a fight,” he explained.

“That dirty bastard!” Gabi huffed, coming to sit next to me on the bed.

“How long will the effects last?” Al asked.

“Barring we remove and dispose of all the contaminated glass in her, she should be fine in about half an hour.”

Everyone kept looking at me. Their expressions were a melting pot of emotions and concerns, but mostly I saw anger. I wanted to say so much, but it was too much work. I was frustrated and upset. I was going after a major villain and clearly wasn’t prepared. I knew I’d gotten myself in too deep at this point. I couldn’t back down, couldn’t run away, but for the first time, I doubted my ability to face him. He’d shaken my determination and caused my wobbling confidence to crumble.

“I take it Jacky boy got to her, ay?” John stated more than questioned, this time with a Canadian accent thrown

in. I knew he was trying to break the tension, but it wasn't working.

They all turned to him, as if they'd forgotten he was there.

"That's none of your damn business. You may work for the head vampeens but you don't work with us," Rafi growled. His delivery caught me off guard. I knew he was a tough vamp, but he usually kept quiet, leaving the others to do the talking.

"I don't want to work for you. I've got a cushy gig where I'm at. I do want to help Lexi though, and I have access to information she needs to catch this Jack character."

They all exchanged glances with each other, deciding whether or not to trust John.

"Hello! Me. Glass." I yelled.

"Damn dalley doopers. Who gives a waddle about this schnucker? Let's focus on helping Lex," Craig interjected.

Kellan and Craig helped me stand while Gabi, Kai and Kalel all quickly worked around each other removing bits of glass and metal from my skin and tattered clothes. Given their vamp speed, they were done in just over a minute. I instantly breathed a sigh of relief. I already was beginning to feel normal again.

"Ugh that sucked," I groaned, stretching my limbs.

"Yeah well, it sucked for us too," Gabi sighed, biting her lower lip.

"What's wrong?"

“He almost got you Lex. We’ve been taking this way to lightly. We’ve known the risks, but we haven’t really been facing them. Now we have to.” She was right, as much as I hated to admit it. She looked at the group of testosterone driven vamps all in varying moods around the room. “What’s our next move guys?”

I pulled the paper from where it was still tucked into my bra. I hadn’t even read it yet.

London Bridge is falling down.
-Jack

“London. We’re going to London next,” I firmly stated, passing the paper to Kalel and the others. “I’m going to take a quick shower and change. Then we can leave.”

I ruffled through my dwindling pile of clothes. How many more outfits would I lose on this mission? Not that I was lacking thanks to Aunt Claire, but still. I sighed, grabbing my familiar comfort staples from my suitcase: VS Capri sweats, a slim fit tee, hoodie, panties, a bra, socks and sneakers. I needed to call Aunt Claire. I’d left her a voicemail before I left and a note, but after what happened just now, I couldn’t help but remember my parents and inevitably worry about her.

Five minutes later I was fresh and clean, hair thrown into a messy bun, old clothes in a bag to be disposed of somewhere besides the trash, and bag packed and ready to go.

“I called for a taxi van,” Al said, walking out the lobby doors where we’d just checked out.

Kellan hugged me to him as we waited for them to arrive. I was feeling much better, clearer, but still uneasy.

“Give me your cell phone.” John held out his hand. I passed it over to him, throwing caution to the wind where he was concerned. I didn’t know if I could trust him, but I knew I didn’t not trust him. He could have easily finished me off back there, but chose not to. That had to count for something. “I just programmed my number into your phone and called my phone so I’d have yours. I’m going to pull some files back at the embassy. They have a lot more info than they let on about Jack. As soon as I secure it, I’ll contact you.”

“Thanks John.”

“Johnny,” he scowled sarcastically.

“Sorry,” I smiled. “Thanks Johnny.”

“No prob. You take care of yourself. You’ve got something Lex. I don’t know what it is, but it’s big. I can feel it,” his Australian voice melted around the English words.

“I didn’t picture you as the sensitive type.”

“I’ve got my walls up, but I’ve learned to trust my gut.” He paused. It looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t continue.

“Thanks for the help. I appreciate it.” I extended my hand. He looked down at it before placing his own within it. His grip was firm, self-assured, and yet careful at the same time. The same tingles I’d received the first time I touched him reappeared, quickly sending my body into a flutter.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said. In a blink he was gone, fast as lightning. I was left somewhat shaken and longing, staring into emptiness.

"Cab's here babe." Kellan pulled me from my wonderment. I nodded, still trying to process everything; knowing I had to get a grip on everything before I lost it all, especially where my love life was concerned.

"Well, Spain was nice, at least what I saw of it," I sighed as we climbed into the large van.

"Didn't you live here?" Gabi asked.

"Yeah, but I was young and don't remember much."

"Send in the cleanup crew," Kai ordered. He immediately hung up and returned his phone to his pocket. I guess we did leave a pretty big mess behind us that needed to be cleaned up for the humans.

The ride to the airport was silent and tense. We all knew we were heading straight into a trap, but no one opposed.

Thankfully I'd healed quickly after everything was removed. I snuggled into Kellan; he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, running his fingers in a lazy circle on my upper arm. He was trying to remain calm on the surface, but I knew all too well the turmoil within.

I didn't want them walking into this trap with me, but I didn't know how to ditch them, especially when they could read me and my thoughts so well. I couldn't do anything right now. Knowing this, I allowed myself to relax until we arrived in London.

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Chapter Sixteen

London was a dreary mess of cold, snow and lots of gray.

"This certainly isn't the London of my day," Will said, staring out the taxi window. We had to separate into three cabs since they seated a maximum of three customers at a time.

"When was the last time you were here?"

"Nearly sixty years ago," he replied. The cab driver turned wide-eyed at Will. "Oh bloody hell," he cursed under his breath.

"I'll take care of it after," Kellan offered nonchalantly.

"Take care of me? What will you do to me? I'll not tell anyone what I've heard. I don't know a thing. You say nothing to me. I heard nothing." The driver was bordering a panic attack, his middle-Eastern accent thickening the closer he got to hysteria.

"Take the wheel Will," Kellan ordered, grabbing the driver by his chin and forcing him to face him in the back. The driver's eyes bugged out; I heard his heart nearly leaping from his chest it was beating so hard and fast, yet he was holding his breath. Kellan demanded his focus, locking their eyes. I knew the moment Kellan was in control since the guy instantly calmed. "You have heard nothing out of the ordinary. We are only customers that you will drive to and drop off at their hotel. Once you lose sight of us, you will forget you ever saw us. Now face forward and drive us to our hotel." Kellan released him. He faced forward, a dumbfounded look on his face. He shook his head in confusion. I saw his brows were furrowed through the side

mirror as if he was trying to solve a riddle, as if he was trying to grasp what had happened. He wouldn't remember though. That's the beauty of being brainwashed; you never remember that it actually happened.

All three cabs arrived together.

"The May Fair? Really guys? You couldn't choose something a little less... I don't know... flashy?"

"They have good security and only guests can access the rooms," Kai explained. I guess it made sense after what happened in Spain, but it was a steep bill for security.

The bellman promptly offered his assistance as we walked through the revolving door. Kai and Al headed straight to the front desk to check us in under the Bladangs company cards.

"We're all in Studio Suites," Al announced, passing out room keys. "Everyone has their own room except Gabi and Rafi and Kellan and Lexi." Al stopped and looked pointedly at Kellan. "This isn't the time to be indulging yourself son."

I instantly blushed and looked away. I knew he was right, but the fact that he thought we were or would do it was too much.

Kellan laughed it off. "Sure thing Dad." He flashed me a devilish grin. "*What he doesn't know won't hurt him.*" A chill ran down my spine.

"Let's drop our stuff in our rooms. I'll be around to install door alarms; this way we'll know if anyone entered the room," Kaleb said.

"What about housekeeping?"

"These are silent alarms. It'll send an alert to me, Kai and Gabi's phone."

“Oh, okay.”

“Let’s get out of the lobby.” Al headed towards the elevators leading the pack.

“Lexi, may I speak with you privately in my room?” Will asked. He always seemed a bit off, slightly nervous, or it could just be that he pays attention to every detail and the details overwhelm him; regardless, he appeared anxious.

“Of course. Kellan, will you take my luggage?” I focused on Will the entire time, unable to pull myself from him. His anxiety was rubbing off on me. Nerves crawled through me forcing my serum upwards.

“I got it babe,” he said, taking it from my hand.

The elevator ride seemed to take forever, but alas we finally made it. I followed Will to his room; I was glued to his side, my mind reeling with ideas of what could be so disconcerting to him. I knew I was overthinking it; I knew I was making myself sick with worry probably for no reason, but I couldn’t stop myself. I couldn’t control my wondering thoughts.

He opened the door and stood back, allowing me to enter first. I couldn’t even appreciate the beauty of the room, too consumed by what was about to be revealed.

“What’s going on Will?” I cut to the chase. I peeked through the lavish curtains out to the bustling city below. I turned back to find him removing his tie and folding it before lying it on the dresser.

He set down his oversized leather briefcase on the bed. I didn’t know why he didn’t carry it around rather than the pile of books, especially now that he’d lost a few. He removed the binder and a thick, worn leather book. I

recognized them instantly; my stomach knotted tightly as my serum rose high in the back of my throat. Something was wrong. Something was coming.

“I know you read the translation I provided you detailing the prophecy, and well, I must apologize but I purposefully omitted quite a bit and generalized the rest.” He didn’t fidget or stutter; he looked straight at me as he spoke the words, no apology in his voice.

“Why?”

“Because you would find a way to change things when there isn’t a way. You would drive yourself mad.”

“And Kellan dying?”

“I’m not revealing anything around that.”

“Why did you want to speak to me Will?” I crossed my arms over my chest defensively. He certainly had me on edge, if not before then definitely now thanks to his revelation of honesty.

“Something big is coming very soon for you.”

“Specifics?”

“You need to prepare yourself emotionally and physically,” he riddled on.

“Will, I don’t want games. I want you to come straight out with it.”

“Barkatu,” he whispered.

“What does that mean?”

“Forget I even spoke with you. Now you must be going. Important things are ahead,” he said. He walked

over to me, placed a firm guiding hand on my mid-back and shoved me towards the door.

“But -“

“I’ll see you tomorrow Lexi,” he stated, officially getting me outside the door and promptly shutting it in my face.

I stood staring at the door completely befuddled by my Eislom. He was the one who asked to talk to me, and rather than come out with anything worthwhile, he beat around the bush and admitted to doing so in his translation as well. He was supposed to guide us through this whole experience, but I didn’t feel like he was.

“You going to stare at the door all day?” Kai asked. I turned towards his voice; he stood outside his door a few rooms down, hands tucked inside his dark jean pockets, his muscles bulging through his gray sweater.

“Um, no,” I shook my head, still trying to pick my brain for ideas as to what Will could be hinting at.

“Want to go for a walk?”

“Sure.” I gave the door one last glance. I didn’t know why I did it; I felt like I was leaving behind a task that needed to be completed soon and therefore felt a tug towards it. I had the inkling that Will only broke his code to warn me of something big. Given my past though, big could be anything, and that was the troubling part.

We walked outside back into the busy city streets complete with wind, snow and freezing temperatures. It didn’t affect me too badly. It felt about the equivalent of sixty degrees to me.

“What’s on your mind Leka?” he asked as we navigated through the midday lunch crowd.

“Too much.” He merely nodded his head, facing forward, looking at everyone and everything except me.

We walked in silence for a bit. I didn’t know where we were going and didn’t bother asking.

“What does *barkatu* mean?” I asked, thinking back over what Will had said.

“I don’t know the language well since it’s for vampeens, but I think it means ‘I’m sorry’ in Euskara.” He finally glanced over at me. “Why?”

“Kai.” I stopped walking, turning towards him; I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. My muscles were stiff, and I... I wanted to eat. Or drink. I wanted to do what half the women in the world did when they were stressed or upset; I wanted to eat.

“Leka?” He frowned as he stared down at me.

“Can we go sit somewhere?” I glanced around, looking for a restaurant or coffee shop to settle into.

“Let’s go to the coffee house across the street.” He grabbed my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine. He scowled, glancing down at my ring the moment he felt it. I tried to ignore his reaction.

We settled at a table in the far corner of the quaint shop. I was surprised by how busy they were at this time of day though I suppose it was no different than any Starbucks back home. While the shop boasted upgraded counters and pastry showcases, everything else seemed a bit aged but in a meant-to-be sort of way.

“Hello. My name’s Eva. What can I get for you?” The brunette pixie was energetic despite her layers of black and gray.

“Two blueberry scones and a cup of hot water for each of us,” Kai ordered.

“Care to turn that hot water into a cuppa?”

“What’s a cuppa?” I asked.

“Tea,” Kai replied for her. He glanced at me, one brow raised as if to ask if I wanted to. I gave a slight nod. “Sure,” he replied. The moment the server turned her back he tossed me a few condiment packets from his pocket. I instantly recognized it as blood.

I gave it a quick once over before tucking it into the pocket of my hoodie. “These are really cool. Where do you get them?”

“We manufacture them ourselves in one of our off-site factories. They’re popular in certain parts of Europe.”

“Wait, so you sell them in Europe?”

“Yeah. We have a secure website that clients can access to order from us once they’re verified as being vamp.”

“How do you verify them?”

“We run their names through the vamp registry. They have to provide us their correct date of birth and some sort of proof of identification like an EIN or social.”

“Wow. So, uh, how long have you been making these things?”

“As long as we’ve known that we could eat if we soaked our food. They’re convenient and pass through

customs for vamps that travel.”

“Is it a lucrative business?”

He chuckled. “Leka, I don’t hurt for money, but if you must know, it’s a very lucrative business.”

“I wasn’t referring to your money. I could care less about that.”

He pursed his lips, studying me for a few solid seconds. “What’s bothering you?”

“Do you know the story, the prediction; whatever you want to call it?”

“What about it?” He sat back in his chair, erasing all emotion from his expression.

“What happens?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged.

“But you just said you did,” I protested, not about to let him shut me out too.

“Listen Leka, some things aren’t meant to be known. The fairytales that vamps have told over the last couple hundred years is different than the truth. I don’t know how much different, but I know that nearly all fables start with a foundation of truth and build from there. You and *him* are the foundation, everything else is a crock of shit that everyone has added a little something to over the years.”

“I’m confused. How is everyone’s story the same, yet it’s untrue?”

“The generalization of the story is true, but the details are all wrong.”

“So we are supposed to bring peace to our kind, but nobody really knows how we do it?”

“Basically. Now can we change the subject?” He looked pissed off. His careful façade of nothing was fading into the background as his emotions came forth with a vengeance. I knew it was because it forced him to think of Kellan and me together, but that didn’t make me any less miffed.

“Well, you asked.”

“Yeah. Next time I won’t,” he scowled. I sighed, pulling my phone out of my pocket, offering me an escape from his harsh scrutiny.

I decided to text Mel and check in on her, hoping she was past the angry phase of being left behind.

‘Still mad at me?’

She promptly replied. *‘Even more since you haven’t bothered to even let me know you’re still alive. I’ve had to get my updates from a boyfriend that I’m equally pissed at...’*

‘Sorry? It’s been crazy. I know that’s not an excuse, but I promise to do better. I miss you. ☐’

‘I miss you too. Be safe.’

We always came back together somehow, some way. It’d felt strange not talking to Mel in some capacity over the last few days. It reminded me of the week of my transformation. Luckily, like that week, I was distracted from her absence with action and education.

“Sorry for the wait. We’re swamped,” Eva stated, setting down two steaming mugs still steeping the tea bags

and a scone for each of us centered on a doily set upon fancy china.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thanks,” Kai mumbled, still disgruntled from earlier.

She smiled and walked away to take care of her other customers.

“I don’t want to fight with you Kai, and I don’t want you to be mad at me over something I can’t change.” I focused on my tea, swirling the bag around in the cup. It was a cute hand-made sack with a string tied into a bow holding the leaves together.

“I know.” He didn’t relax in the slightest. “Let’s just focus on the mission for now.” I heard the click of his jaw as he ground his teeth. I understood being on edge about the mission, but for emotions, especially for a vamp, was odd.

I sighed, made quick work of my sauce and tea additive and dove in, wishing I was still human enough to find comfort in food.

—

Chapter Seventeen

We ate and drank in silence until I threw down whatever cash I had onto the table. I didn't know the dollar value, but I knew it was more than enough to cover the bill. I was ready to escape the tension suspended between us.

"Go ahead without me," I said pulling out my phone the second I hit the sidewalk outside.

"I'm a jerk, but not an ass; I'm not going to leave you knowing we're being hunted," he replied, giving our surroundings a quick once over.

"I'm in the middle of a busy city. I'll be fine." I shrugged stepping towards a building to avoid being knocked about in the crowd. I never realized how similar London and New York City were.

He studied me for a minute, a scowl upon his face. "You won't even know I'm here." He went a few yards down from me and leaned against the building. I couldn't get mad at him. He was protecting me. The friction between us was going to start a fire if we didn't find common ground again soon though.

I called Aunt Claire wanting a familiar voice of comfort.

"Alexa Lorryne Jackson! Where the h-e-double hockey sticks are you?"

"Hi to you too Aunt Claire," I sighed.

"Hi? Lexi I've been worried sick. I was left with a generic note and voicemail saying you had a new mission. Not once did you tell me where in the world you were going or who you were with. Auggy can kiss my white vamp butt

with the whole secrecy crap. You're all I have left and I'll be damned if I lose you too. Now where in the dickens are you?"

So much for comfort... "London."

"With who?"

"Kellan, Al, Craig, The Bladangs and my Eislom."

"Eislom? You're at that point in the journey already?"

"You know the full story?"

"Of course. Where do you think I've been? I haven't shown or sold a house since I found out it was you and Kellan. I've been off doing something I vowed never to do again: studying history." I swallowed the lump in my throat. I couldn't believe she went to such an extent for me.

"Really?" My voice was barely a whisper.

"Yes, really. I told you, you are like a daughter to me Lexi. I also promised your mom I would protect you till the end of the Earth, whatever that entails. I meant it." She paused. I knew we were both thinking, remembering, her in some capacity. She cleared her throat suppressing all emotion in her voice. "Now, I'll be on the first flight to London. Don't even bother wasting your breath; I can tell you need me. You're scared and going through a lot and I'm going to be there for you. What hotel are you staying at?"

"The May Fair."

"Beautiful hotel. Well, alright then. I'll call you when I land. I love you Lex. Stay safe and stay strong sweetie."

"Thanks Aunt Claire. I love you too."

I returned my phone to my pocket. Despite not being able to talk through my issues, I felt better. It was like her

love hugged me through the phone; her voice soothed me, reminding me that everything would be okay. It had to be.

I was still in my reverie when Kai abruptly grabbed my arm and whisked me through the crowd at a barely passable human speed. I immediately opened my mind.

"What's wrong?"

"There are several vamps nearby moving towards us at top speed."

I heard the brisk steps of a small army but my nose didn't let me differentiate them. I smelled Kai, the city pollutants, the misty smell of rain becoming snow and the humans I passed with their individual scents.

"I take it that's a bad thing."

He didn't bother responding. He instead led us through the alleys and behind buildings at vamp speed. I didn't realize just how far we'd walked earlier until now.

Moments later I spotted the hotel ahead. Kai headed straight for the service entrance. We moved so quick through the hotel that it was nearly a blur to my vamp vision; certainly the humans only experienced a gust of wind. We flew up the stairs; well Kai basically dragged me, and were in Kalel's room in under a minute. The second Kai let go of my hand, I grabbed the back of a chair for support as I regained my equilibrium. I didn't know vamps could get dizzy; maybe that was just a vampeen thing though because he seemed completely unfazed by the action.

I looked at the two of them obviously conversing mentally despite their cocked heads pointed at me studiously.

"What?" I nearly shouted, hating to be excluded.

"I'm going to tap into the cameras around the city to see who we're up against. Get everyone together because they'll definitely track your scent here, and we'll need to prepare," Kalel said as he moved to his computer setup at the desk.

"Ugh. We just got here," I groaned.

"Act now; complain later," Kalel ordered.

I found Will staring out the window in his room. His door was ajar as if he was waiting for me. He stood legs shoulder-width apart, his hands in his pockets.

"I already know," he stated, a bit of trepidation and sadness in his tone. I swallowed my serum, trying to calm the nerves stealing my sanity from me. He knew what was coming; he knew what we were about to face, yet he stood there saying, revealing nothing.

"What am I about to lose?" I asked stepping closer.

"Who. The question should be who." He turned to face me, a solemn expression despite the pool of emotions in his eyes.

"Who am I about to lose?" I choked out as serum covered my tongue.

"If I told you, you would focus on that vamp and lose another. I can't tell you. I will tell you to activate your necklace now and get to Kellan immediately."

I ran from the room without a second thought. I found Kellan and Craig in Al's room loading up on weapons.

"We know," Kellan announced the second I entered the room.

"Apparently everyone does."

"Here's your dagger." Kellan tossed me my other gift from the Bladangs, wrapped in the only material it wouldn't seer: gold. It made sense considering it's gold. I didn't understand how it worked since vamps wore gold jewelry all the time, but I refused to ponder a defense too deeply.

"We should meet in Kalel's room. He's accessing the cameras around the city," I said, shifting back and forth from foot to foot. I felt so very human in this moment the way my emotions were slamming into me. Nerves, anger, worry, sadness, fear and many more were slowly eating away at me, rolling around in my stomach and rising up in my chest. Will was the one that'd started the entire campaign.

We evacuated and regrouped in Kalel's room. I noticed we were one man down. For some reason or another Will wasn't participating. I couldn't say I was surprised. He'd stepped back and let me take the direct hit from the car bomb. I was beginning to understand that while he was there to guide me, he wasn't about to do anything that would change history and most importantly, anything that would help protect my friends and me.

"Nothing's showing up on the cameras. Either they're hiding or they're using deflectors," Kalel stated. Kai and Rafi stood closely behind him studying the computer screen as he flipped through several camera views.

"Maybe it was nothing; maybe we're all just paranoid. It could have been any group of vamps chasing a human or - " I paused, unable to think of another excuse to throw out. "It could have been anything."

"Very few vamps chase humans in the light of day," Al said, discrediting my hopes.

“So what do we do? Go look for them? Stay here? What are we doing guys?” Gabi huffed, staring down at her perfectly manicured nails.

“Oh blotty nickerbells,” Craig exclaimed. There was something in his voice that caused us all to turn around.

They’d snuck in. Not a sound was heard, not a single pin drop alerted us. They now surrounded us and blocked our escape route. There were at least fifteen of them, dressed in black from head to toe. Their faces were masked in black with merely their eyes visible to us.

“Holy sugar plums,” I whispered, taken aback by their graceful movements. I lifted my hands to activate my shield; I had a feeling I would need the protection. Somehow they all seemed skilled and dangerous despite their calm façade. A small noise, almost intergalactic in sound, reverberated through the room. I looked down at my necklace and tried again. “Uh, guys. My necklace isn’t working.”

“Dammit. I knew the bastard was two-timing us,” Kai bit out.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Gabi said.

“Now isn’t the time to bicker; it’s the time to defend yourself from the real enemy,” Al interjected.

“He’s right.” I pulled out my gold dagger; Kai and Kalel did the same. A quick glance around showed no one else but us were using weapons. *“What happened to the weapons you were pulling?”*

“Won’t work on them. They fight fist to fist. Their uniforms repel everything.”

“Shit.” It was one word I hadn’t used in forever, but knew I was in deeply.

“Block your thoughts and sniff the air,” Kalel ordered. “They have no scent.”

“Duh! That’s probably why we didn’t smell them you idiots. Now stop talking and get ready. Who the hell knows when these bastards are going to come at us,” Gabi nearly growled the order.

Taking the initiative, since it was my fight after all, I slowly edged towards the door. That set them into motion. I barely saw the black land in front of me. I ducked from a punch but caught an undercut that sent me flying across the room.

Chaos flooded the room. Gusts of wind wafted past me from time to time. It took me a minute to notice that the others were defending me. Every pair of enemy eyes focused on me between jabs with my friends.

Suddenly two snuck past the brothers and headed straight for me. My knife was short so I had to wait until they were close to stab them. I missed the first but caught the side of the other. The black fabric sizzled upon contact dissipating to reveal browned skin below.

I leapt up onto the bed, backing away from the pair trying to close in on me again. That’s when I noticed the dart gun in the hands of a ninja across the room. He took aim. I realized he was aiming it at Rafi. I didn’t understand why he wasn’t aiming it at me until I noticed he had at least ten darts in the round loader. Oh God. They were planning to take all of us out, and I bet the last one with the purple liquid instead of the blue was for me. I swallowed the serum that flooded my mouth.

My eyes darted from Rafi to the gun and finally to the ninja that'd just leapt onto the bed with me. They were silent in their assault. Vamp hearing did nothing for us in this battle. I couldn't figure out why either based on their black boots.

The second I averted my eyes I was pinned to the wall, the headboard pressing into the backs of my thighs. The second ninja whom I'd narrowly missed the skin of joined the other, prepared to inject me with something when abruptly they collapsed; sizzling smoke and acid filled the air. The brothers rolled over the ninjas and retrieved their daggers. I was proud of their direct kill, but a quick glance around showed none of the others were faring the same. We were barely fending off their attacks.

The brothers immediately went back into action defending the ninjas. Another planted itself in front of me not giving me a second to defend myself again his kick. The air was knocked out of me as I landed on the nightstand and the lamp crashed to the floor below. I rebounded on my feet and raced towards him delivering my own blows, but none were even close in strength to the ones he supplied.

Suddenly remembering the dart gun, I gave one last hard blow and flew around him. A few more came at me; they were finally pinning me as the target. I somehow diverted their attempts and escaped the tug from behind. I focused on my target: the lone enemy in the corner, preparing to end us one by one without notice.

My body angled towards him, I leapt over random items strewn on the floor, ducked between and around casual combat amongst my peers and the enemy, focused solely on taking out that vamp.

Taking in my stride and angle, he wasted no time. He aimed the gun at the closest opponent: Kellan. *"Lookout!"*

Duck NOW!"

The dart was fired right as Kellan heeded my words and dropped to the floor. The ninja jumped up and rolled over the projection, narrowly missing its sharp edge into his back before he landed on the floor as silently as he'd launched himself.

Returning to my mission right as Craig and Al began fending off a few behind me. My eyes narrowed on the corner vamp again. I ran full force towards him. A palm landing in the center of my chest, caving in my diaphragm sent me flying backwards again. I gasped a few harsh breaths right as he took aim at an unsuspecting Rafi, fighting off two ninjas near the dresser. The army had trained him to focus on the enemy in front of you, not miles away aiming at you. Chances were the one that was miles away would miss, but the one close by wouldn't.

"Rafi!" I yelled right as the dart was fired. The two vamps didn't let up, keeping him upwards and in the line of fire.

Surprised by my own inner strength I threw the ninja threatening to land a blow to my head across the room. I crouched down like a tiger preparing to pounce on her prey, and launched myself into the air at an outward angle. I was upside down over the battle Rafi was fighting and was just coming down past them completing my full somersault when the dart hit my upper chest.

"No!" I heard Kellan fiercely cry out.

Pain, stinging, singed my veins as the venom coursed through me. Maybe it was the poison, or maybe it was my imagination, but the room went silent. Everyone stopped fighting to see what'd happened. I didn't care at this point

because I'd saved him. No one should die because of me,
and I'd made sure no one did.

—

Chapter Eighteen

KELLAN

I stared down at her lifeless body, unable to focus on anything else as my emotions, human emotions I only ever had with her, swelled to the surface.

“No, dammit! No!” I yelled, unable to contain my anger.

A second dart flew through the room; a silent whistle filled the air as the object hit Rafi in the center of his chest. Gabi cried out, a guttural hurt from deep within her echoed through the confined space. We’d let our guard down. We believed that because they’d stopped fighting that we could too. We’d forgotten for a second that our enemy was in the room and would stop at nothing. It was a fatal mistake. Rafi began to fall; Gabi quickly caught him, blood flowing down her cheeks meaning they’d probably just exchanged given their intermingling scents.

My eyes returned to her, pale and flaccid on the floor a few feet away. I didn’t want to look, but couldn’t stop myself. The others looked on in horror; I saw the anger creeping into their expressions. Vampires knew very little of the other emotions.

Looking down at her, I knew anger wasn’t even the right word. How does one cope with losing the love of their life at the hands of their enemy? They don’t; I didn’t. I gathered my rage and centered my fury, prepared to unleash it on the unsuspecting bastards.

I ripped my eyes from my dead fiancé. I felt the scowl on my face. I heard my heartbeat pick up speed as I glared

at the uniformed assassins enjoying my despair. An evil laugh threatened to belt from me. I knew they would be dead before I walked out of the room.

Gabi stepped beside me, the same fury coursing through her veins. We would both be victorious. We would get our revenge.

The others grouped behind us offering silent strength. No one was walking out with Lexi's body but me.

"Let's do this shit."

"Here." Kai and Kalel each passed me their prized weapon. A look of understanding and respect was shared by all of us.

I refocused on my enemies. With a gold dagger in each hand, I ran head on towards the closest target. I twisted sideways at the last minute swinging my arms out confidently and decapitating two at once.

I heard the chaos behind me, but paid no attention. My mission was to kill as many of these fuckers as possible.

I spun around just as one jostled towards me. I jumped and flipped over him; it was probably the best ninja move I was capable of. A quick turn and I offed him from behind right as another two came at me simultaneously. I waited until the last second to move so they killed each other with their powerhouse kicks, which were strong enough to break each other's necks and rip through the delicate skin with the centered steel point on the bottom of their boots.

The second I turned one nearly hit me with a dart, and would have if Craig hadn't killed the asshole with a silver chain slicing his neck. That threw off his aim a bit. A quick glance around showed we were winning.

Less than a minute later we'd murdered the last ninja proving powerful emotions fueled powerful attacks.

Gabi dropped her weapons to the floor as she collapsed pulling Rafi into her arms. Sobs poured from her. I couldn't even react to that. Lexi had sacrificed her life in order to save a man who ended up dead anyways.

Rage resurfaced at the scene before me. I didn't come all this way to lose her. We came to save her. She had to be saved.

Serum dripped off my teeth. I wasn't pure vampire, but maybe I had enough venom to boost her system. Rafi was full vampire; there was no saving him. But Lexi had a chance. She had to have one. She's fierce. She always had the fight in her. It was one of the things I loved about her.

Forgetting the others, I slid down beside her, recklessly ripping the dart from her upper chest. Without a moment's hesitation I exposed her neck and bit. I wasn't going to rely on just that though. I bit my wrist, pulling a chunk of skin off with my aggressive actions; the vein burst open and began emptying my life source everywhere. I opened her mouth and placed my wrist to her pale lips. I knew the scene was reminiscent of her parents, but didn't care. I didn't care what I looked like or how crazy they thought I was. I had to try. I couldn't lose her; I couldn't picture forever in this desolate God-forsaken hell without her.

Craig placed a heavy hand on my shoulder. It felt like the weight of the world as Lexi continued to lay limp in my arms with my wrist healing itself already.

"She can't leave me," I bit out. My chest was tight, the air fighting inhalation. Serum oozed from my gums becoming a waterfall over my teeth.

“You can’t leave me. It’s supposed to be you and me, peace and all that crap. It’s not your time. Wake up!”

—

Chapter Nineteen

I gasped for air, between a mouth full of blood; my body spent and oxygen deprived. It felt like my chest had collapsed inwards on me; the pain wasn't unbearable though. The blood disappeared as I was pulled tightly against a chest, Kellan's chest.

"Holy cow poo; I can't believe it worked," Craig exclaimed.

I was drawn to the bellowing cries behind him though. I blinked a few times to refocus my vision, my attention immediately went to Gabi, who was a crumpled, disheveled mess on the floor hugging Rafi's lifeless body to her. Disappointment slammed through me. I failed. I didn't save him.

Tears welled at the sight of my friend and her loss. I'd failed her; I'd let them all down. I was the only reason they were here, that they were in this place. I couldn't hold back the shame and despair. I felt the tears chasing each other down my cheeks, soaking Kellan's shirt.

"I'm so sorry Gabi. I'm... so sorry," I choked out.

I fell into Kellan's arms as my world collapsed around me. Everyone faces tragedy at some point in life, but it felt like death was chasing me as life beat me down.

Rafi had fought hard to protect me and I'd let him down. It wasn't like my parents when I wasn't there and didn't have a chance. I had the opportunity; I saw the open window to block the move and miscalculated, which was such a human error. The guilt was suffocating me; my stomach threatened to regurgitate the blood settling in it.

“We need to move. Who knows what was heard through the walls,” Kalel said, pulling me back down to reality and away from my internal self-abuse.

“I’ll have the army clean this one up. There should be a few on location who can move quickly,” Al stated.

I lifted my head, finally taking in the room. Everything was broken and in disarray, decapitated bodies and random limbs tossed about. It looked like what it was: a blood bath. Regardless of how many battles I fought, regardless of how many vamps I killed, death would never be a welcome friend. I hated the violence; I hated the idea that I took this person from someone else, the same way my family and friends had been taken from me. I would never purposefully subject someone to that sort of suffering. It was a permanent torture we all experienced at some point, but I didn’t want to be the cause of it.

Al made the phone call while Kalel grabbed his items; I noticed he avoided looking at Gabi or Rafi. Kai went to Gabi, extricated Rafi from her grip and pulled her into his arms. She hugged him tightly, sobbing into his shoulder. He didn’t try to rush her or push her away. He stood embracing her, being the strong man and brother she needed in that moment. For the first time I saw that he genuinely did care about her.

Since I’d begun my journey nearly five months ago, so much had happened. I was slowly realizing that life, regardless of the amount of time you’re granted, flew by in a flash. In one blink of an eye everything could be, would be gone. And now, Rafi was gone because of me. It happened so fast; I should have been better prepared. I should have done more knowing this was what we would be facing.

“Don’t beat yourself up babe,” Kellan whispered into my ear, still hugging me to him, gently pulling my hair away from my wet cheeks.

“I can’t help it.”

“You couldn’t stop what happened. We were ambushed. We all should have been more prepared.”

“Doesn’t change what happened or the guilt I have over it.” I struggled to hold back the sobs. I had no right to be crying. Out of all of us Gabi had lost the most... this time around.

“Let’s go,” Kalel said, reminding us of what was yet to come, of what we still had to face beyond this room. I knew we had to fight harder, in Rafi’s honor.

We walked out of the room to find Will standing there ready with his luggage in tow. “To Cardiff, Wales we go,” he stated as if nothing had happened.

We all looked at him, irritation and something along the line of disgust on our faces in response to his chipper tone.

“Really? We just got done busting our asses in there while you stared out a window randomly checking your watch for the right time to come back and greet us as if nothing even happened, as if Rafi didn’t just die in there! What the sugarplums is wrong with you? You’re supposed to be there to help us, not do whatever the heck you think you’re doing!” Kellan wrapped me tightly into his chest, whispering calming words in my ear. I couldn’t stop the tears from falling again; I couldn’t stop the anger from boiling over. I couldn’t control any part of me. I guess they were right; humans really are ruled by their emotions and I was acting very human at the moment.

Everyone stood in silence, no one jumping into the ring of fire.

“Do you feel better?” Will asked. “I know you’re angry Lexi, but I’m not the enemy; I’m not the one who did this to you. But the bloody bastard who did is still out there. You can choose to waste all that emotion on me or save it for the one who deserves it.”

I closed my eyes, trying to reign myself in. He was right. It wasn’t his fault. I was upset that he wouldn’t tell me what was coming; that he didn’t tell me exactly who to protect to save him, but he wasn’t the one who actually killed Rafi. And he wasn’t the one who miscalculated; I was.

“Sorry Will. This is just really hard.”

“I get it. I’ve read it. I know what you’ve been through Lexi and what you’re going to go through. You have to be strong to do that. I know you have that strength inside or you wouldn’t be where you are right now.” I nodded, not bothering to analyze his words.

“Everyone stay in pairs. Let’s pack and get out of here as quickly as possible,” Al stated.

“I’ll stay with Will and book our tickets,” Kalel said.

“Thanks,” Al replied, heading off with Craig. Kai held tightly to Gabi still as they entered her room.

The second we were in the room, Kellan threw me against the wall and covered my lips with his, immediately opening his mind to me.

“*Oh God. Did I really...?*” I couldn’t even think the word; just the image alone was too much. I pulled away, closing my eyes, trying to rid my memory of what I’d seen, what he’d been through.

“Shh. It’s okay, babe. You’re okay now. That’s all that matters.” He softly trailed kisses from my forehead down to my neck and shoulder.

“You should feed before we leave. It looks like you lost a lot of blood.” I looked down at my ruined clothes, soaked with layers of blood; my nose wouldn’t let me decipher whose it was.

“I will at the airport.”

“I’m really sorry babe. I never meant for you to have to go through all this.” I looked up into his bright green eyes gazing down at me in the most forgiving manner, as if I hadn’t robbed him of a normal life in any way.

“We’re in this together. You and me forever.” He brought my left hand up to his lips and kissed my ring.

“I love you.”

“I love you.” He kissed me again, this time slower with more sensuality behind it. Nothing was rushed; the urgency had expired.

His right hand moved to cradle the back of my neck and head. I leaned into his embrace, deepening the contact, opening myself up to him. I knew without a doubt in this moment that I was finally ready to give him all of me. I would never regret giving him more. I would never regret my time with Kellan, no matter how short or long that time may truly be.

We finally broke away from each other, broke away from the comforting cocoon of each other’s arms.

“We should change and get out of here,” Kellan said, pushing more hair away from my face that had fallen from my ponytail. I nodded, but didn’t move. He gave me one

last quick kiss before moving towards the bathroom. A few seconds later I heard the shower running. He came out, a smile on his face as he looked directly at me. "It's all yours babe." God he really was perfect.

I threw on a pair of jeans, slightly upset about more ruined clothes. I found a tank top and layered Kellan's grey sweater over it; I tucked the front of his sweater into my jeans so it didn't hang quite so low, as it was the collar hung off to the side exposing a bit of my shoulder. I layered a chocolate brown scarf on top covering most of my skin peeking through. Kellan dressed similarly in dark jeans, a black sweater and grey knit scarf.

Apparently we all had the same idea since we all came out showered and changed with our luggage in tow. Despite Gabi's fresh appearance, the bags under her eyes, the lack of depth in her far away gaze told the truth. I walked right up and pulled her into my arms as we left a part of ourselves behind.

"I can't believe he's gone," she choked, the tears welling all over again.

"I know," I softly replied, gently laying her head on my shoulder.

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Chapter Twenty

Cardiff seemed like a world away despite being the equivalent of one state over in Wales; perhaps that was because every minute that ticked by felt like a minute less to stop the bomb from exploding.

“Where to now?” I asked as we retrieved our luggage.

“Novotel Cardiff Centre. I already alerted your Aunt Claire as well,” Will replied. I’d completely forgotten about her traveling to London. I was really slipping.

“What’s our plan, considering we came here on a blind whim promoted by your words alone?” I looked at him expectantly.

“Spoilers Lexi,” he smiled wide.

“Spoilers?”

“Yes, spoilers. You’re asking for spoilers that I can’t reveal. You are just going to have to trust me when I say that we’re in the right place for the moment.” He buried his nose in his notebook barely able to juggle it, his luggage and massive briefcase.

“Let’s just get to the hotel and set up camp there. We’ll figure out the rest later,” Kalel said. There was a ripple of anger or frustration in his tone. No one pushed for a source though; we’d been through the wringer in the last twelve hours.

“Lexi, you and Gabi should rest. I’m not sure when you’ll be given the opportunity to again,” Al advised. I nodded in agreement.

I glanced at Gabi and saw her head down; I knew her eyes were bloodied up with tears beneath her dark sunglasses. They were her shield against the world at the moment. I looked down at my hand entwined with Kellan's. I couldn't imagine losing him; I didn't want to imagine life without him, and I still felt horrible that she had to know that sort of loss. I could only imagine the tortured state of her heart.

Kellan squeezed my hand. His eyes penetrated mine as I lifted my head. He knew where my mind was wandering. I leaned against him as we walked out of Cardiff Wales Airport. A vehicle was waiting for us by the time we got to the curb, sign displaying 'Kalel Kulani.' We loaded up and headed for the hotel.

Upon arrival I found we were indeed in the city center. The guys checked us in again. I was beginning to feel a little helpless. I would definitely be texting John later to see if he found anything.

"Here are your keys." Kalel passed the room keys to everyone.

"Are you sure you don't want me to pay for something? This is supposed to be my mission and you've all been taking care of everything."

He stopped and looked at me for the first time in what felt like a while. He didn't just glance at me impassively or study me for the sake of decision, he actually looked me. He smiled appreciatively at me. It was the first time he'd relaxed since our dinner out in Spain, which seemed like ages ago.

"Thanks Leka, but we made this our mission with you. Plus, we need as many tax write offs as possible."

"Let me know if you do need anything." He nodded.

Kai came up beside Kalel, his eyes raking over me. Kellan tensed beside me, but didn't say anything. Kai still had an effect on me. It wasn't as overwhelming and obvious as Kellan, but I felt the slow stir beneath my surface when he was near.

"Go rest," he finally bit out, abruptly turning and walking away.

My focus traveled to Gabi who was at least holding her head up. "Want to rest in my room with me Gab?"

"No, thanks. If I'm honest I plan to act more human in the next hour than I have in the last one hundred years and ball my eyes out, and I'd like to do that alone so that I can at least pretend that I still have some semblance of control over my emotions in public."

"We're not here to judge you. We're your friends, your family. We're here to help you however we can."

Her brows furrowed beneath the rim of the glasses. "Craig can come with me. Ironically he's probably the least likely to piss me off or irritate me."

"Don't worry love. I promise to zip my flapper and keep it squiddled away as long as you want it to be." Craig came up behind Gabi and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Thanks Craig," I said, grateful that he was willing to step in. He winked at me as he led Gabi to the elevator.

"Lexi, go rest. Kalel and I will plug into the city's network and monitor things. I'll let you know the moment we find something." Al looked at Kellan, reiterating his words silently.

"I'll stay with her in case of anything," Kellan offered.

“Yes, yes. Go, go.” Will shooed us towards the elevators, a strange enthusiastic look on his face. He looked as if he was a proud parent whose child was on the verge of winning a Golden Globe. I couldn’t help but smirk; it was just so out of character for him.

Kellan escorted me to our room. We set our luggage to the side; I was almost afraid to even open it in case we had to get out quick. He clung to my hand and led me to the bed; he pulled me on top of him, securing his arms around me as if he was afraid I’d run away. I leaned down and captured his lips, our minds instantly connecting.

He did a sensual dance through my mind as his hands cradled me in various areas. There was no urgency to his moves. Languid motions up and down my sides, my back, my neck and face; he caressed me with such tenderness.

My fingers slid through the hair at the nape of his neck. My hands traveled over his shoulders and chest as heat slowly began to build between us.

He flipped us so he hovered over me. We were limb to limb between a layer of clothing that suddenly felt too thick and constricting. I couldn’t hide that I’d been thinking about giving him my virginity; the same way he couldn’t hide the fact that he’d been waiting for this moment for a while. I knew this was the time. I wasn’t afraid. It felt right; he’d always felt right for me, to me.

“I promise to be gentle. I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“I know.”

I knew he would make it perfect. I knew he would take his time with me. I knew I had nothing to worry about.

“I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“As sure as I am that I love you.”

He pulled back, breaking our mental connection, but reconnected us in gaze. I stared up into his beautiful emerald eyes, eyes that I'd never tire of seeing every day for the rest of my life. There were so many cuts and facets to the gorgeous irises that seemed so bright yet dark at the same time; as intricate as the person they belonged to.

“I love you Lexi.”

He kissed a trail along my jaw and neck, his hands reaching beneath his sweater I was wearing. He slid down to kiss along the length of my stomach as he slowly removed my outer layers of clothing. I slid my hands under his shirt, feeling the strength of his muscles beneath, his skin warm to my vamp touch. Skin to skin, heart to heart; I surrendered myself to him, to our love.

—

We lay breathing heavily on the bed, side by side, gazing up at the ceiling.

“I always knew it was going to be good with you, but damn.”

“I always expected my first time to be awkward or at the least painful at first, but, um, wow. That was...” I turned to look at him. *“That was amazing Kellan; you were amazing. Thank you.”*

He stared at me, his eyes still reflecting the pure pleasure we'd experienced. He brushed a piece of hair away from my face. *“No, thank you.”* He kissed me softly. I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

I sat up and looked around. “Holy -!” The hotel room was completely destroyed. The back of the chair at the computer desk was snapped in half. Another chair by the window was completely shredded, the fabric and stuffing tossed about. The Bible that was in the now smashed nightstand lay in the middle of the floor, surprisingly the only thing unscathed in the center of the room. The TV lay face down on the floor, a corner of the dresser missing; the mirror over the dresser cracked. I swallowed a hard lump in my throat as I looked down at the bed we both lay in. The sheets were missing and the comforter was barely hanging onto the ripped mattress. The mattress was no longer secured in place on top of the bed frame; rather, it was now lying on the floor on top of the broken frame! “My God. Did we really get that crazy? I can’t remember anything but feeling so incredibly good that I couldn’t focus on anything else but the pleasure.”

Kellan chuckled lightly. “We were all over. You had a strong dominant streak I had to conquer.”

“Um... How are we going to explain this to the hotel management?”

“With a black credit card?”

“Kellan, I’m being serious.”

“So am I. I have one in my wallet. Don’t worry about it babe. Seriously. Now come here,” he said, arms open and waiting for me. It didn’t take much convincing. I snuggled into him and quickly fell asleep feeling closer than ever to him.

Chapter Twenty-One

I stretched in his arms; it was human habit. He kissed my cheek and head as I rolled back into him. I smiled up at him shyly. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he smiled, his dimple showcased with the action.

“As much as I would like to lie in bed all day, we should probably go help Kael and your dad. I also want to check on Gabi.”

He pressed his lips to mine, silencing me for a moment. We were the same, but we weren't. Our relationship had changed in the course of a few hours. Even the touch of his lips was somehow more powerful; my body reacted immediately as if it was more aware of him now. My heart skipped a slow beat as my skin warmed the second his lips touched mine. My body was ready to accept him all over again.

He pulled back placing shallow kisses along my neck and right shoulder. Somewhere in between felt a little sore. I wasn't expecting it so I winced a bit.

“Sorry. Does it still hurt?”

“What do you mean?”

He sat back and looked directly at me, brows furrowed, a frown upon his face. He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the bathroom. He flicked on the light and my eyes immediately adjusted to the brightness. Looking in the mirror I instantly saw the cause of my pain; Kellan had bit me. It must have been pretty hard because it still hadn't healed yet. Even my broken sternum earlier healed quicker.

Looking beyond the bite mark, I noticed how flush my skin was. My cheeks were a rosy hue and my lips looked thoroughly abused, if how swollen they were still said anything. Kellan's muscles were highlighted under the light of the space. Mine soft next to his hard; his angular cuts next to my languid curves.

He leaned in and gently kissed the spot again, sending tingles down my spine. "As much as I would love to stand here and stare at you all day, you're right. We should go help the others. I'm sure they're probably wondering where we are."

"How long have we been M.I.A.?"

"About five hours."

"What? Oh God!" I flew past him and grabbed my suitcase. I quickly pulled out a pair of black skinny jeans, my low cut, flat, soft black leather boots with a bit of fringe overlay, and a plum sweater that wrapped tightly around at the base but was purposefully over-sized on top. It still had structure and shape, or so Eduardo said, and that's why Aunt Claire purchased it for me. "I'll only be two minutes at most," I said as I ran into the bathroom, hopping over debris along the way. At least the bathroom hadn't been touched.

I showered, but wrapped my hair in a bun so it wouldn't get wet. Stepping out, I got dressed, threw on a pair of silver feather earrings and pulled the top half of my hair back in a clip. I walked out to find Kellan lying on the bed, hands resting behind his head, with all his glory on display.

"Shower and get dress," I chuckled. "I'll see you in Kalel's room after."

He leapt up, landing flat on his feet in the tiny floor space next to the bed. He pulled me in for another kiss, softly nipping my lower lip. Goosebumps broke out over me. My body was far too aware of him now.

I put a bit of distance between us to prevent anything more from happening. He slowly licked his lips, a torture to watch. My breathing became labored and his eyes pierced mine. He knew what he was doing.

"I, uh-" I tripped, quickly catching myself as I began to back out of the room. A huge grin was plastered to his face. "*Ay dios miyo*. I swear," I huffed. I left as quickly as I could, but not before I heard him laughing.

Outside the door I took a deep breath. I checked both ways down the hall before going to the right a few rooms down. Before I could even lift my hand to knock the door flung open. Kai stood brooding in the doorway; his look anything but welcoming.

"Sorry I took so long. I guess I was tired." I offered him an awkward smile. He scrunched his nose, scowling in the act.

He reached out so fast I didn't see it coming. He pulled my collar first to the right, baring my left shoulder and upon finding nothing, moved to the other side. I immediately covered the love bite with my hand, but not before he got a glimpse of it. He let out a low, angry growl and pushed past me. My eyes followed him as he raced towards the door marked 'Stairs.'

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I turned back to the room full of vamps all looking at me with odd expressions, none of which matched. Craig was beaming, as was Will beside him; Kalel and Al's expressions were

reserved. I couldn't tell what they were feeling. Gabi had a brow raised as she looked at me inquisitively.

"Um, hi?" I slightly waved my hand as I entered the room.

Gabi came up to me, bent down near my ear. "You reek of Kellan, as in we know you did it with him because your scent is thoroughly mixed with his," she whispered. So that was why Kai was so pissed, and also why they were all gaping at me. "Not to mention you both weren't exactly quiet. I'm surprise hotel security didn't bang down your door," she continued.

I groaned inwardly knowing my cheeks had to be bright red. I covered my face with my right hand, not wanting to face any of them in that moment. Talk about embarrassing. Even worse, Al was Kellan's dad. It was almost as bad as if he had walked in on us.

I took a deep breath. It did me no good to run away; I was going to have to face them at some point. I looked sideways and up at her, my hand still firmly in place. "How bad was it?"

She didn't respond, only patted me on the shoulder and walked out the door. That meant it was bad.

Ready to face the firing squad, I looked up at the remaining male vamps in the room.

"Feeling dapper as a pony prancer yet?" Craig grinned.

Kalel took one hard look at Craig and me and walked out of the room.

I sighed, collapsing into the closest chair. "Is it really that bad that I made a decision to take my relationship to

the next level?”

Serum began to swell in my throat as my emotions got the best of me. I hadn't done anything to them. This only involved Kellan and me; no one else. So why were they acting as if I'd committed the ultimate betrayal? They acted as if I'd slept with the enemy.

Craig sat next to me on the bed, wrapping his arm around me. “It's alright love. The bros just had a thing for you, and vamps, well, we're jealous mongers who always want what we can't have. They'll get over it.”

“I think that's the first time you've spoken without a crazy word somewhere in the middle,” I chuckled.

“I aim to please.”

“I make it a rule not to get involved in my son's affairs, but for what it's worth, you waited longer than Beth and I.” That caught my attention. I looked up at Al, standing by the computer with his arms crossed over his chest. He didn't look mad, but not happy either.

“Thanks.”

“And he's right. We're assholes when we want something we can't have; we act like two year old brats. Just forget about them for now Lexi. We have a mission to focus on,” he added. I shook my head. He was right. I couldn't focus on people I couldn't please at the moment; I needed to focus on saving my own rear and as many of my friends and family as possible.

As if on cue, “Knock, knock!” Aunt Claire called outside the door. I opened the door in a split second, squeezing her the moment I saw her. “Glad to know I was missed,” she chuckled. “Hm. Although I can tell I wasn't

missed just a little bit ago by your scent. Care to talk about it?"

"Apparently having sex with one vamp will piss off at least two others, that's all."

"God, isn't jealousy a bitch? Now are you going to let me in or not?"

"Sorry." I grabbed two pieces of luggage while she picked up the other three loose bags. "What is in here?" I pondered aloud as I set them just inside the door.

"A little of this; a little of that. You know clothes, shoes, jewelry, make-up, weapons and other things."

"What kind of weapons? I didn't even know you owned any."

"Of course not honey. I don't kiss and tell everything." She walked past me. "Hello gentlemen," she smiled.

"Hello darling," Craig said, failing horribly at a British accent.

"Hello. I'm William Jameson." Will extended his free hand towards Aunt Claire; his other was holding that same notepad. I swore I was going to steal it one day and read exactly what he was always writing.

"Hello William. I'm Claire Maxwell," she replied, shaking his hand.

"Hey Al. Thank you so much for looking out for Lexi. I really appreciate it," Aunt Claire stated, giving him a half hug.

"Of course." He didn't look uncomfortable, but also not comfortable...

“So what are we working on? I’m ready to kick some vamp ass.”

“What did you have on the plane? You’re extra feisty right now.”

“A delicious pilot. I’m lucky we landed safely.”

“You didn’t!”

“Of course not. I waited until he landed the plane and then jumped his bones,” she laughed, flicking her wrist as if it was nothing.

My eyes widened of their own accord. “Okay! So Al, you and the guys were tapping into the cameras around the city. Anything else? What have you found?”

“Nothing so far. We haven’t seen anything out of the ordinary or caught any suspicious behavior. We set up this computer over here to alert us if anyone tries to dial out on a scrambled line so we’ll be able to tap into it and hopefully decode it in time. We’ve scouted the local hang outs to try and visit tonight.”

“Which reminds me!” I pulled out my phone and text John. ‘Anything yet?’

He immediately replied. ‘You’re a mind reader. On my way to Cardiff right now with the intel. You have a Judas in your group.’

I paled the second I read it. I looked around the room. The only person I didn’t fully trust, but believed he wouldn’t betray me still was Will.

“What’s wrong Lexi?” Al asked, looking up from the computer screen at me. I passed him my phone. He quickly returned it to me. “We’ll talk about it later.” I nodded. We couldn’t change what was heard or known; we’d just have

to be extra cautious. Even the door alarms didn't work with Jack's group before. They somehow threw off every piece of technology; my necklace was a complete waste around them but worked fine when I tested it on the way to the airport.

Having a leak was huge though. It meant regardless of where we went, how well prepared we were, Jack would still have the upper hand.

"Last time we had the most success being out there, not cooped up in a room staring at computer screens and cell phones. Let's go grab something to eat, walk around the city, eavesdrop; then we'll hit a few clubs and parties later tonight."

"Finally we get to the good stuff," Craig exclaimed, leaping up off the bed and heading toward the door.

"Wait up. I need to check on Kellan. He was supposed to meet us in here." I started walking towards the door but turned back. "Everyone meet in the lobby in five. Does that sound okay?"

They nodded, only somewhat listening, as they began talking amongst themselves. Al and Will were talking animatedly with Aunt Claire about what'd happened so far. Will and she instantly connected on their in depth knowledge of basically my present and future life. I shrugged, catching up with Craig.

"Mugger buggers!" Craig exclaimed, zipping off in a heartbeat.

My heart pounded in my chest at the sight before us. Kellan and Kai were nose to nose, their chests puffed out; Kalel was nowhere to be seen. I heard no words exchanged though silently they were stabbing each other; their eyes

were narrowed like daggers pointing straight at their opponent.

“Hey now! Let’s not get our tizzles in a nizzle. Hey! I sound like snoop there it is doggy dog. Woof! Woof!” Craig laughed awkwardly, which was odd for him as he forced himself between the two of them.

I stood back, frozen in place. I wasn’t angry or sad; I was almost numb. All this was about ego. That’s it. I was a prize to them, a prize to fight over. I wished I could crawl back into my fat suit so I didn’t have to deal with it. Perhaps I was being melodramatic and petty, but I felt cheap. Seeing this cheapened the act to me. I loved him; I always will, but I didn’t want to be in the middle of a pissing match.

The feeling began to return to my limbs. I swallowed the depression trying to rear its nasty head and, as nonchalantly as possible, walked past them both and straight to the elevators. Thank God I had grabbed my wallet and cell on my way to Kalel’s room earlier. I needed some fresh air, a moment away from it all. I’d taken a huge step in my life a little bit ago and the last thing I wanted was to feel bad about in anyway. I knew I didn’t regret it, but I didn’t want any hint of a negative connotation surrounding it; and that’s exactly what the guys were creating.

I stopped short finding Kalel in the lobby speaking to John.

“Didn’t you just say you were on your way to Cardiff?”

He looked up at me, shrugged nonchalantly. “The plane hadn’t landed yet; technicality.” He sounded a bit Nordic at the moment.

I looked around for his luggage, but didn't spot any. When our eyes met again, his nose was scrunched, head cocked slightly. He definitely smelled the difference. He raised a questioning brow when I didn't volunteer any information.

I sighed. "I'm going to go for a walk. Just text me when everyone's ready to go and I'll head back."

"Damn. Was it that bad?"

I shook my head. "What do you mean?"

He switched to a Japanese accent now. "It is man's job to please the woman. If he fails, all will know. A happy woman is a satisfied woman, and you do not seem happy."

I tensed at his suggestion. I wished I could hide my scent; wash it away. I hated the fact that everyone knew the moment I walked into the room. I hated the fact that they all had to point it out. What happened to my privacy? For once, I missed the company of humans. No one would have been the wiser in that group unless I offered up the information.

I turned about-face and headed out the door seeking freedom. I was weary and weak, vulnerable. I needed to toughen up. I needed to get a grip. I couldn't walk around with my emotions on my sleeve around Jack and his crew. I was already seeing a strong difference between myself and the vampires I spent most of my time with. I was clearly the vampire in the group; the most human of them, and I no longer felt comfortable with that.

As I hit the pavement outside, I walked towards the marina. A shiver ran through me. When we'd arrived in Cardiff, the weather was a manageable thirty-six degrees Fahrenheit; it'd definitely taken a nosedive in the hours that'd passed.

I tried not to think of anything as I strolled. I needed to let go of what was going on in my personal life and focus on this mission. Any sort of distraction was unnecessary and dangerous. That's how vamps get you; they hit when you least expect it and when you're the most vulnerable. Basically when they feel like they could easily overpower you. In my case, a distracted mind or a heavy heart was a death dart.

It didn't take me long to reach the marina. I immediately felt at peace; it reminded me of downtown Charleston. Boats were lined along wooden piers, tied to their docking stations. I didn't see many fishermen, only a few men in many layers of well worn winter ensembles going the opposite way.

Without realizing it, I found myself walking down a dock. The boats ranged from upscale mini yachts to economy sized fishing boats and even a few speedboats. The one that stood out was a weathered, dilapidated shack of a houseboat. The boat's bow was rusted metal, corroded by the salt water; the actual house portion was crackling wood that I was surprised hadn't rotted through. There was little to no finish left on the eye soar.

Perhaps its single redeeming quality was how quaint it felt. Odd pots and spoons and shells hung on nails dotting the peripheral. An old yellowish-white and faded red circular flotation device hung to the right of the door; the kind seen on every boat as the lone life raft you toss out to rescue a stray.

Suddenly the door flung open and an older man with a long grey beard, weathered face and tattered sweats walked out. I leapt back, unsure of when I'd crept up so close to the vehicle.

“I thought I smelled you. Come on in.” He waved his hand towards the door, walking through without a look back. I looked around the harbor to see if perhaps he was talking about someone else. “Don’t doddle! I haven’t got the years you do,” he grumbled.

Years I do? He knows. But how?

Curiosity got the best of me. Every horror film that depicted a single white female walking onto a boat with a strange lone male lurking about always ended with the female dead, yet I followed obediently. For some reason I felt safe. I couldn’t fathom why, but my body didn’t react to him. No serum rose; no panic produced sweat or heart palpitations.

The moment you walked inside, to the left was the shining glory of the boat: the captain’s cockpit. The brass wheel still looked brand new as if it’d been shined daily. The nozzles and controls surrounding it were still a crisp black. Beyond this single area though, everything else resembled the outside. It was a straight shot from the steer to the twin bed with a one-wall kitchen and a half table with two weak chairs.

More eclectic charm was poured into the space inside though with a rusted aluminum can wind chime hanging over the tiny porthole above the kitchen’s extremely shallow sink. The scratched cupboards, having seen their better days, were obviously once a soft buttercup to play off the cornflower laminate counter top. There wasn’t much to the space, yet it was the special touches of random paraphernalia that made it feel inviting.

“Well don’t just stand there, take a seat. I’m afraid I don’t have any blood, but would you like a glass of water?”

It was a struggle not to stand open-mouthed gawking at him, but I managed to nod my head politely on my way to the closest chair.

“How do you know?”

“My too-many-greats-to-mention grandfather predicted you. He left a copy of his journal to his last born descendent when he died. It was eventually passed down to me.” He set a glass of water in front of me before pulling out the adjacent chair. He grunted and groaned dramatically as he sat down, his joints sounded as if there were impacted with fluid and swollen, yet were limber at the same time.

I glanced around the tiny space once more finding something new each time despite my vamp vision. Everything was neat yet cluttered at the same time. “How long have you lived here?”

“The last thirty-seven years. It was always a dream of mine to own a houseboat and sail around the world with it. Of course one of these things will set you back three mortgages just for the waterproof belly,” he chuckled, the sarcasm light on his tongue.

“Where are you from?”

“Long Island; of course it wasn’t what it is today when I was a lad.”

“How did you end up here?”

“You.”

“You sailed across the Atlantic just for me?” I asked, unable to hold back how stunned I was.

“Climb down off your high horse young lady. I’ve been this side of the Atlantic for a while, but it was my gramp’s

journal that lured me this way; particularly your role." He chugged a good bit of water, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "So where's the fella?"

"Back at the hotel," I replied hesitantly. For a human, he certainly knew an awful lot about me, journal or not, which didn't settle well given my current circumstances. "I, uh, should probably be getting back to him."

He studied me for a good long minute before shrugging. "Suit yourself, but you'll be back if you do leave now."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're curious. You don't know what possessed you to come down here and particularly come to my home. You also know that I'm more than meets the eye."

"How can you smell me?"

"I'm what they call a sensitive; always have been. All my senses are heightened like a vamp's, but my mind is keener. I have the patience to read people, not just smell their fear."

"Do emotions really have their own scent?"

"It's minimally different; I've become attuned. Right now you're leery of me still despite what I've shared; a bit frustrated and worried. I have a pretty good idea why from the journal, but what the hell. What's going on in your world right now?" He stood, taking his now empty cup to the sink for more water.

I waited for the serum to rise, for my hair to stand on end or for my gut instinct to lead me away, but alas my body remained tranquil despite my racing mind. He knew

so much, but didn't reveal anything. He hinted and riddled, but didn't tell or dispel.

"Why are we meeting? What's the point of me being here?"

He nearly fell into the chair, its legs squeaking under the pressure even though he couldn't have weighed more than one-fifty.

"There's a bit of spunk in you after all I guess," he stated.

My brows furrowed as I tried to read him. I didn't understand why I was destined to meet him.

"Stop analyzing me," he snapped.

I blushed slightly. "Sorry."

I wrapped my arms around myself as a draft crept in through a few cracks along the walls. "Don't you have a heater in here?"

"Used to. It crapped out a long time ago. Usually this time of year I head down towards the equator so I don't freeze my tail off, but I had an appointment I couldn't miss." He looked pointedly at me. He frowned, the lines in his cheeks and feathered lips deepening.

"What?"

"You're nothing like what I thought you'd be."

"What did you think I'd be like?"

"Just different." I tried not to take offense.

We sat in amicable silence for a bit. There was something about the man that was keeping me there.

"What's your name?"

“Wilbur Harfinkel.”

“Nice to meet you.” I offered him a courteous smile.

Abruptly I felt my phone buzz. I pulled it out of my pocket. It was Kellan.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?”

“The Marina.”

Silence met me on the other end.

“I don’t hear the wind. Where at exactly?”

“Damn he’s good,” Wilbur chuckled to himself.

“Who are you with?” Kellan spewed.

“Wilbur,” I stated his name as if he’d know who I was talking about.

“What happened to don’t trust anyone?” he nearly spit the words in my face through the phone. I sighed. Clearly he was on edge from whatever went down with Kai still.

“I’ll tell you about it later. Where are you all headed?”

“Some pub a few blocks down.”

“I’ll call you when I’m on my way.”

Again the silence stretched on. He was debating whether or not to insist I leave now; probably even going as far as to consider hunting me down. The only thing stopping him was the fact that it didn’t sound like I was in any danger; which I didn’t believe I was.

“You’ve got five minutes.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.” I closed the phone, seeing a knowing glint in Wilbur’s eyes.

“Guess the territorial rumors are true.”

“I guess.” I took a small sip of my water.

“Well, I guess I’ll wrap this up in one trip. Wouldn’t want a visit from an angry vamp; somehow I think I would notice a difference between them and us.” *Us? Why did he say us?*

He walked over to a small drawer in the corner. It stuck on something on the track. With a hard tug it finally passed the obstacle and opened just enough for Wilbur to squeeze his hand in to grab the contents. He pulled out a worn piece of parchment paper. I could tell it’d been handled quite a bit despite its hard to access location. “Here you go little miss.” He handed me the paper.

I opened it up expecting a letter addressed to me but found merely one sentence in old English script in the center of the page. *‘Don’t save the one you love.’*

It made no sense to me. “Are you sure this is it?” I asked, flipping the paper over, looking for more.

“I’m sure.” I sighed inwardly. Here I was hoping for a big break, yet all I got was a new puzzle to solve, something else to occupy my mind.

I looked up at Wilbur and immediately felt guilty. I was being selfish wanting all the answers. He’d sacrificed a lot to get this one line to me, and I was basically turning my nose up to it. Not wanting to leave him on that note I started a new conversation.

“Where are you heading after this?”

“Was thinking about Florida.”

“Sounds warm,” I smiled. I couldn’t stop myself from looking around with a crease in my brow. “Will your boat make it across the Atlantic again you think?”

He laughed heartily, his muscles finally relaxing. “She might not look like much, but she’s got a lot more in her.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you or, um, her.”

“Nah. Betsy’s been great. Those fancy new models are tempting, but you make do with what life gives you.”

His words hit home for me. I had to make do with what life gave me; regardless of how challenging it was. And regardless of how difficult it was at times, there was always someone in the world who had it harder. Looking at Wilbur’s home compared to mine was a prime example.

I stood, checking the clock on my phone. It’d been six minutes since I hung up with Kellan and I knew that he’d be calling me any second.

“It was a pleasure to meet you Wilbur. Thanks for the...” I didn’t know what to call the paper he’d given me so I just held it up and shook it a bit. “Thanks for this.”

“Would you mind humoring an old man before you go?” He slowly got to his feet, making a fuss over using the table as leverage.

“Sure?”

“Will you bite me?”

I knew my eyes shot open as my brows went up. “Excuse me?”

“I know all that curiosity killed the cat stuff, but do you mind?”

“You know my bite won’t turn you right?” He nodded eagerly, lifting the sleeve of his weathered jacket before extending his wrist. “Just bite or drink?” I checked.

He considered it for a few seconds before responding. “What the hell? You only live once. Drink,” he winked.

Before he could blink I secured his wrist under my teeth and bit down. His blood spewed over my tongue; he tasted sweet and warm with a bit of spice. His blood was the most luscious to ever hit my taste buds. Fearing I’d lose control and kill, I released him after only a few seconds. I waited for the serum to rise to heal him, but it didn’t come. I frowned as I watched his wrist heal itself before my eyes without my healing liquid. I swallowed the hard lump in my throat.

“What are you?”

“Not what; who.” His dark eyes focused on me, as if willing me to piece together the puzzle.

I jumped when my phone buzzed. I silenced it. I’d call him before he got here anyways.

“Who are you?” I took a good step back, needing a bit of space. It seemed like the moment I felt I was on solid ground, the earth quaked again.

“Good luck, Alexa. It was a pleasure making your acquaintance.” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Um, goodbye?” I shook my head slightly still trying to wrap my mind around it all. The nudging inside me told me it was important that I figure it out.

I turned towards the door, but stopped right before its frame. It was a shot in the dark, especially since his name was nothing close to Maximus Arturo or Sir Staten, but I

had to take the chance and check. It wasn't uncommon for vamps to change their names. "You wouldn't by chance be the one who predicted all of this would you?"

A broad grin covered his face, the crow's feet framing his eyes as they lifted at my question. "Be sure to heed those words."

I shook my head, tucking the paper inside my pocket right as my phone went off again. With a quick wave I left 'Wilbur' to map out his route to Florida.

"Hello?" I answered my phone.

"You shouldn't have wandered off alone," Kai stated. I was a bit surprised to hear his voice on the other end of the line.

"With how pissed you were at me I didn't think it'd matter to you."

"You matter too much to me; that's why." The words were ground out between his clenched teeth. At least we could both agree that we were uncomfortable with how we felt about each other.

"I'm on my way. I'll see you in a bit." I hung up, not wanting to draw out the tension. I text the same thing to Kellan and headed back towards the city center.

Kellan replied with the restaurant's address.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

I walked into the pub, the entire time my mind was consumed by what I'd just encountered. Wilbur wasn't human; I knew that for sure, but without my nose I didn't know exactly what he was. He said he hadn't been bit so that only left a vampeen unless there were other paranormal creatures walking this earth with us that I didn't know about. It would be exciting to discover other fictional characters weren't so fictional.

The pub was exactly what I always pictured a European pub to look like: scuffed wood everywhere, a bar taking up a good portion of the restaurant, TVs showing a rugby match and a futbol game. I walked over to the hard-to-miss group; we were steadily growing in numbers it seemed.

First thing I noticed was Aunt Claire wearing an outfit nearly identical to mine except her sweater was silver, earrings pearl studs, and her boots adorned a kitten heel. As if sensing my appraisal, she angled herself towards me in her chair on the end. She smiled mischievously. "You like it?"

"Sure?"

"It is the best form of flattery they say," she winked. She knew I wasn't thrilled to be dressed the same, but it was nice to see her out of a dress; a little strange, but nice.

I settled in next to Kellan, but Will was the one I needed to speak with. Kellan kissed my cheek the moment I sat down. I bounced my leg earning a raised brow from him.

After less than five seconds I cracked. "I need to talk to you right now Will. Please," I quickly added.

His eyes locked on me in an instant since he wasn't accustomed to outbursts as such from me. I watched him swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing with the effort, but he didn't appear to be nervous. "Of course." He promptly stood up to escort me outside to speak.

Everyone at the table stared me down, hard glares demanding answers. I didn't ease up. I grabbed Will's hand, a low growl erupting from two vamps at the table. I ignored them continuing to drag Will out of the noisy establishment.

The second we got outside, he adjusted his blazer. He was stalling as if he knew what was coming. "What can I help you with Alexa?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You already know that don't you?"

He cleared his throat. "No, I actually don't. Perhaps that's why I'm so disconcerted. For the first time on this mission, I've been blindsided. I'm not sure what's just happened to you," he frowned.

I cocked my head waiting for him to meet my eyes. The moment he did I saw the concern within them. He truly didn't know what was going on. Nerves coiled within me. I licked my teeth praying I hadn't just gotten a taste of vamp poison. Nothing was happening to me that I felt or saw, but I didn't know beyond that.

Brows furrowed as I stared off in the distance beyond Will, I considered my options. I didn't want my companions worrying any more than they already were. Serum began to rise in my throat as panic threatened to attack.

“Um, what do or did Maximus and Sir Staten look like?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

His harsh intake of breath was my only clue that he’d possibly pieced together what I’d encountered. “Maximus was a vampire changed at the tender age of seventeen. He had a Roman’s nose, strong angles on his face; dark brown hair, honey brown eyes nearly identical to yours.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, twisting as fear finally settled into his features.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um, well, Sir Staten is quite different and far more dangerous. He was a vampeen, but had some medical issues at the time of his transformation that allowed him to continue aging a full fifty years past the typical twenty-five. The technology of his time prohibited correction or even true diagnosis as to the problem. Many believed he would go through life with the abilities and cravings of a vampeen, but die the death of a human. Alas, he lived a full three-hundred and twelve years before his supposed assassination.”

“Supposed?”

“His death was never confirmed.” A shiver ran down my spine as goose pimples broke out over my skin despite not being exposed.

“How is he more dangerous?” I was fighting every urge in my body not to crumple into a tiny ball and crawl into a corner in horror; either that or shake every last drop of information out of Will.

“He has an excessive amount of paranormal abilities, far beyond what many could possibly conceive. He’s dangerous because no one truly understands the extent of which he’s capable, especially since his death was never

confirmed, and it was said that he was quite unpredictable.” Will stopped and stared at me pointedly. “I watched Maximus die; I was his liaison, his constant companion.” Fear rolled down my back. “You met him, didn’t you?”

I couldn’t respond; I merely shrugged my shoulders. If Sir Staten wanted others to know about our encounter, then he would have included it in his predictions. I felt like I was betraying him in some form by confirming Will’s suspicions.

I took a deep breath, calling upon my best acting abilities. “No,” I laughed. “But I got you good!”

Will’s expression turned sour in a split second. He was pissed. I would rather him be angry than to discover the truth though.

“I just came across a vamp that was a little strange. Didn’t look anything like the two you described though. Thanks for telling me about them though.” He softened a bit. I’m sure he thought the vamp had spooked me for me to jump him the second I arrived. “Let’s go eat,” I smiled.

He walked ahead of me and opened the door giving me a second to compose myself. Inside I was a mess. *What the heck have you done to me Sir Staten?*

I looked up and found Kellan at the door glaring at me. *“What happened?”*

Oh crap. I guess I accidentally projected that last thought, probably hoping to get it to him wherever the vampeen was by that point.

“It’s not important.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Please don’t push. I can’t... don’t, want to share it right now.”

“Clearly. You’re using your will power to block it from me.” He frowned, muscles tense; jaw taut.

I felt only slightly guilty. I knew in a relationship there weren’t supposed to be any secrets, but until I knew what Sir Staten did to me with his blood, I wasn’t sharing anything.

He continued to stare at me with appraisal in his eyes. He was deciding whether to let it go for now or push. He must have seen something because he sighed and turned back towards the others. I exhaled not realizing I’d been holding my breath. I closed my eyes for a second, taking a deep breath. I needed to focus. What’d happened couldn’t be changed. I needed to focus on what could be changed, and that was the outcome between Jack’s army and us.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Aunt Claire chimed as I sat down at the table.

“They’re worth a bit more today so sorry, but no.” She smiled and nodded taking no offense to my secrets, which I was grateful for.

I turned my attention to Gabi between Kai and Al near the opposite end of the table. As if sensing me she lifted her head right at that moment. “How are you?” She offered me a small smile and shrugged. “I’m here.” She nodded.

“Muffin sticks! These gufters have gator!” Craig exclaimed officially breaking the tension at the table. I chuckled. He was looking at the paper menu with a look of pure joy, like a child on Christmas day.

“I take it you like gator?”

“He loves it,” Kellan snickered. “We always said the crocodile hunter was his cousin because his parents always had gator meat.”

“How long did you live in Australia Craig?” He was lost in gator revelation still.

“He moved to Seattle when he was four. That’s why he’s got the accent but none of the actual Australian dialect,” Kellan said.

“I don’t think he even has the English dialect,” I said. Kellan laughed. I observed him staring down at his best friend with true brotherly love in his eyes. I knew he would do anything for Craig and vice versa, which was proven in Craig risking his life to be here.

“Ready?” the server asked. He was a rugged athletic looking guy; messy chestnut brown hair only added to his boyish good looks. I could see him attracting a lot of women, but he seemed a bit more interested in sports by the way he kept staring at the match on the TV.

“Gator!” Craig yelled. “A gleaping glub of the fried fritters.”

The guy cracked a smile. “How many orders is a gleaping glub?”

“Four orders,” Craig promptly replied. He seemed so animated; truly a kid in a candy store. I was definitely going to have to find some gator in Charleston when we returned.

The rest of us ordered fish and chips or sausage and chips. As soon as the waiter walked away, again watching the TV as he did so, the mood changed at the table. It was time for business.

“There’s been some activity on the south end of the city,” Kalel announced. “Flashes of movement have been spotted. Can’t make out the identity or identities though so for now we need to take extra precautions.” He stopped and looked directly at me. “No going out alone for anything. We need to do better than pairs even. We have a better chance in groups of three or larger, but should try to stick with one larger group as much as possible.”

“I’ve contacted the army and was assured that back up is in the area should we need it, but there would be a delay from the time they were notified to arrival,” Al stated.

I noticed John narrowed his eyes at Al. Thinking back to what he’d text me I knew what he was concluding: that Al was the leak. Looking at it from this new angle though, perhaps he was inadvertently. The way Auggy threw me to the sharks at the vampeen embassy didn’t sit well with me.

“Who are you reporting to?” I asked.

“Auggy.”

“Does the back-up know about the mission details?”

“No. They’ve just been ordered to roam the area and stay low.” Something wasn’t adding up to me. The more I thought about the embassy and Auggy the uneasier I became.

“*What’s wrong?*” Kellan pressed, taking hold of my hand beneath the table. I looked up at his emerald eyes gazing down into mine.

“John knew where we were because we have a mole in the group or a leak. I think your dad may be inadvertently leaking the information to the real mole: Auggy. How he handled the embassy just doesn’t sit right with me. I think there’s more to it, to him. I don’t think he’d set us up to fail

a mission on purpose, but he certainly hasn't been quiet about what we're doing this time around. With the Bladangs, no one knew."

Kellan tensed, squeezing my hand so hard I was surprised he didn't break anything, vamp or not. *"What's in it for him?"*

"What do you mean?"

"There has to be something in it for him. That's the only reason he would broadcast it. Auggy seems petty so it could be as little as pride to have the people who shut down the oldest vamp on his payroll, but we don't know for sure."

"I don't want to blast your dad, but I want him to stop all communication with the army. No company credit cards, no updates; nothing. We'll move hotels, go to the outskirts or to another city entirely if we need to, but I want to see. The fact that John works at the vampeen headquarters eliminates a lot of assumptions with this guess."

Kellan nodded his agreement. He and his dad locked eyes, silently communicating, though I didn't know how much was fully passed. Al shook his head, glancing at me; he had a stern look upon his face. I couldn't tell what he was feeling; if he was angry with me or even angry at all.

"Don't worry babe. He's not mad at you. He's mad at Auggy. I'll talk to him after, but I'm pretty sure he has the same conclusion you have." It was my turn to nod now.

"Anything exciting happen since the last time I saw you love?" John asked, this time choosing the native accent. He winked at me, eliciting a growl from Kellan.

"Hm. Let's see." I tapped my index finger on my chin. "I died; Kellan revived me somehow. We killed a room full of black ninjas. Our dear friend Rafi died at the hands of

the bastards. Oh, and we discovered we have a mole in the group." I squinted my eyes, staring off in the distance. "Yup, that's it. Nothing major." The sarcasm was dripping off my voice.

"Well damn. Aren't you just a pot of rosy?" he lightly chuckled, though it was clear he was now uncomfortable. Luckily they brought out our food right at that moment.

John stared down at the food before him, a war between skepticism and curiosity playing out in his eyes. I promptly opened a few blood packets into an empty dipping container and set it in front of him. He looked at me, silently gauging my offer.

"Try it. You can't turn your nose up to what you haven't tried," I said.

He stared down at his platter once more. After another glance around at all of us, including Al and Aunt Claire, whom I'd turned onto the notion at Christmas with all my delectable treats, he seemed more open to it. We were all absorbed in our consumption with random chatter filling the space between our smacks.

"Just do it!" I shouted.

He narrowed his eyes at me, silently screaming 'Challenge accepted.' He gazed into my eyes, holding my attention as he dipped a piece of sausage into the blood and shoved it into his mouth. He chewed slowly, never losing his focus on me. The moment he swallowed, I saw him waiting, anticipating, the regurgitation that didn't happen when we ate food. It was as if our bodies recognized the difference.

After a few seconds with no reaction, he finally beamed with delight at the revelation. "Whoa! That's bloody awesome!" he exclaimed, British accent in tow.

"Told you," I smirked.

He winked, oozing with charm. Kellan cut his eyes at John, but he just shrugged him off. "Don't get your nickers in a bunch. She still reeks of you."

Kellan visibly eased at that while I struggled not to tense. I looked down the table at Kai, who'd pushed his food away at the reminder. How did I ever end up in a Jacob - Edward triangle? I hated the tug and pull Bella endured, but could absolutely understand her hesitation. Unfortunately, for Kai, at this point, he was clearly Jacob and clearly the loser in this game of hearts.

One of the good things about my predicament was it distracted me from Sir Staten. I struggled not to think about what was coursing through my veins. I didn't feel any different, but then again I didn't know what I was expecting or even what to expect.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

As we walked out of the pub, Kellan leaned in close, taking my hand in his. “Are you sure you’re okay?” I gently nodded, always touched by his awareness of me. We both knew I wasn’t okay, but we also knew I didn’t want to talk about it.

Abruptly Kalel stood at attention in front of our pack. Nose up, he sniffed the air, almost how I pictured a werewolf to. The second his nostrils flared and eyes darted to me, I froze. *Oh crap.*

He was in front of me in a split second, my wrist to his nose. Kellan growled a low, harsh warning; he was tense beside me prepared to spring any second. Kalel inhaled my scent deeply. His eyes narrowed in their focus on me. *Oh God, he definitely scents it.*

“Where were you?” he demanded, no softness in his tone.

I looked beyond his dominance, overwhelming the space in front of me, to find the others copying his investigative sniff. One by one their eyes landed on me accusatively. I yanked my wrist from his grip and took a shaky step backwards. Kellan cocked his head, as if he was finally picking up on what the others already had.

“That’s you?” he asked. He tried to lift out entwined fingers towards his nose but I pulled back my hand before he could. “Where were you?” His tone was colder than Kalel’s, invisible barriers all around him. It’s not that they instantly thought I’d betrayed them, but they were looking at me as if I was the definition of trouble.

I swallowed the serum quickly rising to my defense and took another step away. “The marina,” I replied, no confidence in my voice.

“With who?” Kalel pressed. I felt the earth, the air, closing in all around me, growing thicker with each second that passed under their scrutiny.

My eyes flashed to Will who immediately pieced together my secret. I didn’t think the man could look more horrified.

“No... Really? No...” he stumbled, flipping through the pages of a binder like a mad man. “It... it just can’t. Oh dear heavens.” He was physically shaking.

“Will you stop muttering nonsense and tell us?” Gabi interjected.

“I... I... it just can’t be. I mean it’s not possible,” he continued mumbling, now writing with a vengeance.

“Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on and why I have this intense urge to drain Lexi?” Gabi yelled, a huff quickly following her outburst.

Kellan promptly settled himself in front of me. I looked around, grateful that there wasn’t much human traffic around at the moment, but still all the more uneasy with the situation.

“Let’s just go to the club like we agreed,” I said, hoping they’d forget about my new scent.

I flashed back to the second Sir Staten’s blood hit my tongue. The merriment of delicious flavors danced around on my tongue; his warmth sliding effortlessly down my throat. It felt so real.

“Lexi!”

My eyes snapped open to find I'd bitten Kellan's neck. In public. In front of the restaurant windows. I jumped away from him, my hand flying to cover my mouth and any blood on it. My pulse raced so loud I could barely hear my own thoughts. They all gaped at me in horror. Al and Craig had positioned themselves to block whatever view the diners would have had.

The concern on Kellan's face nearly broke me. He held a hard hand on the vein below my bite to stop the blood. The serum regurgitated in my mouth. I quickly covered my mark and ran away. I heard someone hold Kellan back while a few others argued over who should follow me. I didn't stop or even slow down. I ran at the quickest human pace in no general direction, just wherever the wind carried me.

What's wrong with me? I'd never lost consciousness like that before. I was always in control, or at least to the degree of keeping myself in check in public. This mission was testing me. I was either going to crumble or come out stronger than before. Thus far I wasn't doing too well. I was a mess; a whining whimpering pot of disaster with no backbone left. *Where the hell is my courage?* Where was the brave vampeen that started this mission?

"Lost my dear?" I halted immediately at the sound of her voice. I looked to my right to find Imara standing in the doorway of a small shop advertising tarot card readings, psychic readings and few other mediums. At the crease in my brow and confusion on my face, she waved me inside.

Inside, the space was a diverse mix of rich patterns, textures and colors found in the Middle East. Deep reds, dark purples, burnt orange and midnight blue painted a royal palate. The knick-knacks of gold Buddha's, Kali and the sun and moon filled in all the gaps on the wall-to-wall

bookshelf that lined the left wall. Ancient books of varying binds added a warm layer of character to the space. Candles, again in varying colors, sat on the remaining available surfaces as the smell of pungent incense floated through the shop.

She gestured to the dark mahogany table and chair set in the center of the room. She lit all the white candles in the room and closed the purple velvet curtains, instantly creating a cocoon of warmth.

“The white candles will calm your spirit, but likewise enlighten you to its truth,” she stated, taking a seat across from me at the table. She stared directly at me, patience in her aura.

“Um, how long have you had this place?”

She smiled. “That’s not what you really want to know.”

She grabbed my hands, turning them palm up, and placed her own atop mine. She closed her eyes. As if she was projecting her energy over me, a veil of peace settled around me.

“Oh, my dear,” she softly cooed. “Your spirit is lost. Your heart is not speaking with your mind; you are not aligned with your desires. You have lost your tender balance of life. You are wandering aimlessly and will surely suffer at the hands of fate if you do not reconnect with yourself.”

A sob escaped me. She knew exactly what it was I was going through. She probably was the only one. Not even Kellan knew it all. I had lost my focus; I felt like a stranger even to myself.

“Calm down child. You are strong. Your spirit belongs to a warrior; the same silent strength your mother had.”

I swallowed the waterfall of tears quickly brimming. The doctor said that vampeens were the most vulnerable and emotional in their first year after transition, but because of the death of my parents so abruptly following it, I was even more volatile. It didn't change the way I felt about my weakness and general state. It wasn't an acceptable excuse for me. I couldn't be weak. I couldn't fall apart on a whim. I had to be strong.

"Strength lies in both the tears shed and unshed Alexa. You know what you are capable of, what you are destined to accomplish. You have nothing to fear. Staten has ensured that you will have what you need."

"What do you mean? How do you-" She raised a questioning brow at me, challenging my doubt. "Right. Of course you would know about him with all your... gifts?"

"Yes, they are gifts. The gods bless us with the gifts they believe we deserve to aid us in our journeys. You know you are special because of a preset path, but you do not feel that you are special. It is by obligation only that you press on, not from true heart. In order to save your life and those of the ones you love, you must find the missing link. Your heart and mind must align. You cannot love if your mind does not accept. Likewise, you cannot succeed if your mind does not allow."

I'd only known Imara for a short time, but she didn't cease to amaze me. She was so connected. It was as if she was the essence of Mother Earth. She had such a strong understanding of life and every facet of self.

"Thank you." I offered her a small smile. She squeezed our joined hands once before releasing me. I was expecting the blanket of comfort to leave me raw the moment she pulled away, but alas it didn't.

“They are near,” she stated. I knew she was talking about my friends, my lover, my family. “Take your time Lexi. Do not make haste when your inside is not prepared for the physical fight.”

I heard them round the final corner; the grumbling of Kai, Kalel and Kellan carried into the shop. I stood and extended my hand. “Thank you so much. I don’t know how you knew I needed you, but I really appreciate it nonetheless.”

She reached into a hidden pocket within her dress and handed me a card. “This will tell you how to reach me should you ever need me, although I’m already attuned to you.” I took the card, flipped it backwards and forwards, confusion settling into the creases on my forehead. It was a blank white business card. “When you truly need me, the words will reveal themselves. Until then, rely on your own inner strength that we both know is there.”

I didn’t know whether I wanted to hug her or hate her for her confidence in me. It was unnerving, yet empowering at the same time.

I tucked the business card in my pant’s pocket right as the guys burst through the shop door; their narrowed gazes passed between Imara and me. I cleared my throat, turning back to Imara. “Thanks again.”

I walked straight up to the guys, grabbed Kai and Kellan’s hands and dragged them out of the shop knowing the others would follow suit. “We need to talk,” I blurted the second we were a good fifty feet from Imara’s business.

“Let’s head back to the hotel to avoid eavesdroppers,” Kai suggested. I nodded in agreement, allowing them to lead the way. I didn’t even recall how I’d gotten to Imara’s; my mind was so preoccupied that I couldn’t find my way

back if my life depended on it. Okay, so technically I could follow the lingering scent of the pub off in the distance, but that would only take me back to the restaurant.

—

We all gathered in Kalel's room. He and Al made quick work of their surveillance systems while Will took over the desk, his papers covering every possible square centimeter of it. He was still engrossed in his notes.

Aunt Claire placed a gentle hand on my left shoulder, slinking her arm around me. "I love you Lexi, but we need to nip this thing in the bud. I can't lose you."

"I know," I nodded.

I sat down on the bed beside Craig. He nudged me, a wide grin on his face; he was always breaking the tension. I took a deep breath, looking around at the firing squad. Slowly they gave me their attention, but their arms were folded protectively over their chests. I had a lot of explaining to do.

"What gives Lex? We've all sacrificed a lot to be here. I don't even want to talk about what we've lost since we arrived. You owe us an explanation at the very least," Gabi said, no cajoling whimsy in her tone. I couldn't blame their attitude, especially hers. I couldn't say I'd have been as forgiving as her if I'd lost Kellan in a battle that wasn't even ours.

"I owe you guys a lot. I messed up; I've continually messed up. I thought I was protecting you by keeping certain things from you, but I've only made things worse. Please don't take this the wrong way because I appreciate you all so much, but I feel this huge pressure because you all are here. I..." I sighed, trying to find the right words to express myself. "It's like I have all these kids to watch and

protect when it would be so much easier just looking out for myself.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me. How about you count how many times we’ve saved your ass while you climb down off your high horse,” she ordered, disdain oozing from her.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. We’re all on edge right now and I just feel more pressure with you all around. I know you mean well, and admittedly you have helped me out a lot. I can’t change the way I feel though.” I fiddled with my hands, staring down at my fingers twisting and untwisting around each other.

“So you want us to leave?” Kalel asked. I swallowed the hard lump that appeared out of nowhere in my throat.

“I would feel better if you did.” My voice was barely above a whisper, but I knew they’d heard every word.

“Well tough. You may not want us here Leka, but we know you need us here. *Ohana* sticks by each other through good times and bad; through good decisions and bad decisions. Now why don’t you tell us what we’ve all apparently missed so we don’t have to constantly be watching our backs for more than ninja assassins and random bites in public?” Heat colored my cheeks. My eyes glanced across the room at Kellan. I relaxed just a bit when his eyes softened at meeting mine. It meant while he was mad, he wasn’t going to punish me more than I’d already punished myself.

I felt bad. I wasn’t without guilt over everything. I wasn’t ungrateful for all they’d sacrificed and done for me. Truthfully, I felt like they were running this mission more than me. This mission would be completely different

without them. I couldn't even say that I'd be alive right now if it wasn't for them.

With my tail between my legs, I shared everything with them. No secrets. I didn't even ask John, the newcomer, to leave. If I wanted things to get better, if I wanted to be able to focus on more than this constructed wall between myself and the others, I had to give a little, take the risk and expose the most vulnerable parts of me. Perhaps they had something to offer, but at the least they would be better equipped to help me in this mission.

"Hoppin poppin buppin puffs," Craig said once I finished telling them about Imara, Sir Staten and my overall mental debates. It came out more as a surprised sigh; like a 'And I thought I had problems' statement.

I hated to admit it, but I felt much better letting everything out. I felt free, as if part of the burden had lifted off of me. Slowly my confidence began to build as I met the nonjudgmental eyes of my supporters. Even as I looked around the room, the connection was slowly forging. I was regaining my footing, being reminded of why I pursued this mission. Whether home or abroad, these people were at risk because they were associated with me. Whether they were here or not, their necks were on the line too. Jack had no mercy, as he'd shown with Rafi. And it was about time I used that as my leverage, rather than my enabling fear.

"It's good to have you back girl," Gabi beamed, yanking me into a bear hug. I laughed, falling into her embrace.

"Do you want us to test your blood?" Kalel asked. "We can tell you exactly what he gave you."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I expect people to trust me, but I realized that I hadn't been so trusting of them. He

clearly didn't want to hurt me, or he could have. I'm going to leave well enough alone and let destiny run its course." He nodded.

"Clearly you've covered more ground than we originally believed," Will stated, notebook in hand. "You're ahead of schedule according to my timeline."

"When will I get to actually see this timeline?"

"Never!" Aunt Claire declared. "You're not supposed to honey. It'll really loosen a few screws in your head if you did. You're just going to have to follow through on your promise and start to trust us."

"What's next then?" Gabi asked, wrapping her arm around my waist and pulling us hip to hip. She frowned down at where we were touching. "On second thought, let me not stand next to you. I'd rather not be the fat person on the fat versus skinny comparison chart."

"Oh hush!" I threw my arm around her waist, holding her to me.

"Well, on the upside, I can eat my weight in depression over Rafi and not gain anymore weight." She tried to smile, but it was forced.

"I'm really sorry Gab."

"It's not your fault," she shrugged.

"I feel like it is."

"Well, you did give him permission to haunt you if he lost his life while on this mission. Knowing him, he's probably going to be having a little after life fun with you. He was always the last one suspected, but the first one to cause mischief if you really knew him." This time the smile was genuine though it still didn't touch her eyes.

“Have at it Rafi,” I chuckled.

“We probably shouldn’t exchange blood anytime soon until we know what *he* gave you,” Kellan said.

“That would probably be best,” Al agreed. I felt myself blush slightly at announcing the romantic exclusion to the group.

“He probably just had her bite him so he could track her. Now that his blood’s in her system, he can track her anywhere in the world. It was one of his known abilities,” Will offered absently, his nose in the binder in front of him.

“Can’t you always track someone once they’ve had your blood?”

“No. Having them take your blood only changes their pheromones for a short time. Actually exchanging blood back and forth is the only permanent way to track someone, but even that’s not guaranteed since they’d have to be within a certain mile radius,” Al explained.

“Oh.” With my nose, the only person I smelled was Kai, but even then I could only pick him out in a crowd, not necessarily track him.

“God this is like watching some horrible episode of The Brady Bunch as adults and on a dangerous mission,” John commented.

“The Brady Bunch? Really?” Gabi scoffed. “We’re a million times better than that perfect dysfunctional family.”

“Either they’re perfect or dysfunctional, which one is it?” John smirked.

“Don’t play the annoying little brother role. I’ll eat you alive baby,” she smiled so pleasantly it was wicked. Gabi never turned down a challenge.

“Bring it *baby*,” John gave Gabi a come-hither wave with both hands, cockiness written all over him.

“Dally wags. What the fizzle are we doing listening to this crapple of rubbish?” Craig sat unentertained on the edge of the bed, his lips quirked up. His demeanor was easy going, his fit surfer’s body relaxed in his soft blue polo and jeans as he watched the goings on of the room unfold before him.

“Well, now that we’re all one happy little family once again, what do you say we hit the town and have a little overdue fun?” Aunt Claire suggested.

I couldn’t help but notice that everyone had relaxed into the easy conversation and banter except Kai. He was still standing stiffly across the room, arms folded and barriers erect. He locked eyes with me, but revealed no emotion in his gaze.

“Only if we inject a little business in there,” Kael said. “We need to be listening in for any updates on Jack’s location. Will told us we were supposed to be in Cardiff, but so far we haven’t gotten any proof backing that. We don’t want to miss anything.”

“Agreed,” Aunt Claire stated. “Let’s keep our listening ears open while we shake our booties with a bunch of natives.” She winked at me and Gabi.

“Let’s take the next ten minutes to get ready and we’ll head out. Let’s go freshen up ladies,” Gabi smiled, linking arms with me and Aunt Claire and leaving the guys to do whatever it was they would do for the next ten minutes.

The second we walked out the hotel room door, we stopped dead in our tracks. “The timeline is off,” Aunt Claire gulped out.

“Oh shit,” Gabi stated, eyes wide at the sight before us.

—

Chapter Twenty-Four

The black ninja walked right up to me and bowed to me. Gabi, Aunt Claire and I exchanged a confused look. I knew I should be in attack mode, but when he wasn't posing a threat, why would I initiate something?

He turned back around to face the other three lined up across the hall. I was just coming to the conclusion that Jack was into mind games, attacking us one minute and then playing nice the next, when the ninja spun around and stabbed both women with a dart at once in the center of their chests.

"No!" I screamed as they collapsed in my arms. I felt the ring of red that circled my eyes. I launched myself at the ninja, who blocked me as if I was merely a fly he was swatting away.

I saw the others racing, stumbling upon the scene when I sprung from behind the ninja again. With a quick twist I snapped his neck, effectively killing him with one swift move. I looked at the others, still standing along the wall. They hadn't moved a muscle. The guys gathered behind me, all of us in a standoff when one of them pulled an envelope from inside their robe and handed it to me. I stared at it for a while, the adrenaline still coursing through me. *'Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me'* resounded in my mind.

With a shaking hand I snatched the envelope from them. The moment it was between my fingers, they turned in unison and marched away from us as if nothing had happened, as if this was merely a military drill.

I turned back to Aunt Claire and Gabi. Kai had pulled Gabi into his arms; Al had Aunt Claire. I closed my eyes, trying not to lose the uneasy grip I had on myself and the situation. After all that happened today; after all we'd recovered, to then just lose it all. Words couldn't describe how angry I was.

"Open it," Kellan bit out.

I stared down at the plain white envelope. Flipping it over, it had Jack's custom seal fastening it closed. I ran my finger beneath the flap, opening it warily.

*One, two, three
Play along with me;
Soon you'll know
Who will stay and who will go.
One may die,
Both may not,
Either way a lesson will be taught.
See your weakness,
Face your fear,
For our confrontation is growing near.
Love Always,
-Jack*

I wanted to scream; I wanted to rip the structure of the building apart piece by piece. I never knew anger could be felt in every centimeter of my body. I never knew I could feel such rage that world destruction was actually being considered. This was all a game to him; I was a mouse and he was a cat playing with his food.

"Is there an empty warehouse nearby?"

"I can Google one," Kai offered.

"Combat. Are one of you up for some heavy one on one?"

“Babe, I don’t think that’s-“ I silenced him with a raised hand.

“I need this Kellan. He’s fucking with me. He’s freaking mind-fucking me and I’m done. Read this and then tell me I shouldn’t go spar with one of you.” I passed him the note. He quickly skimmed the words, sighing as he neared the end. We both looked at the two women on the floor. Craig and Al were moving them to Kalel’s room.

“Fine. Someone needs to stay behind with them though in case one or both of them actually come out of this alive.” He ground out the words, flicking his hand haphazardly in the general direction of the door.

“What did he say Leka?” Kai pressed. Kellan passed him the paper. Kai’s nostrils flared, hands quickly forming fists around the page. Kalel snatched it from him, doing the same shortly thereafter.

“I’m going to put you through the ringer. Everything is going to be about your reflexes. By the end of tonight, we all need to be prepared to block anything and everything we see, hear or feel coming in an instant. No delayed reactions. We can’t afford to lose anyone else.”

“We should change hotels before we go,” Al suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea, but clearly this asshole has no problem finding us wherever we go,” Kalel countered.

“We should still take precautions,” Al pressed. I took in the set of his jaw, the flare of his nostrils as he exhaled. He was feeling it too.

“Agreed,” Kalel nodded.

“How are we going to get them out without anyone knowing?” I asked the obvious.

“We’ll let the vamp army take care of it,” Al stated.

“I think they’re the ones leaking our locations. John had easy access to us and he’s with the embassy where Auggy was pretty darn chummy with the vamps, including blasting our mission.” Al seemed torn. He was supposed to report out of obligation for his current position, but it could be what was compromising the life of his son and future daughter-in-law.

“If they let you go, I’ll hire you,” Kalel offered, deciphering Al’s hesitation.

“If they are the ones leaking the information out, then we have a much bigger problem.” His eyes passed between Kellan and me.

“We can only face one thing at a time, and right now, I’m more concerned with being prepared for the next attack rather than contemplating who may have caused the last.”

“We’ll pack Gabi, Claire and ourselves,” Kellan said.

“I’ll call Art, have him send over a few guys from our British unit,” Kai added.

“Get off of me!” I raced into the room at the sound of a vivacious, and irritated, Gabi.

“You’re okay!” My arms went around her squeezing her with utter and complete joy and relief.

“Of course I’m okay. Ninjas can’t get rid of me that easily,” she scoffed sarcastically.

She yanked the dart that was still situated in the center of her chest out. “Where’s-“ Her voice dropped off at the sight of Aunt Claire. “Oh God. I’m so sorry Lex.”

I'd been trying to ignore it, trying not to think about Aunt Claire possibly being gone too. I didn't know if I was prepared to deal with another loss. Anger and sadness flooded my surface again, my serum quickly rising in tide.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

'Bad feeling. Is everything okay???' It was from Mel. She had impeccable timing. Maybe we were connected somewhere along the line.

I didn't want to worry her, so I text back *'We'll talk later.'*

I was just returning my phone to my pocket when it buzzed again. *'That bad huh?'*

I smiled. She knew me so well. *'Yeah.'*

'Anything I can do from lonely hell?'

'No, thanks. Take care of yourself. Love you.'

'Same to you. Love you ☐'

Looking at Aunt Claire down for the count, Gabi just regaining consciousness, and knowing my best friend was half a world away, well, so an ocean away, counting on me, suddenly everything connected for me once again. I was doing this so Aunt Claire didn't have to look over her shoulders forever, so Gabi could vindicate Rafi's death, so my best friend could go through her transformation and enter my world, our world, without an immediate threat to her life. I was doing this for all those who had supported me along the way, for my parents and all they sacrificed to get me to this point in my journey. I was doing this for myself too. I deserved a good life with Kellan; I was molding the world my children would enter and I'd be

damned if they came into a life that was limited because of old wars and outdated hypocrisies.

I looked directly at Kellan, my heart on my sleeve, my emotions hung between us. His eyes focused entirely on me; it was as if we were the only two people in the room. I was lucky he was still by my side; I was so grateful for him. He was my silent strength. His lips lifted in the corners, his dimple slightly visible as he nodded at me. He understood. He knew where my mind was, and he always knew my heart because he held it.

He closed the distance between us and captured my lips in a bruising kiss. *"I've always got your back."* He pulled away, staring down into my eyes, his emerald piercing my brown.

"I love you."

"I love you forever."

"So are we going to kick some ass or what?" Gabi broke in.

"Let's do this," I said, still looking at Kellan. He nodded.

"Such a tender moment. Do you always have to be so rude Gabriella?" Will clucked.

"They have forever to suck face and exchange love songs," she shrugged. She stood a little too quickly and swayed. Craig caught her in time. "Woah! Mira pendejos! What the heck did they give me? My legs feel like jelly."

"Sit down now," I ordered. "Kalel," I called; he immediately ran into the room. "Can you run a trace on the contents of this dart? Maybe draw a bit of blood from Gab

and find out what they gave her. She can't stand up right now."

"It's probably a mixture of knock out meds with a temporary paralysis injection," he mused, pulling out a few instruments from his luggage. He ran a q-tip along the inside of the syringe and collected a few drops of Gabi's blood onto a clear, square piece of plastic as well as a few strips of paper that instantly turned different colors. "Looks like he did a combo of amaryllis and black locust bark. If you were human, you'd be dead."

"Fudge rucker," Craig said, all of us looking to Aunt Claire at the same time.

"She's vampeen, fifty-fifty. What are her chances?"

Al walked up to her and touched her pulse point. "Her pulse is very weak."

"What if one of you guys gave her some of your blood? She's vampeen; your blood is more potent than ours." Kai surprised me by biting his wrist and opening Aunt Claire's mouth to allow the blood to run in. "She won't... change, will she?" Bad afterthought moment.

"No. It's just as if she exchanged blood and claimed a mate. She'll be a little unbalanced for a while since she'll have more vampire DNA in her system, but she'll level out," Al explained. I nodded, my anticipation growing with each passing second that she didn't respond. Kellan pulled me into him, his arms cocooning my back to his chest. He gently kissed my head, a soft reassurance of sorts. "You've given her enough Kai."

Kai withdrew his wrist, the wound healing almost immediately. "Sorry Leka," he said, genuine sorrow in his expression. I broke away from Kellan and pulled Kai into a hug. At first he stiffened before relaxing into me. He felt

different; I fit into the plains of his chest perfectly, as with Kellan. Physically they were nearly identical in build though Kai was a bit larger in bulk than Kellan, but in feel, Kellan just felt like a cup of hot chocolate on a cold winter day in front of the fire. It was tiny, subtle differences like this that solidified my decision.

“Thanks for trying,” I smiled, gently disentangling myself from his tight hold.

“You all should go. Will and I will stay behind and pack everything. I have an old friend who owes me a favor up the coast; I’ll call him in. I trust him,” Al offered.

“Sure you’ll be okay, Dad?”

“I’m sure. Keep your eyes open though,” he warned.

“Will, it’s time for you to get a little dirty. Borrow one of Kellan’s outfits if you need to because your buttons are about to be popped off. I need you to be more than just a sideline right now. I need you to step up your game and become more of a supporter than a cheerleader right now.” He frowned, already wrinkling his nose at the suggestion. “Help Al help us. Wouldn’t you like to write down a bit of what you did in that journal of yours?”

He seemed to contemplate my words for a bit. “My role isn’t to be involved Lexi. My role is to manage; to assist you in staying on the right path. Nothing more.”

“Well you can either help Al or pack your crap and go. I don’t need another body to watch; I need a soldier. You’re a freaking vampire Will. Don’t be snooty about this.”

He took a deep breath, his eyes traveling the room. “Fine. I’ll help.”

“Thank you Eislom,” I beamed overly enthusiastically. He rolled his eyes, a pout on his lips.

“I’ve located an abandoned factory a few blocks away, heading back towards the marina,” Kalel announced.

“Awesome. Let’s go. I can’t wait to kick each and every one of your butts,” I laughed.

“Keep talking that crap, but we’ll see who’s still standing in the end,” Kellan bantered.

“Right on mate,” Craig bellowed.

“I definitely want a piece of your ass on a platter,” John growled.

“I’m not going to read into that any further,” I replied.

“Neither am I or else we might start fighting early,” Kellan stated dryly.

“Kick his ass for me please Lex,” Gabi hollered.

“I will.”

“Tag teams then one on one,” Kai said. “It’ll help us to work as a group, but also be prepared if we’re caught alone.

“Sounds good to me.” And it felt good too. I finally felt like I was back on the right track; like I was finally making use of all my resources. We’d be prepared for sure the next time Jack and his team came at us. I had enough emotional ammo to fuel a bomb that could knock half the world off the map.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The factory still held all the manufacturing equipment in it. A few broken windows near the top of the thirty-foot walls had allowed the salt from the ocean infused air to rust a lot of the pieces.

“This is perfect,” I smiled, rubbing my hands together. The pieces were perfect for simulating a fight around real objects that very well could be in our way. We’d already fought in a hotel room; and before then in other locations that had obstacles to be aware of during combat too. We had to be prepared for anything; I was learning that slowly but surely. We had to be ready for anything at any time in any place.

“Let’s start by breaking up into two even teams. Kai, Leka, and Craig; you’ll be fighting me, John and Kellan. Start out in opposite corners of the space, it’ll give us practice in hiding, keeping a low profile when approaching our enemy and also just maneuvering quietly in general.”

“Get ready to be slaughtered,” I smirked, turning and heading to the other side of the factory where the belts began their assembly line roller coaster.

“Sliggy worm is who I am,” Craig chanted.

“Why a worm?” I saw Kai shake his head in dismay beside me, probably wondering why I even bothered entertaining Craig.

“He’s the worm that lives in Bikini Bottom but is never eaten. He’s super smooth, super slick; he’s a super slug.” He added some sort of karate hand jab at the end of his sentence.

“We need to focus. This could be life or death for any of us,” Kai said, quickly sobering us back to reality; a harsh reminder that this wasn’t a game.

“Agreed,” I nodded. “Should we head around the perimeter or cut straight through?”

“Both. Two of us can go down the center of the room while one person stalks the perimeter in case you two get caught head on or are converged in on.”

“Based on your words, I take it me and Craig are heading straight into it as the targets.”

“I have more experience and am more aware of my surroundings.”

“Shouldn’t you be in the middle of everything then?”

“No, I’ll be better on the outside.”

“I’m down mate,” Craig agreed.

“I guess that works.”

“It’s best to save your energy. Dodge their attempts until they get so frustrated that they get sloppy. Then hit them with a swift, straight blow to the chest, and never attack straight on from behind, they could easily turn at the last second and stab you head on.”

“Well then. I guess let’s split up. See you on the other side,” I said. Kai nodded and sunk down, quietly inching along the back wall towards the right side of the room.

Craig and I looked at each other, nodding in understanding that we were to watch each other’s backs as we entered the war zone. He jerked his head, signaling for me to go first. I ducked under a table-height belt, scanning the area as far as my eyes allowed in the darkness before waddling a few feet. I stood, pressing my back against a pass through, where something used to stamp, mold or cut the items that were on the line. Craig followed my moves, arriving at the post right when I turned and squatted to head further into the trenches.

We maneuvered our way through the maze of equipment, slick and silent. When we neared the other end of the space without seeing the others I began to worry. Anxiety coursed through my veins. My body was on edge. I was anticipating an attack, someone springing themselves at me at any second, but the longer it didn’t happen, the more careless I became with my moves. I was inviting them to take advantage of my reckless behavior.

I glanced to the right and found Kai approaching us, not even bothering to hide his movement. He must have hit the same impatient point I was at. We’d taken over ten minutes darting around the space silently. The second we all came together, I heard the whoosh of air above us. Kellan, Kalel and John flew down from an overhead metal walking plank. *Crap. We didn’t look up!*

They all landed behind one of us, their arms making quick work of our necks trying to snap them. Kai, Craig and I held tightly to their forearms and sent them flying over our heads. Their bodies slammed into each other, launching off the limbs of another in their collision.

They landed on their feet despite the mid-air fumble and came at us directly. Kalel came at me strong; John not going easy on Craig, and I heard Kai and Kellan going at it pretty harshly at my side. With that match up though, I think they'd been waiting for an excuse to really spar.

At the last second Kalel darted right; thinking quick, I turned to my right so we would collide head on in the middle. I lifted my leg to kick him right as I rounded fully; he caught my leg and flipped me backwards, tossing me into the heavy metal of a nearby machine. I immediately leapt to my feet in one swift move. I launched myself at him, aiming slightly off center having a feeling he would move. He did, but I caught his left shoulder, taking him down to the cement floor.

A struggle of strength ensued as we rolled over and under each other. He squeezed my knee cap between his muscular thighs, effectively popping it out of place. With my free leg I delivered a kicked straight to the back of his head with the toe of my shoes, catching him off guard with the move. He stumbled, letting go of his strong lower body grip. I took advantage of his weakness, sliding my hands down his chest, grabbing his shirt and sending him flying backwards. He landed on one of the belts, the metal below it creaking and cracking under the pressure.

I popped my kneecap back in place and wasted no time with my onslaught again. He blocked my punch, catching my wrist and twisting my arm behind my back and upwards to dislocate my shoulder. I winced as the pain shot through my upper back and arm. Damn he wasn't playing fair. Weren't there lines we weren't supposed to cross in simulated fights?

I swung around and kneed his family jewels earning a gasp from him. His arms went out right as I ducked and

punched his knee. I leapt up and over his jerk reaction as he kicked out at me. On the way down though he caught my chin with an uppercut that sent me flying into the air. I landed on my feet on a belt heading up at an angle towards the second floor line. I turned and ran up the track, reaching the top in no time. I looked below to find Kalel heading up another line across from me. I raced towards him, hoping to build more speed than him, which would give me more strength when I pounced.

We launched ourselves at the same time; him doing a round kick, me springing straight towards his extended limb. I wrapped myself around his leg and bit hard into him. He hissed trying to flick me off as we landed with a loud thud on the cement floor, effectively cracking the concrete beneath us. Only then did I release him, but not without yanking a chunk of his pants and skin off.

He narrowed his eyes at me, growling fiercely as I wiped his blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. His chest puffed in and out as he watched me. I knew he was calculating his next approach, but I couldn't help but think something else flashed through his mind as well.

Abruptly, I caught sight of movement overhead. I instinctively jerked my head in that direction. Kalel cocked his head in front of me. I pointed a finger upwards. He stepped in front of me, withdrawing his dagger. Without warning he took off at top speed, racing up the maze of belts. Before he reached the top a ninja dropped out in front of me.

"Guys!" I yelled as a flood of them flew down from overhead. "Holy sugarplums." I knew my eyes were wide with horror. There were at least eighteen of them.

I tackled the closest one to me, flinging two off me as others came at me from behind. I was barely missing their

attempts as I ducked and jumped, spun and twirled in and out of their three against one slaughter. I got lucky and two attacked each other when I escaped at the last possibly nanosecond, leaving me to handle the one.

A flash of silver in the moonlight caught my attention. "John!" Ignoring the ninja in my way I raced full force, with all my heart, soul and strength. I'd be damned if these guys got another one of my family members or friends. John heeded my warning blocking the downward stab with his forearm.

Adrenaline screamed from within my veins. These guys were pissing me off! I was tired of their freaking herbal elixirs delivered with a fast, harsh blow. I'd lost so much already and I didn't deserve to lose anymore. I shouldn't have to lose any more. It was time Jack felt what it was like to lose.

I arrived in front of the ninja John was holding back, my anger palpable in my every move. I reached out without thinking and ripped the neck off the ninja. It was so quick that blood didn't even spray out immediately.

"What the fuck?" John exclaimed. His eyes wide as he glared at me, taking a few steps away from me.

"What?" I looked around to find every ninja in the room had stopped and were starting to back out of the space. I sought Kellan. "Kellan?" I watched his Adam's apple bob as he looked me up and down.

I looked down and gasped, immediately finding what had stopped them dead in their tracks. My veins, the blood coursing through my veins, was glowing, like a toxic river running beneath my skin. I held my hands out in front of me watching the steady lamination; trying to hold onto my

sanity when I just wanted to lose it. “What’s wrong with me?” I cried. “Oh God,” I shuddered.

My breathing became erratic as panic began to set in. I pushed down on my skin, but nothing happened. The light flexed beneath my pressure, but didn’t dwindle. I looked around at each of them helplessly, pleading for an answer.

Like my Savior coming forth, Kellan walked right up to me and pulled me into his arms. “It’s okay, babe. Nothing’s happening beyond a neon light show. I’m here, and I’m not leaving you,” he soothed, rubbing his hand up and down my back. I wrapped my arms around him, pressing my face into his chest.

“Holy shit,” John stated. I pulled back and looked at him, unsure how it could get much worse. “When he touched you, it... it went away. It’s like he’s your bloody light switch,” he gawked.

I looked down at my skin, relief washing over me the second I saw I was back to normal. I exhaled, letting out a shaky breath.

“Damn, that Sir Staten fellow was no joke,” John harrumphed. There was a bit of awe in his voice, but no reverence. He was impressed by the power, but didn’t respect the idea of it.

“We need to get out of here,” Kai bit out, stalking towards the door.

“I’ll send someone in to clean up this mess,” John offered.

“Thanks,” Kalel said, heading after Kai.

“They left a note for you Leka,” Kai called as he pushed open the door. Dread settled in the pit of my

stomach. It'd been one heck of a night already, and it hadn't even been five hours since Jack delivered his last note.

I took it from his hand, walking outside as I opened it, trying to brace myself, but lacking preparation time.

*You've slain eighteen
Now you must slay me
No second chances Lexi
See you in El Yunque
-Jack*

"Where's El Yunque?"

"Puerto Rico," Kai answered.

"I guess we're going to Puerto Rico," I sighed. Kellan read the note and passed it around to everyone. "At least the end is near; whether it's good or bad doesn't matter. At least it's near."

—

Chapter Twenty-Six

Back at the new hotel we all showered and changed, agreeing to meet in Kalel's room as usual. This hotel had an actual living room in each suite. I curled up on the loveseat, tucked into Kellan's chest in my Juicy Couture velour outfit Aunt Claire had given me for my birthday. Gabi was getting around just fine now, and while Aunt Claire had regained consciousness, she needed to be seen by the doctor and under a watchful eye as she recovered. I tried not to let the guilt consume me, but couldn't help my conscience which was adamantly blaming me for the entire experience. I'd broken down and called Auggy when we returned. We were leaving for Puerto Rico soon anyways, so it wouldn't matter

if he knew our whereabouts at the moment. He'd agreed to come out himself though, which was surprising.

I heard the thud on the hotel room door and knew it was him. He'd been in Scotland and had agreed to charter a flight right away. I didn't know what to make of it truthfully. One minute he was helping us, the next hindering. I was on the fence about him entirely.

"What took you so long to answer?" he grumbled the second I opened the door.

"Don't start with me. I've had a hell of a day no thanks to you."

"What the hell does that mean?" he pressed, walking in behind me.

"Who knows about this mission Augustine?"

"I take it by the use of my full first name you think I'm to blame somehow."

"Kiss that brain!"

"There's no need to be a smart ass. That's my job. Now just what in God's name do you think I've done?"

"First off, I didn't appreciate being thrown to the wolves at the vampeen headquarters."

"Cut the shit Lexi. You're the first and only vamp to ever mouth off to me. If you could do that with me, I knew you could handle a room full of sharks."

"What all did you tell them prior to this meeting of the wolves?"

"That you were going after Jack. Nothing more and nothing less. I told them all questions had to go through you, that I wasn't saying anything else."

“Then who the hell leaked our location every time?”

He narrowed his eyes as he thought for a bit. “Did you use credit cards or cash for all your purchases?”

My face blanched. “Crap.”

“Uh huh. I won’t bother to ask for an apology. Now where is that aunt of yours?”

“Resting in Al’s room.”

“What’d they hit her with?”

“Al will tell you everything. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Fair enough. For what it’s worth, you’re doing a hell of a job so far. You’ve surprised me, which is hard to do. John’s been relaying.”

I cut my eyes at John who didn’t even have the decency to look sorry. He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “You’re gone mister!” I declared.

“Suit yourself. I was getting tired of having to fight off your advances anyways.”

“My what? You are such an egotistical-“ He shut me up with a kiss. One second his lips were pressed to mine and the next he was across the room pinned to the floor by Kellan. “He’s not even worth it Kellan,” I huffed.

Kellan jerked him up off the floor by the throat for good measure and leaned into his space. “Lay even a finger on her again and you’ll be nothing but ashes.”

“Whatever man,” John laughed. Kellan tossed him away. John walked towards Auggy, still cocky as ever. “I would say it was a pleasure, but I’d be lying. Lexi, if you ever decide to leave this punk, give me a call,” he winked,

choosing the American accent for his goodbye. I rolled my eyes, shaking my head.

“Don’t mouth off to the lady,” Auggy yelled, smacking John in the back of the head.

“I’ll take you to Al’s room,” I offered. He was just two doors down, but it felt like a world away.

I hesitated at the door before knocking. I had avoided seeing her because they said she wasn’t exactly doing great. I knew I was being a coward when she needed me the most, but couldn’t muster the courage to face my fears.

Al promptly opened the door, stepping back inside as he motioned us in.

“Hey Aunt Claire.” I tried to sound as cheerful as possible, but sounded flat even to myself. She smiled up at me, weak as it was though. She didn’t look nearly as bad as I’d talked myself into believing she was. “Aunt Claire, this is Auggy. He’s one of the High Authorities. He’s going to take you back to one of their bases so you can recover.”

“I’m not going with him,” she fussed.

“Ma’am-“ Auggy started.

“Don’t you ma’am me Augustine. How dare you send my niece out on this mission! How dare you risk her sixteen year old life while you sit behind your cushy desk and study military maps all day! You can turn your butt right around and go back where you came from,” Aunt Claire exclaimed. I’d never seen her so worked up. I stood frozen off to the side. I should have been embarrassed, but I wasn’t. She had a valid point from a parent’s perspective.

“Well, I see where you got your mouth Lexi,” Auggy said, not an ounce of inflection in his voice.

“Get him out of here!” Aunt Claire yelled, throwing a pointed finger at the door.

“How dare you talk to me like that! Did you forget who you’re dealing with here lady? I could buy, sell and imprison you at the snap of my fingers.”

“You wouldn’t dare! And if you did, good luck pawning my niece into doing your dirty work again!” Aunt Claire was nearly screeching by this point. I looked to Al who seemed just as lost as I was as to what to do. John, of course, was amused by it all.

“Well then Auggy, I’m just going to be heading out old man. It seems like you’ve finally met your match and I’d rather not be privy to all the gory love making details on the flight. I’ll book my own. Catch you on the flip side Lex,” John waved as he left the room, throwing on a pair of Aviator glasses on his way out.

“Bye,” I waved.

It was when he left that I finally realized what had been an overwhelming pull towards John had dissipated. It was gone as quickly as it came. Imara’s words about misinterpretation flashed in my mind. The only thing that had happened was that I’d saved his life in the warehouse. This was definitely an angle to consider. Maybe I felt a strong connection to the people I was meant to save. But that would mean I was meant to save Mel, Kai and Kellan’s lives at some point as well. I would have to reevaluate it all later, after I dealt with Jack.

“Lexi, you wouldn’t really torture your wonderful, lovable aunt by sending me with *him*, would you?” Aunt Claire asked, eyes wide and trying to feign innocence.

“Torture! You haven’t even begun to experience torture woman!” Auggy yelled, his neck colored red as his

vein bulged.

“Well being forced to sit next to you in tight quarters for God knows how long will be the closest thing to it I’ve ever experienced!”

“Well it’s my fucking plane so you sure as hell aren’t kicking me off it!”

“Um, guys?”

“What?” they both yelled in unison.

“Nothing,” I shook my head. “Nevermind.” I looked to Al who gave me the same raised brow I was giving him.

“Children, they think they can monopolize your attention for nothing these days,” Auggy scoffed.

“Tell me about it,” Aunt Claire laughed. The atmosphere of the room abruptly changed.

“Now we’re going to go get on that plane and fly back to our London base where I’ll be sure that Dr. Higlenburge takes extra special care of you little lady. Then, once you’ve recouped, I think you owe me dinner. It’s the least you can do to apologize for your rudeness earlier,” Auggy said as he lifted Aunt Claire into his arms.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Apologize? I never apologize, especially when the man has acted like an ogre,” she snipped.

“Well this ogre apparently has more manners than you.”

“Manners? Do you even know the definition of the word? Last I heard you bossed everyone around without so much as a please or thank you, right Al?”

“I’d rather not get involved.”

“Smart man,” Auggy stated. “Bancroft, report to me once you’ve completed the mission. It seems my time will be monopolized by a needy woman at least until then.”

“Needy! I don’t need any man. In fact, put me down and I’ll charter my own plane you... you...” Her face scrunched as she prepared to launch another word attack on him.

“Aunt Claire!” I shouted. “I... love you, and I’ll see you again soon. Please, please, please be good. Listen to the doctor,” I pleaded.

“Honestly Lex, I’m the adult and you’re the child. I don’t need instructions or pampering, especially from an ogre!” She emphasized the last part, returning her attention to Auggy.

“You’re really trying my patience woman,” Auggy bit out.

“Good, because you’ve already run through mine in under five minutes,” she countered.

“What’s the record? Two?”

“I happen to be a very patient person,” she claimed. I tried not to role my eyes.

“Hm. We’ll see how patient you are when I tie you to my bed and teach you the meaning of the word torture,” Auggy said, leaning in and nipping Aunt Claire’s flushed neck. *Oh God. They like each other. Auggy like -likes my aunt, and she apparently feels the same way if the goose bumps that just broke out on her skin or her suddenly erratic breathing were any indication.*

“Um, be safe Lexi,” Aunt Claire said, her eyes locked on Auggy the entire time she spoke it though.

“You too Aunt Claire. Auggy, you better take good care of my aunt in whatever way she wants or else I’ll hunt you down and sabotage your institution from the inside out; after all, I do have a security clearance,” I smirked. That got his attention.

“Believe it or not I do know how to take care of a woman,” he frowned.

“Oh I’m sure you do. I know you’re not innocent. But I’m not talking about any woman; I’m talking about my aunt. Now stop doddling you two and run along. The sooner Dr. H looks her over, the better,” I said, shooing them out the door.

“Love you honey,” Aunt Claire beamed, winking as Auggy headed straight for the door. “What about my luggage?”

“I’ll buy you a new wardrobe,” Auggy replied.

“I don’t think the army can afford my taste sweetie.”

“Maybe not the army, but I can,” he assured her.

“Bye guys,” I waved.

“Bye,” Auggy gruffly stated. “Hey Claire, reach in my pocket and grab the radio for me.” The door closed behind them and the room suddenly felt too quiet.

“Wow. Who would have thought? Aunt Claire and Auggy. Never pictured them two together,” I stated.

“There are a lot of odd couplings on this earth Lexi. What matters is that the love is there,” Al stated, looking poignantly at me.

“You don’t have to worry Al. I love Kellan.”

“I’m not worried about him Lexi. I’m worried about you. You’re a lot like Beth. You love too easily, even the ones who don’t deserve your love.”

I couldn’t argue. I didn’t know if he was right given the amount of hatred I’d built for Mike before I lashed out at him, but I couldn’t find an example to prove him wrong with either.

“Thanks Al. I really do appreciate everything you’ve done to help us.”

“You’re like a daughter to me Lexi. I’m not warm and fuzzy like Beth, but it doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

“I’ve known. I don’t think you would be here if you didn’t.” He nodded, shoving his hands in the pockets of his trousers. “Thanks again.” Giving in to my whim, I hugged him. His arms went around me, reminiscent of my own father. The tears immediately began to gather at the thought of him. I tried not to think about my parents because they would always be my vulnerable spot. I’d accepted that I couldn’t have changed what happened, but I didn’t accept what happened quite yet either. I pulled away, running my fingers beneath my lids to stop any tears from falling.

“Go relax for a bit. I’ll be over later.”

“Okay.” I was ready to escape the room and the emotional truth that hung there.

—

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Hey,” I smiled as I fell into the spot beside Kellan on the sofa. I curled up into him and pulled out the red iPod Nano; I’d stopped to get it from our room on my way back.

I handed him one of the ear buds and placed the other one inside my ear and flipped it on. He studied me for a minute as the music started.

“You okay, babe?”

“Yeah. Just trying not to avoid remembering a lot of what’s happened over the last couple months.” He gently removed my hair scrunchy and allowed my hair to fall around my shoulders. He ran his fingers through my strands, soothing me with the motion. I closed my eyes, enjoying him, allowing the music and Kellan to surround me as I blocked everything else out. Sometimes we all need a little meditation time.

I left my mind open so Kellan knew exactly where I was at that point. Communication was one of the most important parts of a relationship, and despite being able to connect at any second and read each other, we often didn’t. We kept the barriers between us. I always found that when we did release them though, tossing caution to the wind, unrestricting our thoughts, we grew closer, stronger.

Already Kellan instinctively knew just what I needed most of the time, but every relationship has a disconnect from time to time. It’s holding on through the hard times, through the misunderstandings and emotional low points, that secure your relationship for eternity. If facing your problems is more than you’re willing to bear, then you’re not with the right person. I couldn’t imagine going to hell and back with anyone else, for anyone else. Regardless of his heated moments, I couldn’t picture myself consciously walking away from Kellan.

Given my age, it’s normal for me to stray; after all, this was supposed to be the prime of my life. I was supposed to date around and have fun, not tie myself down. But I did. And I knew I made the right decision because I didn’t

regret it. I didn't feel like I was missing anything with Kai. I didn't feel like I was missing anything with another guy. Occasionally I found someone else attractive, my eyes would travel, but they were never better than Kellan. The best way I could put it was my mind would stray, but my heart would stay. He was my foundation, my anchor. I always came back to him, and always would.

He leaned down and kissed my head, as if acknowledging that he'd heard all of that. I rolled over and lay down so my head rested on his thighs. I gazed up into his brilliant green eyes; they were crystal clear despite a dark teal ring settling in indicating his desire for me. His pupils dilated as he continued to play with my hair.

I smiled back up at him, feeling like a giddy puppy. He beamed back at me, his dimple on full display; his full lips were stretched, yet retained their pouty pucker. Would I ever grow tired of looking at him?

"I hope not."

I laughed. *"I don't think I will."*

"Good."

My face shot to the right at the sound of someone clearing their throat beside us. "Hey Kai," I greeted, sitting up.

"We couldn't get a flight out tonight. Earliest flight is tomorrow morning."

"That's fine," I shrugged.

"It's a commercial flight that stops in Miami before continuing on to San Juan."

"Okay. Do you need me to do anything? I know Kalel is still tapped into the cameras around the city. Want me to

monitor them?”

“No. He disconnected from them. We never caught the assassins on them anyways. They know how to avoid them.”

“Is there anything I can do? I feel like you guys have done almost everything.”

“Prepare yourself. We’ve searched and El Yunque is a large rainforest with mountains, caves, waterfalls and absolutely no cell phone service. Once we’re in, we’ll have no way of contacting anyone on the outside.”

I felt the life drain from my face. Jack was setting us up good. We wouldn’t know how many of his men we were going to face until we were in, and we wouldn’t be able to call for back up at all. We were alone; this was it.

“We need to take as many weapons as we can carry. By chance, do you think we could get the same outfits we used the last time, the ones that stopped me from being burned?”

“Yeah. I’ll have Art ship them overnight to the hotel.”

“Thanks.” I looked down at my necklace. It’d been a random thought I’d had, and given Kai’s feelings towards him, he was probably the best person to ask. “Kai, do you think Ralph is working with Jack? My necklace doesn’t work with the ninjas around, almost as if they know exactly what it’s made of and what to do to deactivate it.”

“That’s crossed my mind a few times,” he sighed. I scooted over to sit in Kellan’s lap as Kai sat down beside him.

“Does Ralph have access to your card records? To the Bladang’s expenses?”

“Only for the company card because he has to purchase so many parts and pieces.”

“You and Kalel have been charging the hotel bills to your company cards, haven’t you?”

I knew the second everything pieced together for him. “Shit! I knew I never should have trusted him. I only keep him because he’s Gabi’s cousin, and okay, so he is brilliant with technology, but he’s not worth the trouble. I’ve never trusted the twerp.”

“Twerp?” I chuckled. “Never heard you use that word before.”

“I reserve it for him.” Kai pinched the bridge of his nose. I nearly jumped when he leapt up and yanked his phone from his pocket. “Cancel Ralph as an authorized user on the AmEx right now! I want him on 24/7 surveillance and I need a log of all of his computer activity.” There was a pause. “I don’t care if you have to hire someone completely new to crack his security codes and encryptions. I want it done immediately. Call me when you get something.”

“You really think he did it?” Gabi asked, stepping into the conversation ring.

“I don’t know Gabi, but I don’t think it’s a coincidence that my necklace has worked with everyone except Jack’s team.”

“I don’t take offense to it. I mean we’re barely blood relatives in my eyes, and he drives me insane with his fat word musings, but I also don’t picture him as the type to make business deals. He’s more of a behind the scenes kind of guy.”

“You think someone else in the lab set it up and Ralph is just going along with it?” I checked.

“I don’t buy that. The guy is a lot more conniving than you give him credit for Gab,” Kai scowled.

“I’ll admit he’s not as innocent as he looks, but he’s also not as devious as you’re making him out to be.”

“How well do you really know your cousin Gab?” I asked, recalling the bad vibes I got when I met him. She remained silent, which meant not well. “Listen Gab, I’m not saying he’s a criminal; innocent until proven guilty and all. But he is the only one with access to the credit card charges and my necklace, which is pretty incriminating.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I just can’t believe that he would be so stupid. He’s deathly afraid of Kalel.”

“People are unpredictable,” I shrugged.

She took a deep breath. “Okay, so you cut him off from viewing the accounts, but was that before or after you booked the flights?”

“Shit!” was the expletive that exploded from Kai.

“Calm down. You can’t change it. Have you booked the hotel yet?”

“Kalel was doing that.” I was waiting for Kai to rip out a chunk of his curly brown hair the way he was tugging on it, nearly turning his shoulder length hair into an afro. I reached out and placed my hand on his forearm to stop him. “Sorry,” he said, letting go of his hair.

“It’s okay, Kai. We’ll figure it out. It’s no different than what we’ve faced so far.”

“I just can’t believe it’s one of my own fucking employees screwing us over. A family member at that!” He abruptly turned and punched the wall, the entire structure shaking as he connected with and crumbled concrete. I had this innate notion to hug him like a mother would her angry child. I yanked him into my arms, pinning his arms to his sides. He scrunched his brow, taking deep breaths that did nothing to calm him.

“Kai, stop. You can’t change it. I know you’re mad, but breaking walls isn’t going to change things. It is what it is; what’s done is done. From here on out, we’ll just have to be more careful. Only those who are with us can see where we are, even Art. Sadly, it’s as much our fault for being careless as it is his for betraying you.”

He relaxed in my arms and looked down at me. “How old are you?” he smirked. I rolled my eyes and took a step away from him.

“Okay, now I’m really ready to kick some ass. My family betrayed us; Rafi died,” her voice caught at the mention of him, “And I’m ready for revenge. None of what we’ve gone through should be in vain.”

“You know, that’s part of the problem between vampeens and vampires. We’re always trying to vindicate each other’s actions. It’s always about revenge, isn’t it?”

“Don’t go all churchy on me Lex,” Gabi squared off with me, hands on her hips as she pursed her lips.

“I’m not going churchy on you Gab. I’m just stating what I’ve been oblivious to. Why are you still on this mission Gab?”

“To get revenge for Rafi,” she replied.

“Kai, why are you on this mission?”

“To get revenge on the fucker for your parents and for trying to mess up my operation.” He said it as if it was a no-brainer, as if I should have known that all along.

“Kellan?”

“I’m ready to get back at the pendejo for messing with my woman,” he declared.

“Oh God. This is a revenge mission,” I groaned. “That’s not what I wanted at all.” I sighed, closing my eyes to the truth. We were no better than Jack the way we were using our negative experiences to fuel our attacks. Here I was thinking we were protecting other vamps, when really it was a selfish mission all along.

“We’re selfish creatures Lex. We don’t have human hearts or compassion,” Kai stated.

“That’s not true, otherwise you wouldn’t be on this mission with me. You have compassion when it comes to me,” I challenged.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” he shrugged.

“What does that mean?” I bit out.

“I just told you I was on this mission because the asshole messed with my operation,” Kai said through gritted teeth.

I narrowed my eyes, accepting the challenge. “So you mean to tell me that if Jack was torturing your brother you wouldn’t beg to trade places with him, take compassion on him in the midst of suffering?”

“He’s a big boy.”

“I don’t believe you.” He shrugged again. “What about when your dad was suffering right in front of you? You

didn't beg to trade places with him?"

"That's different. I was a new vamp back then. Time has hardened my heart."

"If you had a hard heart Kai, then you wouldn't love at all, and I know you love me." Abruptly the room went silent. Craig, Will, Kalel, Gabi and Kellan all had stunned faces; they couldn't believe I'd just said that. I could barely believe I'd just said it. Kai looked at me, fire in his eyes. Then, suddenly it was gone. He bottled all his emotions and buried them deep inside.

"I don't have time to argue with a naïve child," he growled and walked out the room. I stood motionless staring after him with my mouth gaping open.

"That was a low blow Lex," Gabi said, effectively slapping me in the face with guilt. I sighed, collapsing back onto the couch.

"I think we all need a bit of fresh wind and more gator," Craig suggested, effectively breaking the tension again.

“You just want more gator.”

“Darn tootin fig newton!” he grinned. I chuckled, relaxing a bit at his crazy phrases.

“Sounds good to me. How many more of those blood packets do you have Kalel? We’ve gone through a lot of them.”

“We have a manufacturing plant in England. I stopped off and grabbed a few boxes when we were there.”

“Awesome, thanks. They’re great. You’ve definitely earned me as a customer when we get back to Charleston.”

“I’ll set you up with an account before we get back and sell them to you at cost.”

“Thanks.”

—

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We all went out for dinner at a local restaurant on the waterfront side of town. It offered variety; no gator, but Craig wasn’t too disappointed. He just liked food in general. Eventually Kai joined us as well, once he walked off his anger. I probably should have, but I didn’t feel bad.

We were again the only crazy group to sit outside in this weather on the deck overlooking the water. It gave us time to talk about our strategy in Puerto Rico anyways.

“Do you have any radios?” I asked Kalel.

“They run on satellite signal, which we wouldn’t get in El Yunque,” he replied.

“What about old fashioned walkie-talkies?”

“Usually they max out at about a quarter mile, and El Yunque is huge.”

“Well crap.” I pushed around the pasta on my plate, quickly growing cold. “Any ideas?”

“What about the military radios? Those allow communication over miles,” Kellan suggested.

“We’d be hard pressed to get a hold of those between now and then.”

“The army should have some. We have a base in Miami. I can request some to be delivered during the layover,” Al offered.

“Even if they don’t work, I’d just feel better going in with something,” I said, taking a bite of my cold pasta and then pushing the plate away. My stomach had been uneasy all evening, foreboding corroding my core.

“Any idea where in El Yunque he could be? From the aerial maps I pulled up on my phone there’s several mountains covered with rainforest and supposedly tunnels running through the mountains too.”

“Anywhere. Given how often he’s communicated with us, I doubt he’d choose our arrival to be silent. We’re walking right into a trap that he’s set up perfectly,” Kalel stated.

“Are you guys okay walking in there knowing that? It’s not too late to back out. I would understand.” Part of me was praying that they would, and the other part was praying they wouldn’t. As much as I hated to admit it, I was probably going to need the back up.

“We’re sure,” Al answered for them, giving everyone a stern look warning them not to go against him.

“Actually Lexi, I’m not scheduled to go with you into the forest,” Will said.

“Why am I not surprised? Tell me Will, what is it exactly that an Eislom does?” He at least had the decency to look slightly embarrassed.

“I’ll accompany you only until a certain point,” he announced.

“Woohoo.” I twirled my pointer finger around in a tornado motion.

“Believe me or not, I am doing my job Lexi,” he defended.

“That’s fine Will. I guess I just don’t understand exactly what your job is, or rather what the point of your job is.” He nodded his understanding, not bothering to further explain himself.

“What do you say we go out to the club and let loose? It’s our last night here,” Gabi said.

“I’m game.”

“Alright. Let’s go cut a rug,” Craig nodded.

“Cut a rug? Really Craig?” Gabi snickered. “Come on. You can do better than that.”

“Jealous of my flossy vocabulary mate?” he smirked. Gabi burst into laughter.

“Hey Craig, when was the last time you talked to Mel?”

“This morning.”

“She’s okay?”

“Beautiful as ever. We Skyped.”

“And I won’t go beyond that. Al, have you talked to Beth?”

“Earlier. She’s been calling me regularly checking on everyone. She’s a nervous wreck at home of course.” He took a long, slow sip of his water; his eyes grew starry just talking about her. It was sweet to know that after all this time they were still madly in love like my parents were.

I smiled, looking at Kellan, getting the same starry eyed look in return. He leaned in and planted a soft kiss on my lips. I jumped at hearing a chair scrape backwards. Kai shot up from the table, threw down a wad of cash and walked away. Kellan surprised me by pulling away and standing up to follow him. Gabi and I exchanged worried glances.

“Let them hash this out,” she ordered. I watched Kellan catching up with Kai, my heart racing, pounding in my head.

I swear I didn’t sit still, bouncing in my seat, straining my ears to hear what was going on between the two of them. The anticipation was killing me. I was hoping they would work it out, but I half expected to have to break up a fight off in the distance.

What felt like forever, but was probably only two minutes later, Kellan and Kai both strode back to the table, both of them tense, but at least walking amicably beside each other. I raised a questioning brow at Kellan. He shrugged and smiled.

“You guys ready to head out?” Kellan asked.

“Um, sure,” I stuttered, trying to figure out what he’d said to Kai that could possibly have evoked a truce.

“Just go with it,” Gabi whispered.

“Enjoy it love,” Craig added.

“They both love you Lexi. Men will do many things for the woman they love,” Al commented. I blushed at the fact that my fiance’s dad acknowledged that more than just his son loved me. I didn’t know how he remained so calm and collected about it. Maybe he was secure in my love for Kellan in return.

“Oceana here we come!” Gabi yelled. “Oh my gosh Lex, I checked it out online. Every room has a different theme, and guess who will be traveling around the world tonight?” She wagged her brows suggestively. I could tell she was trying to let go of Rafi, but wasn’t quite there yet.

“I can’t wait, but shouldn’t we go back to the hotel and change first.”

Gabi looked me up and down, still in my JC velour set. “Oh yeah.”

Al and Will opted to stay at the hotel, which wasn’t surprising. I couldn’t exactly picture the two of them at a night club anyways. Gabi and I changed into our best LBD. She wore hers with a pair of black tights and a pair of blue suede pumps nearly identical to mine, accessorizing with silver and teal feather earrings and a purple clutch. I paired my dress with black tights as well, but opted for my purple suede ankle boots that had a fringe detail, large square diamond earrings and a diamond tennis bracelet that my dad had given my mom a few years back for Christmas. Gabi and I both let our hair fall free and wavy.

“Okay, now we’re ready to go party,” she smiled approvingly at our ensembles.

“Kellan, please hold my ID,” I passed him my fake license that Kalel had given me before. I carefully tucked my cell phone in my bra, pulling my v-neck cut back up for

modesty. The dress already clung semi-close everywhere else on my body, even down the long sleeves; I didn't need any more sex appeal.

The club was huge, and crowded. I checked my watch, surprised to find it was already eleven when we arrived. At the club, Gabi and I went off, leaving the guys to hang out. We actually did make it through each room of the club, although my favorite was the Reykjavik Icehouse. The neon blue lighting created a perfectly chilly backdrop. I enjoyed the Parisian Boudoir's seating. The banquettes were upholstered in the most luxurious crushed velvet fabric and provided a premium view for people watching.

By the time we found the guys again, we had mingled with more local males than we had fingers and toes. They were all very nice and had a bit of Southern charm to them that I found endearing. Gabi got a few phone numbers, but I knew she wouldn't be calling any of them anytime soon. It was going to take a while for her to get over Rafi. She put up a good front, but I knew she cried behind closed doors.

"Where were you ladies all night?" Craig asked, a twinkle in his eye, as if he already knew.

"Mingling, getting stacks of local numbers," Gabi bragged. I elbowed her, looking at Kellan who was smirking, completely unfazed by the information. They definitely knew.

"What did you guys do all night?" I countered.

"Mingled; got our own stacks of local numbers," Kellan winked.

"These two pussies followed you two around all night," Kai rolled his eyes.

“And how would you know that?” I smiled, having cornered him.

“We followed you two to make sure you were okay,” Kalel stepped in.

“You don’t think we can take care of ourselves?” Gabi pressed, her hand on her hip.

“Frankly, no,” Kalel stated.

“Humph,” Gabi scoffed, grabbing my hand and leading me out the exit doors.

—

I stopped short at the white envelope taped to the door of my hotel room; my serum flooded my mouth immediately. Cautiously I looked up and down the hall, but found nothing suspicious. With a shaky hand I snatched it off the door. When I flipped it over and didn’t find Jack’s seal though, I frowned.

I pulled out the note tucked inside, swallowing the hard lump in my throat.

Dear Lexi & Kellan,

It’s been a true honor and pleasure to have been blessed with the opportunity to get to know and work with the heroes of the next vamp generation. Lexi, given your determination, I know you will accomplish all I’ve read. And Kellan, you will influence this journey more than you realize.

Earlier, you asked me what an Eislom did; what is my role precisely. An Eislom’s role is to help their assigned students until they gain the ability to navigate the trenches alone. I was to open your eyes to your destiny without

revealing it; I was to facilitate you both in achieving your destiny without changing it.

If I look back to where you started Lexi, more dependent on others than yourself, you've grown immensely and far surpassed my expectations. Kellan, look at when you first met Lexi to now, you have grown and evolved into a strong vampire who has more inside him than he gives himself credit for. Together you are a power duo, world domination in a coupling. I'd like to think that I helped mold you into that pair, but truthfully, I only made you both aware of your purpose. Until I came along, you were merely living; but now you are living to succeed and fulfill that charted journey.

Unfortunately, my job is done at this early stage. I'm ever so proud of you both for your immaculate progress; you're quick students. Should you ever need a reference or require my skills, please do not hesitate to contact me.

*Proudly,
Your Eislom,
William Jameson*

"That's it? He came and went that quickly?" I stood stunned, staring at the paper in my hands. I knew I had a stupefied expression on my face, but I was so caught off guard by Will's departure that I didn't know how to react. Kellan took the paper from my hands.

I thought back over our journey, trying to think of how Will had influenced it because I would give him that; he did influence us to some degree. He forced us to involve our purpose in every decision that we made; I think he was the one that made us accept our destinies for what they were predicted to be while not shying away from making it our own still. And, admittedly, now that he was gone, I felt like a part of our journey had ended already. That saddened me.

“What’s going on Lex?” Gabi asked, watching my expression with concern.

“Will’s gone.”

“Oh. You really liked him didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I gave him a hard time, but I appreciated him.” I shrugged, trying to brush it off.

“I’m sorry, *chica*,” she said, pulling me in for a hug.

“It’s okay. He did say earlier that he wasn’t going with us into El Yunque, so I knew a goodbye was coming, I just didn’t know it would be so soon.”

“Well, technically it’s only a day early.”

“True,” I gave her a small smile. I took a deep breath. “Well, that’s that. I’m going to shower and get comfy, probably try to get a few hours of sleep before tomorrow.”

“Make sure you sleep,” she said, looking pointedly at Kellan. Kellan threw up his hands, as if saying he wasn’t starting anything, but not stopping it either.

“Good night Gabi. I’ll see you in the morning,” I smiled, pulling Kellan into the room by his shirt.

He threw my back against the wall, crowding my space and kissing me hard. His lips pushed me to respond, forcing my mind to mold to his. It was an intense collision that had my mind spinning in seconds and my body heating beneath his touch.

“Sorry about Will babe.”

“It’s okay. I knew it was coming.”

“At least you never have to worry about me leaving you,” he said, instantly stopping me dead in my panting

tracks. The journal came rushing back to me.

“The journal said you were shot last minute in the forest. It could have easily been a rainforest.” I didn’t realize I was crying until he wiped my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs.

“Even if it is, we have tonight. Let’s not waste it worrying about what may or may not happen.”

Not given me a moment to think or say otherwise, he lifted me, wrapping my legs around his waist and carried me to the bed. He gently laid me back on the pillows, cascading soft kisses on my lips and jawline. He lifted off my dress, his eyes going directly to the permanent scar on my shoulder where he bit me. He showered kisses over the spot as I sunk into him.

—

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Dear God that flight was brutal,” Gabi complained as we grabbed the few pieces of luggage that had survived off the belt. Security in the San Juan airport had been worse than customs, especially with our luggage. We’d been pulled into a back room when they found our weapons doing a scan. I lost count at how many people we had to glamour. “Next time we ship our weapons,” she huffed.

Craig chuckled at her dramatics. It had been quite an experience, but I felt somewhat reassured by the way they handled everything.

The second we stepped outside the airport, the heat swarmed us despite the island breeze. I was surprised given that it was January. My pulse sped up the second we climbed into the black van. I clutched Kellan’s hand, intertwining our fingers and squeezing.

"This is it. We're really here."

"Regardless of what happens, I would still choose to do this with you. I wouldn't change a thing." He kissed my fingers, surrounded by his.

"Likewise. I love you."

"I love you."

"The hotel is down the street from El Yunque. We'll be able to see it from below. Maybe seeing it from afar will help us plan so we don't go in blind," Kalel said.

"You are visiting El Yunque?" the driver asked.

"Yes," Kalel replied.

"El Yunque is magical, but stay on the main road. People get lost in there," he warned. My stomach knotted even tighter, something I didn't know it was capable of.

"Thanks for the warning," Kalel nodded.

Thirty minutes later the van pulled up in front of a couple condo buildings next to a good sized intersection; the outside was an orange stucco that stood out against the backdrop of El Yunque. El Yunque was vast, covering the entire backdrop to that area of town with green in the shape of mountains. It was overwhelming in presence from a distance, so I could only imagine once we were inside it.

"We rented a 3-bedroom condo for the week," Kalel announced as we walked into the space. Sand colored tiles ran diagonally across the entire space. The white walls and Caribbean-style dark rattan furniture only emphasized the fact that this was a Puerto Rican villa. "I plan to tell Art of our location. I told him if we haven't contacted him in four days to empty the condo so no one knows anything."

I looked wide-eyed at Kalel. *Oh God. He's planning for the worst, as if he's expecting it.*

"Don't look at me like that. I'm just taking precautions. I don't expect to die in the next couple days, but just in case I'd rather not leave a mess for other vamps to clean up with the humans." I slowly nodded my head. "You're the only one who needs to sleep so you can have the master. I plan to set up all my equipment in the second bedroom since it has a built in desk."

"Thanks. I'll help you set up."

"No offense Leka, but you'd probably be more of a hindrance than a help."

"None taken. You're probably right. Me and technology don't seem to be getting along lately anyways," I chuckled nervously, looking down at my necklace. I didn't know why I even bothered keeping it on. I guess I was hoping that it would miraculously start working again when I needed it most. That had me staring at the veins in my hands, looking normal and slightly blue beneath my skin at the moment.

"You okay, Lex?" Gabi cocked her head at me. "You seem a little off."

"Huh? Yeah, I'm good." I wrung my fingers around each other as I tried to convince her and myself that I wasn't on the border of an anxiety attack. She frowned, her brows creasing with concern as she looked straight at my hands. I dropped them to my side, rubbing them against the tops of my thighs.

Kellan came behind me and massaged my shoulders, trying to get me to relax. My mind had already left on the 'what if' roller coaster though. All the different scenarios were running through my head as to how this could all turn

out. Of course, I was probably way off. Either this would go a lot better or a lot worse than my worst-case scenario. Being that I wasn't as evil and twisted as Jack, I was leaning more towards the last one.

I needed to stop thinking about it though. I was only projecting my negative energy into the space, making the open, airy living room suddenly feel very tiny and dark.

"Snap out of it Lex!" Gabi snapped her fingers in front of my face.

"Sorry." I looked around the room. Everyone had some sort of wary expression on their face as they studied me. I blushed under the scrutiny. The last thing I needed was them worrying about me breaking under the pressure.

Something felt different about this mission versus my last though. I guess it could just be the fact that I knew I was walking into a trap this time around. And I wasn't just walking into the trap alone; I was bringing the people who meant the most to me with me.

"What do you say we go out and try some authentic Puerto Rican cuisine?" Gabi suggested. "It can be our last little hoorah before we go into the pits of hell," she laughed, but no one laughed with her. She rolled her eyes. "Oh come on guys. We knew what we were getting ourselves into. We know what we're facing as well. One way or another we're going into El Yunque tomorrow and I'd rather go in knowing I'd had some good food the night before."

"You're right Gabi. We should try to relax; we're sloppy when we go into something on edge and tense, vamp or not," Al agreed.

"Let me set up the office first and get the equipment connected to the satellites." Kalel headed in that direction

with three luggage bags.

“I need to check in on our troops as well. Christian hasn’t reported in over seventy-two hours,” Kai added, quickly following Kalel.

“Come along love. We can canoodle with a movie until these boys are ready,” Craig said, slinging an arm around my shoulder and leading me towards the master bedroom.

“Hey man, that’s my girl and only I can cuddle with her.” Kellan playfully punched Craig’s shoulder so he dropped his arm.

“I’m a frag lonely mate. I only want to snickle with her for an hour.” He sounded so sad and pathetic, but then again, he was a good actor.

“There’s enough of me to go around boys,” I chuckled lightly, rolling my eyes at myself.

“I guess nobody wants to cuddle my excess sexiness,” Gabi pouted, quickly coming into the room behind us.

“Girls in the middle!” I yelled, yanking her onto the bed with me.

We greedily took up the middle of the king-sized bed. Gabi snatched the remote from the nightstand before the guys could even blink. We smiled up at them innocently, fluttering our lashes.

“Um, I’m going to go hang with my dad for a little while,” Kellan stated, running his hand through his hair, messing up his Jersey style spikes. We’d had a bit of fun with the styling serum that morning and he never fixed it.

“Suit yourself mate. Move over ladies and share the love with the Craig.” Gabi and I shifted, putting a gap between us. Craig went to the front of the bed and leapt

backwards, landing perfectly in the center of us with his hands behind his head as it rested on the pillow. It was a perfect backwards dive. "Ah, so this is how it feels to be Mr. Hefner," he grinned from ear to ear.

Gabi and I exchanged a conniving look. We shook our heads and each yanked a pillow from under Craig's head and whacked him with it.

"Hey! Ow! Ow! You're cragging my pitter putter pipe loves!" He sat up, throwing up his arms in surrender. When we didn't respond, he snatched the pillows from our hands and tossed them across the room.

"Hey! We were having fun!" Gabi cried.

"By abusing poor me," Craig argued.

We shrugged in unison. "Serves you right playboy," Gabi laughed.

"Humph. I'll be joining my mates. I rather love myself and don't deserve such horseradish."

"See you later Craig," I waved.

"Later love," he smiled, waving back before he went to join Kellan and his dad in the living room.

"Guess it's just us girls."

"Guess so. What movie should we watch Lex? Now that the boys are gone, we can actually watch something in Spanish."

"Surprise me. Just no English movies that have been dubbed over with old voices for young stars."

"I can guarantee that we won't be watching any of those. I can't stand them. I never watch the movie. I always get caught up in laughing at how horrible they sound."

“I know, right?”

We settled on an overly dramatic novella. Right as it was ending, the guys came to get us.

“Where are we going?” Gabi asked.

“There’s a restaurant down the street at the bottom of El Yunque. It’ll give us a chance to get a closer look without actually going in,” Kai said.

“Let’s go.”

We all shuffled out into two cabs one of the guys had called for. My guess was Al since no one else but Gabi and I spoke Spanish, although most Puerto Ricans knew some English.

I hadn’t paid much attention on the drive to the condo from the airport, but this time I studied my surroundings. Puerto Rico was different from the US. It held an eclectic mix of old and new, run-down and modern usually along the same road. Even the plazas had mom and pop shops mixed with retail chains. The true vision of this was in the neighborhoods. In the US, one side of the neighborhood was older homes and the other side was new, but they never intermingled. In Puerto Rico, there was a rundown home followed by a semi-structurally sound homestead followed by a mansion; then another decent house followed by another battered one. Regardless of the home’s condition, they all had bars on their windows, doors and garages, and every house was a different color. Miami was truly the closest city in regards to atmosphere and structure.

We turned down a narrow, rough road, the sign for El Yunque standing off to the side. The houses looked older than new in this neighborhood. It didn’t matter though because they had a priceless view. I looked out the window

and up at the glory that was El Yunque above us. I was still staring up at the mountains when we stopped in front of a restaurant, in the middle of a neighborhood. There was a large wrap-around, screened-in porch, and the windows had only bars on them, no actual glass. Music was playing in the background with patrons standing around eating finger foods like bacalaitos while drinking their Corona of choice.

We walked up the scuffed white boards and over to the open bar and kitchen. The crowd worked for us and against us. Busy meant good food, but it also meant we had to be more careful with our blood.

“We’ll go grab a table while you guys order,” Gabi said, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards a pub table in the back corner overlooking the back view. We dragged the high top beside it up to ours so the guys could all fit.

We both sat down and stared out at El Yunque. “That’s it,” I mused.

“That’s it,” she stated reverently.

“Are you nervous Gab?”

“A little, but the way I look at it is I’ve lived for so long that if I die now I can’t be mad because I got a lot more time than most could ever dream of having.”

“Hm.”

“That’s me Lex. You’ve only had sixteen years. If you don’t walk out of that jungle tomorrow, then I’ll be pissed for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Dealing the cards early?” Craig asked as he approached the table.

“I guess,” I said, still engrossed in the mountain scape behind us.

“Food’ll be out in a bit,” Kellan said as he came to sit next to me.

“What’d ya’ll order?” Gabi pressed. I was learning that she was quite picky about her food, especially for a vampire.

“A mix of stuff,” Kai shrugged.

Like a scene in a movie, we all stared out the open back, through the screens, beyond the other homes dotting the mountain floor behind this one and up at El Yunque. It was intimidating, even to me as a vampeen. At vamp speed, it would still take me quite a bit of time to navigate the beast, which was the scary part. I could definitely see and understand how people got lost within it. I was afraid of doing that even with all my vamp abilities.

“I think we can start by going-“ Kalel started.

“Babe,” Kellan shouted, the alarm in his voice made me jerk towards him. He yanked something off my back, staring around the room as he did it. A moment later I was looking at a white envelope, sealed from Jack. My heart quickened; it felt like every breath was an effort.

With a shaking hand, I took the envelope from Kellan and slowly opened it. Al stood up. “I’m going to do a walk around.” I nodded, reaching in to pull out the piece of paper.

Scoping me out?

-Jack

“How is he always one step ahead of us? I just don’t get it. You can only have so many -“ A flash of something

caught from my necklace. “Oh crap! I’ve been so stupid! This whole time I’ve been wearing this necklace under all my clothes. It hasn’t been working for me, but I’d bet my life that it’s been working for Jack to track me! Is there any way to see if there’s a tracking device inside this thing?”

Kalel took it from me, passed his phone over the piece and stared at his phone’s screen. Kai and Kalel communicated something amongst each other mentally. “You got it right Leka,” Kalel bit out.

“That slimy son of a-“

“Gabi!”

“What? Sorry. I can’t believe the *pendejo* would stoop so low as to literally screw over family. Wait until I get my hands on that-“

“Gabi!”

“Sorry,” she shrugged. “I have the mouth of a sailor when I’m pissed.”

“Clearly.”

“We can’t change it, but what this does mean is that when Ralph built this for you, he embedded the tracking device in it. So either he’s been working for Jack for a while or he had ulterior motives where you were concerned Leka,” Kalel concluded.

A chill ran up my spine. “Ugh.”

“Can we please get rid of that thing?”

“Allow me,” Gabi smiled. She grabbed the necklace from Kalel and forced her way through the crowd and out the back door. She walked down the steps and into the

backyard area. She whirled the necklace around like a cowboy would a rope.

“Woohoo! We got ourselves a cowgirl!” a random guy yelled.

She turned and winked over her shoulder, earning cheers from several locals. With a quick flick of her wrist, she sent the necklace flying what looked like at least a mile up El Yunque. Whistles and claps erupted all around. She bowed eloquently before returning to my side.

“Well, now that that’s taken care of, I’m starving. Where’s my food?” she asked.

Right at that moment, a man and a woman brought out a mountain of food to us. If I had to guess, I’d say they owned the place. They looked to be in their late forties, dressed in casual attire. It was a very casual restaurant so it wouldn’t surprise me if the owners dressed like the patrons.

“*Ay que rico.*” Gabi smiled around a large bite. We’d had to get creative and mixed our blood with salsa for dipping.

Silence loomed at the table while we ate. We’d come out to relax, but with El Yunque right behind us, that was hard to do. Tomorrow hung over our heads and weighed us down. I doubt anyone thought about anything else given how many times we all glanced at the rainforest.

“Okay. I’m done sulking. Let’s get out of here,” Gabi sighed.

I knew when Craig didn’t do anything to break the tension on the way back to the apartment, that things really were as bad as they seemed. When we got back to the condo, a large box was stationed in front of the door.

“That’ll be our ops gear,” Kalel stated.

“Kalel, why don’t you and I study some maps of the tunnels running through the mountains for tomorrow,” Al suggested.

“Maybe I can pull up images of the interiors from tourists,” he agreed.

“I’ll join you,” Kai said.

“Why don’t we all do it?” I asked. “We all need to know where we’re going after all.”

“I’ll plug the computer into the TV,” Kalel offered.

We anxiously crowded into the living room space and spent the next several hours studying El Yunque inside and out. The task actually gave us something to focus on and eventually the tension dissipated.

“So we’ll go in tomorrow at dawn so we’ll have the sun’s light all day,” I confirmed.

“Right. We’ll drive up so we at least have an escape vehicle, hopefully,” Gabi said.

“We’ll need to load our weapons before we leave. We can’t leave anything to chance. Jack has orchestrated this entire thing, and once we set foot on the mountain, we’re in his territory with his traps,” Al stated.

Kellan squeezed my hand, offering me a bit of reassurance. He’d been quiet most of the night, silently absorbing everything. I knew he was paying attention; he just wasn’t jumping in like the rest of us.

“Tomorrow’s the day mates.” Craig looked around at all of us. He almost seemed excited about it.

“He’s an adrenaline junkie,” Kellan chuckled, patting his friend’s shoulder.

“I’m never cluckin’ drab,” he replied.

“Isn’t that the truth.” Gabi shook her head.

I looked at my watch. “Wow, it’s already three in the morning.”

“You should go catch some Z’s Lex. I’m sure you won’t miss anything,” Gabi said.

“I won’t sleep long; maybe an hour. Wake me up when it’s time.”

They all nodded and began conversing amongst each other about approaches and what area to hit first.

“I’ll come with you.” Kellan led me to the bedroom and closed the door behind us. We both plopped down on the bed and I immediately snuggled against him.

“I can’t believe it’s almost time.”

“Everything will work out babe. We’ll be fine.” He kissed my brow as I closed my eyes, trying not to worry about the things unknown.

—

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“We’re driving up to about fifteen kilometers. Brace yourselves because the air thins and the pressure rises,” Kalel warned.

Kalel and Al had thought of everything. We were all crammed into a Hummer, which basically made it impossible for any cars to pass around us on the narrow road winding up the mountain. We adorned our ops attire

and had weapons stashed in nearly every pocket, an assortment varying from gas bombs to knives and dart guns. Once loaded, I didn't know how the spies ever got used to the weapons all around them. I found myself walking a little funny to keep a star from slicing my thigh.

"You know, if we weren't going into battle, I might actually like to explore the rainforest. It's a lot more than I expected. It's like the magic of nature is palpable up here." I looked out the window as we narrowly missed a branch jutting out above us. Leaves beat the side of the vehicle as we remained glued to the side of the mountain.

"Sorry babe, but I won't be coming back with you for that one." I chuckled nervously, reminded of the day ahead and the question mark it held hostage.

We came to a clearing with a waterfall on the right and a small parking lot on the left. We were just about to pass the waterfall when the car began to roll backwards and collapsed.

"Oh shit," Gabi said, eyes wide as she looked around.

"Mary Poppins!" Craig exclaimed as he opened the back door and got a look at the vehicle outside.

"I guess we've reached the point that he wants us. We're on foot from here guys," Al stated.

I stepped out of the car and looked at the deflated tires and now snapped in half rims. I walked around the car, but didn't see any nails. I didn't even see how or why the tires deflated at first.

Kai pressed a hand on my shoulder, stopping my movement. He placed a silencing finger in front of his puckered lips. I nodded once. He bent down and pointed to

a thin dart poking out of the tires. It was barely visible, merely a single porcupine.

We all grouped together, our backs against the Hummer as we looked around, searching the jungle for any movement. I listened, but the birds cawing in the distance made it hard to hear anything else.

My head flew upwards as I heard something being carried by the wind. I saw no one, only the white envelope that was plummeting through the sky from above. I looked at my companions, whose eyes were glued to the envelope and me. I snatched it out of the sky when it was within reach. I ripped it open and pulled out the paper.

Welcome to my jungle. Let the games begin.
-Jack

I read it aloud. The moment I said Jack, the ninjas fell all around us. This time they had weapons; this time we were fighting dirty.

Simultaneously we withdrew our weapons of choice. We broke out around the vehicle as the assassins drew closer; the inner circle versus the outer. We were surrounded by at least fifteen of them. Given how many we'd gone through, it had me wondering just how big Jack's operation really was. He seemed to have an endless supply of them. Given that all we could see of them was their eyes, I couldn't decipher whether they were the same ones from the warehouse or not.

They came at us in twos, swinging their wood and metal bars. I couldn't help but feel like I was in the final levels of Super Mario Brothers, facing off to the mini Koopas.

Both swung at once, coordinated by one high and the other low. I leapt up and back onto the hood of the

Hummer. Serum flooded my mouth as adrenaline pumped through me. I somersaulted through the air over them and was just about to land when one of them hit my stomach, sending me flying into a tree that cracked in half from the pressure. I used the split trunk as leverage to swing myself back up and over the edge rather than fall a mile or more down into a ravine.

I withdrew my dart gun, aimed and fired, hitting one of my targets in the hand. It wasn't a perfect shot, but at least I hit him. He dropped to the ground. The other didn't give me a chance to reload. He came at me with round kicks, the pole flying out in front of him.

We danced around each other's moves for a while. It was a good sign because it meant that practice had improved my skills. I had to be sure I didn't get sloppy as things carried on though.

The sound of Kellan struggling caught my attention. His grunts and heavy breathing stood out against the others. I looked over, giving my guy the perfect opportunity to send me flying into the mountainside. The moment I saw Kellan barely fighting off three guys at once, something within me clicked, some sort of inner strength bulleted to my surface. I threw my arm out right as the ninja closest to me released the spear at the end of his pole and aimed it at my chest. I snapped it in half, the piece scraping but not penetrating my clothes or skin.

I was at Kellan's side in a split second. One second I wanted to be next to him, and the next I was. I heard the battle begin to die down behind me as I connected one by one with each ninja, barely able to keep up with my own speed. They went flying into the air landing on hard edges of the mountain's rock surrounding the waterfall. Blood

slowly began to run into the water from their black uniforms.

My breathing was heavy, my heart pounding in my head as I moved on to the next assassin. One by one I knocked them out, snapped their necks and tossed them over the mountain's edge. Again, I could barely keep up with my own speed. When I finally stopped not even a minute later, my head spun causing me to teeter in my steps. Kellan caught me as I started to go down.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes as he surrounded me. "I'm okay," I finally said.

"You haven't stopped glowing," Kellan whispered.

My eyes shot open and looked straight down at my arms, thin lines projecting neon light, forming a maze down and around my hands. I took a few more breaths, trying to calm my racing heart. The serum was beginning to recede already.

"You okay, Leka?" Kai asked; his brow creased with concern. The others' expressions were similar.

"I'm fine. Really. Just not used to this yet." They didn't look convinced but didn't push either.

"I say we head up the mountain. They're dropping from above us so they're further up," Kalel said.

Kellan secured my hand in his as we made our way further along the road and up the mountain. The higher we went the chillier it got. It became harder for my lungs to expand. Lucky for me the oxygen in my blood was way above normal since I was a vamp, which helped offset the asthmatic feel brought on by the thinning air.

We reached another clearing, this one was merely a large notch carved out of the mountain. Large and small rocks gathered beneath moss at its base beside the road while vines looped above us. The road had narrowed to nearly a single lane by this point.

I studied nature's mural. It'd been at least twenty minutes since the last battle had ended. I was on edge, waiting, anticipating Jack's next move.

Something flashed out of the corner of my eye; movement from within the cut out. I leapt over the wooden posts acting as a makeshift rail. The moss was moist and slippery beneath my black combat boots. I carefully crept over and around the landscape. Everything shot upwards abruptly, creating a wall. Looking up, I confirmed movement.

I waved the others over as I searched for a branch or extended edge of rock to use as leverage. Unable to find anything, I squatted down and projected myself. My fingers caught the edge of the ledge above. I swung my legs up and over, lying flat as I checked around me; I'd reached another wall of the mountain at this level, but could see there was an opening in the wall once I rounded the corner. Whatever had moved was gone, and probably had ventured to the same place I was heading.

I extended my hand down, helping my friends up one by one. I pointed in the direction of the opening before leading the way. The trees overhead were crowded, making it impossible to see anything beyond their leaves and palms.

I walked through the cave entrance into pitch-black darkness. I was just about to turn around when a hand grabbed me and threw me into the cave wall. My head snapped back against the stone, igniting my veins in self-

defense. Suddenly I could see everything from my glow. I swear Sir Staten must have played with some radioactive slime. Who has ever heard of glowing veins?

Looking around, I didn't see anyone but us, but I knew for sure something had grabbed me and tossed me into the wall. Kalel bent down and picked up the white envelope on the floor, confirming my experience. He opened it and handed it to me, careful not to touch me. I tried not to feel like an alien in that moment, but couldn't ignore the rejection in his eyes. We didn't know what I was at this point other than abnormal. Kellan touched me, loved me without concern, but Kalel shied away as if I was contagious.

I pulled out the paper.

You're tricks are ruining my fun. Let's cut to the chase, one and done.

-Jack

My eyes darted all around us. He said one and done which meant he was going to take care of us all at once and soon.

As if right on cue, the floor dropped out from beneath us sending us flying down a tunnel of some sort. It was smooth, not rugged so clearly it had been specially crafted. We landed with a harsh thud on a dirt floor. Jack's men immediately swarmed us, disarming us in a flash. I began to fight back, knocking out his soldiers one by one with my enhanced strength and speed.

"Ah, Alexa. We meet at last." I froze mid-punch at the sound of his voice. I turned around to face my bully.

Jack stood about six feet with chocolate brown skin, a buff physique. His hair curled tightly to his head. Despite his skin tone, his hair wasn't coarse, but seemed rather

soft. His dark brown, nearly black, eyes penetrated through me. A giant grin broke out over his face.

He walked over to a huge U-shaped leather sectional arranged over a rug upon concrete beneath. He'd somehow managed to install a fireplace in the middle of a mountain; it blazed beneath a wall of 40" flat screen TVs, showing cameras around all of El Yunque. A technology center off to the side housed every brand of computer and wiring, which were somehow routed through the rock walls.

"You seem surprised that I do not live like a caveman," he mused, pouring himself a drink at the bar standing along the far wall.

"Not at all," I said, surprised that my voice didn't shake.

"Let me go!" Gabi fussed, fighting the workers trying to restrain her.

I looked, frowning to find the guys had already been detained, something slapped around their wrists. It looked like solid metal piping soldered in layers around them.

"Let them go Jack," I ordered.

I nearly leapt backwards when he was in front of me in a split second, right in my face. "I don't know who the hell you've been dealing with Lexi, but you don't impress me. I'm not about to cave to a little girl who likes to play big."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Well it sure seemed like you enjoyed playing with this girl," I shot back.

"And people say I'm vain," he laughed, walking back over to the sofa.

I caught him shooting glances at Gabi the entire time. "Let her go."

“I have an even better idea.” He took a sip of his drink before setting it down on the glass coffee table. “Bart!” he called. A balding, pot-bellied man dressed in a suit approached him.

“Yes sir?”

“Bring me the pens.”

“How many sir?”

Jack looked at the guys before answering, “Two.” Jack smiled deviously at me. “Now come here my dear.” He called me over with the crook of his finger.

“Don’t dear me,” I snapped.

“Touchy, touchy.”

“Jack, cut the shit and let my friends go. It’s me you want, not them.”

“Oh, how cute. You think I actually care. Oh how rosy and naïve your view of the world is Alexa! I’m a bastard, a straight, conniving, cutting bastard. There is no good in me.”

“Bull shit.” He cut his eyes at me. “I said bull shit! If you were really mean then you would have just killed us all already.”

“On the contrary. I’m worse than mean. I’m evil because I’m stringing you along. You’re all going to die, but I’m going to make sure it’s slow and torturous.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Here we go with that magic question.”

“Seriously. If we’re all going to die anyways, the least you can do is tell us why.”

“Because you’ve messed it all up. I was lying low, building my political connections and working my candidacy underground. There were plenty of vamp groups and units with leaders, but no true government. That was until you came along. Now two powerful entities with armies of their own and sustainability are working together. No one can go against them. But now that I have the three leaders of one of the most powerful vampire operations all under my roof with the one petty vampeen who still believes in a silly thing called world peace, I can end this abomination once and for all!”

“Do you feel better?”

He shook his head in dismay. “What the hell are you talking about girl?” It was the first time an island accent seeped into his tone.

“Do you feel better now that you’ve gotten that off your chest?”

“Bart! Where the hell are you with those pens?” he yelled.

I was in. Somehow I’d figured out what would crack Jack. He wanted me to believe that he was unemotional, all vamps tried to claim that, but he wasn’t. I made him mad, and anger is an emotion. Jack also liked to be in control; he liked predictability, especially if he went to such lengths to track me.

I smiled and winked at the boys. I walked over to the couch and sat down. I grabbed his drink and took a sip, immediately spitting it out everywhere. “What the heck are you drinking?”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I asked you first,” I smiled innocently at him.

“Coconut water,” he growled. “Or at least I was until you swilled it with your germs.”

“Touchy, touchy.”

“Don’t patronize me. I could kill each one of your friends in a heartbeat.”

“Then do it,” I waved my hand and stood up. I paced around the room looking at his equipment.

“Lex, I really don’t think you know who you’re dealing with here. He actually will kill us,” Gabi pleaded.

“Here are the pens sir,” Bart said, his chubby hands extending out what looked to be two ballpoint pens. I knew that’s not what they were. The liquid inside was an amber color, not usually found in the fountain of a Paper Mate.

“Ah, now let the games truly begin. Bring those three over here.” Jack motioned for Kellan, Al and Kai to be brought towards him. I watched the guys test the wrist restraints, wincing in pain when they did. That’s when I noticed the electrical jolt that zapped each of them. My heart sped up at seeing them in pain; worse yet, I didn’t know how to break through those things.

“Now Lexi, you get to decide which one of these three vamps you’re going to save.”

Serum flooded my throat. I hadn’t counted on this. I wasn’t supposed to lose anyone, not yet anyways.

A glow caught my eyes; I looked down to find myself illuminated again. I was beginning to recognize the pattern. Anytime I feared for someone’s life, I lit up like a neon Christmas tree. I tried to think of how I was going to get them out of this. I didn’t care if I died here, but they couldn’t.

“Which one?” Jack demanded.

Don't save the one you love.

“Kai!”

“Interesting choice.” He threw back his arm prepared to stab Kellan.

I don't know what came over me. It felt like a surge of power thrust from my center. When I opened my eyes, barely able to breathe, Jack was crushed beneath me on the hard floor; his eyes nearly bugging out as he looked up at me.

I was gasping for air; I felt light headed and dizzy. I was barely able to stay conscious.

“I've got him,” Al said, placing a calming hand on my shoulder. I felt Kellan's arms hug me as he lifted me into his arms. I saw Kalel and Craig help Al secure Jack.

“It's okay, babe. You did good. You saved us,” Kellan said, kissing my forehead as he laid me on the sofa.

“It hurts,” I whispered. I never knew not having enough air could hurt so bad. It felt like my insides had a thousand pounds of pressure on them. A trail from my throat to my chest burned.

“Shh. Just rest.”

—

Chapter Thirty

My eyes flew open as a wave of cold passed over my body. Imara stood over me, gazing down at me peacefully.

“Welcome back,” she smiled.

“How... how?”

“I found her card in your pocket,” Kellan said.

“But-“ Imara shook her head warning me not to finish the sentence; not to tell them that I hadn’t put her card there.

“I’d like to apologize for my son’s ruthless behavior. It was uncalled for,” Imara stretched out her hand to help me sit up.

“Your son?”

“Yes. Jack is my son.”

“But, I thought he was the oldest vampire.”

“He started that rumor decades ago, but he is nothing more than a nuisance with too much time and money on his hands.”

“But, when I went to the vampire headquarters. I... I was drilled about him, in front of you.”

“I could not interfere with your destiny Alexa. It was forbidden of me, regardless of my personal involvement. You were meant to teach my son a lesson, and, bring him love.”

“Love?” I laughed, struggling to wrap my mind around any part of what she’d said.

“Yes, love. With Gabriella.” My eyes shot to a blushing Gabi, seated next to Jack on the floor. He was no longer restrained; the guys were seated around the couch, except Al who was studying Jack’s electronic equipment. “Just as Kellan offers you perfect balance, so does Gabi offer Jack perfect balance. Their auras are balanced together, the perfect high and low of each other. Opposites attract one might say. Nonetheless, she will keep him grounded. And if

she doesn't, then I will personally lock him up and throw away the key."

"I said sorry ma," Jack said.

"Threatening peoples' lives, threatening the very existence of our kind is nothing to merely apologize for. You owe this lady a hell of a lot more than that!" I sat back when Imara's eyes took on a reddish hue. I'd never heard her curse before either; never pictured her as the type to.

"I've already shut down all the units temporarily. No one else will be affected."

"What about all the ones who've already been affected? How many humans have you recruited into your academy Jack?"

"What do you mean?"

"Um, Lex, it turns out that all of Jack's ninjas are still human. He has a deal set up with a school in Japan. If they can survive against a vampire, then they receive their certification. The whole bit about the families and stuff was another rumor he started to beef up his fear factor," Gabi explained.

"Well sugarplums. I feel duped!" I thought for a minute. "What about the car bomb?"

"That actually wasn't him," she frowned.

"I did say that I saw three vamps, not ninjas, do that," Al added.

"Well crap," I sighed.

"You still did take him down, which is a hard feat," Gabi smiled.

"I guess," I shrugged. I looked at Gabi for a long minute. "What about Rafi?"

"Foul play, but not on Jack's part. Somehow a vampire hunter snuck into the academy." I could hear the sadness in her voice.

"I didn't even think those people really existed."

"Where there is a myth, there is a hunter. Where there is a story, there is some truth," Imara stated.

"Werewolves?"

"We exist, do we not? So they probably exist to some degree as well." She sat down beside me, placing a hand on my thigh.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help feel like we're just washing this all away, like we're forgiving him for making our lives a living hell these past couple weeks. How exactly would this have ended if it wasn't for my surprise twist?" I looked directly at Jack, not willing to just wipe the slate clean quite as easily.

"I check. The pens were filled with berries and blood," Kalel offered.

"So this really was just a game to you?" I checked.

He at least did look a bit embarrassed. "It gets lonely here. Bart is still human. No one can keep up with me."

Which reminds me. Why did you send Rico after me?"

"Who is Rico?"

"Vamp army, double agent. You hired him to target me around Christmas. He said Black Jack when he was questioned."

“Oh Alexa, you have garnered the attention of the second male vampeen ever created; the leader of the vampeen vampire war, Johanne’s first son, Cesar. His game of choice is black jack, hence the nickname,” Jack explained. I felt myself pale.

Oh God. This is never going to end, is it? I turned towards Kellan. He offered me silent reassurance to counter the fear in my eyes.

“Jack, don’t scare the poor girl,” Imara fussed. “Actually, why don’t you try your skills on Alexa?”

“Skills?”

“You want to see your future Alexa? Do you want to see what your fate truly consists of?”

A chill ran down my spine at his words. Kellan bristled beside me; I sensed the others doing the same. Sensing it was big, I opened my mind.

“Give me your hand, Alexa. I can project the image into everyone’s mind,” Imara offered. I agreed, placing my hand in hers.

The second Jack’s hand clasped down on my shoulder, it was as if all the air was sucked out of me. My mind was thrown into a projected scene. It was literally as if I was watching myself.

Barefoot, dressed in sweat pant capris, though not my usual, and a somewhat loose-fitting t-shirt, I looked out the window of the hi-rise condo. I was in the middle of a city, though I couldn’t say for sure which one. I must have been in the center given the view of roofs and another tall building adjacent to my own. I let the curtain slide between my fingers as I turned and walked away. That’s when I saw

it, my baby bump. I must have been at least five months along.

I walked over and plopped down on the black leather sofa. The décor of the place was ultra-modern, certainly not my taste. It must have been a hotel then, though the computer cubby in the corner, set up with a full computer, books and more disputed my idea. I jumped up, tossing the magazine, the second I heard the thud. Turning quick I saw the last of them land on the balcony. I wrapped a protective hand around my stomach and raced to the front door. A quick peek in the hall showed two racing straight towards me. I slammed the door, locking it before I leaned my back against it.

I scanned the apartment for a weapon, abruptly grabbing several knives from the kitchen of varying lengths. I could see the panic in my face as I glanced down at my belly, the tears already welling. There were four guys on the balcony, taunting me through the door, and another two right outside. I had no idea what they were waiting on, until I saw the Bluetooth in one of their ears. They were waiting on orders, an approval to bust through.

I stared longingly at the bedroom, but I was smart enough to know not to box myself in. I would have to face them head on, six against one, fighting to protect my unborn child and me at all costs.

“Where the hell is he?” I cried out in a whisper to myself. I saw the resolve beginning to take form on my face. My jaw suddenly became set as fire lit in my eyes. I actually looked like a fierce force to be reckoned with.

I narrowed my eyes at the black girl with short twists on her head; she was focused on me, her eyes dancing between my face and my belly. Somehow I knew it would be her who did the most damage.

I heard the "Go!" come in over their headsets. I planted my feet shoulder width apart and firmed my grip on the knives, one ultra-long and another ultra-short. They crashed through the doors simultaneously. Like a trained assassin, I flew in circles around the men, quickly knocking three of them out. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the blonde guy pull the gun and aim it for me. I yanked his partner in front of me the second the trigger was pulled. The guy fell fast to the floor right as I tomahawked the large knife into the assailant's chest.

I turned towards the balcony where she was standing, arms crossed, studying me. She was smart. She'd stood back and observed my fighting skills, learned my style.

"Such a pity to have to kill such a worthy opponent. You could have made an excellent sparring partner," she said, her island accent thick, as she began to walk around the outer edges of the room. I watched her like a hawk eyeing its prey. My fingers strummed the knife handle; it was all I had left, and it was short meaning I'd have to get close or aim hard and well. I instantly knew somehow though that it would be the first.

She continued her stalking, leaving me on edge, anticipating her spring, or perhaps she was hoping I'd be foolish enough to attack first. I heard the whirring through the air before I saw it; a tiny knife, the size of an envelope opener, flew pointedly towards my stomach. I dove down, my side across the floor knocking over the coffee table, barely missing its sharp blade. The second the item hit the sofa behind me, it sizzled and the material began to melt and dissolve.

"Acid?" She merely nodded with her brows, folding her hands behind her back.

I began to fidget; I was losing my patience. I couldn't afford to do anything stupid though. As if sensing my disquiet, she turned and faced me head on. She withdrew a weapon with each hand; a knife and a needle filled with some sort of liquid. I swallowed; my throat had to be filled with serum by this point. My left hand caressed my stomach; it appeared I was gathering my strength, knowing this fight wouldn't be for myself.

She released a war cry as she raced straight towards me. I waited until the last second to flee. She caught my neck with her arm yanking me back towards her; I threw her over me by her arm and kicked the knife out of her hand. Her free hand gripped my foot and sent me backwards on my ass. I used the foot she held to kick her, but she merely slid away for a split second and slid back, her grip on me tight. She looked at me, a gleam in her eye right as the needle jammed into my calf.

"No!" I screamed as the reality of it hit me. Summoning an unknown power, a light glow illuminating off of me, I did the same thing to her as I did to Keira. I was on her in no time ripping her to shreds with my nails and the knife. She fought back, but it wasn't enough. It was as if I didn't feel it because I continued on as if she weren't attacking me in return, as if she weren't shredding my clothes and scraping my skin. Blood covered the both of us.

I looked directly into her eyes. She lifted her chin in defiance, spitting in my face. Without further thought, I jammed the knife harshly into her chest. A second later her head turned sideways and she was dead. I burst into tears, blood and water running down my face.

I carefully slid off of her and removed the needle from my calf. It was still full, but I looked empty. Using the unharmed edge of the sofa, I hoisted myself up, wrapping

my arms around myself, hugging my baby as I drowned in despair.

I glanced up at the sounds of someone running down the hall. I jumped back, preparing for the worst, though it didn't seem like I had anything left in me to fight with. The second he saw me, Alejandro was at my side taking me in his arms.

"Where is he? Where is he?" I kept crying as he held me, surveying the disarray of the room and the fight I'd just been through.

I gasped when Jack released me. I felt the tears running down my cheeks. He gave me a hard gaze, one brow lifting then falling quickly, the only question he was asking me over what I'd seen.

I looked around at the others, their faces full of either anger or sadness; the worst of what I saw though was pity. They were looking at me with eyes fully of pity. I huffed, blocking my thoughts. Now I finally understood why Will had kept the future to himself. It did change you. I would be waiting, expecting this fight, praying I could find a way to avoid or change it.

"Next time, keep your skills to yourself Jack," I said.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Well, again, I apologize for my son Alexa. I'm sorry I didn't get here in time for your show; I heard it was spectacular. I was hoping to visit Charleston soon and would love to stop in if you don't mind."

"Of course not. Just let me know when."

"Jack, walk your dear mother out. It was a pleasure meeting all of you," Imara waved.

“Fumbling juju beans,” Craig laughed. “Wait until Mel gets a load of this crock.”

“I don’t know if she’s going to laugh her butt off or be pissed that she missed out. Probably a bit of both now that I think about it.” I looked at Al and grinned wide. “Wait until Auggy hears about this!” Al chuckled for the first time, his eyes lighting up with amusement.

“That’s if you can pull him away from Claire,” he joked.

“Oh God Kellan. Could you imagine calling him Uncle Auggy?”

“That’s a negative son,” he did his best Auggy impression, which was surprisingly almost spot-on.

“Alright ladies and gentlemen,” Jack clapped his hands and he walked back in. “I hate to do this, but I’d like a little alone time with my future wife.”

“Future wife?” My brows couldn’t go any higher on my forehead.

Gabi was blushing like a schoolgirl, and was as giddy as one too. I hated to admit it, but she was never this happy with Rafi. “Jack’s agreed to align with the Bladangs and Vamp Army if I marry him,” she beamed.

“Doesn’t the saying go, ‘Don’t mix business with pleasure?’”

“Oh I always mix business with pleasure,” Jack smirked, pulling Gabi to him and kissing her passionately.

“Okay! And we’re going. Bart! I need directions out of this place!” I yelled.

“Of course,” the man appeared with a smile. “You can use the elevators. It will deliver you to a one-way tunnel. Follow it out to the basement door. Go up the stairs and you will find a vehicle waiting for you. Have a wonderful day, and thank you for coming by.” He bowed as if he was a butler.

I grabbed Kellan’s hand. “We’re all walking out alive,” I smiled.

—

Chapter Thirty-One

“I can’t believe I missed all the fun!” Mel cried. “But zita zappitas is it great to have you back!” She squeezed Craig and me at the same time. She’d been waiting for us at my house with Beth when we returned and immediately made us tell her everything.

“Well, in less than two months you’ll be one of us,” I reminded her.

“I know! The time is flying by. I swear I’ll blink and see everything just like Bella,” she squealed. “Of course there’ll be a whole lot of freaking out in between, which you’ll have to hold my hand through. Which reminds me. Party of the century is being planned for me! It’s going to be the week after I turn. I’m praying that they take some of what they whittled off of you and stuff it in my boobs and butt.”

“You didn’t get out much while we were gone, did you?”

“No. I sat glued to the phone, freaking out that I’d miss a call from you guys. Which also reminds me, spa day, me and you, and of course Gabi when she gets back from her honeymoon. I can’t believe she flew to Jamaica and got married the next day! Jack must be some vamp.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent catching up with Mel and Beth who, I was surprised to find, had gone out a couple times shopping together while we were gone. Later in the day, I called Aunt Claire, but was advised by Auggy's assistant that while she was doing wonderful, she was otherwise preoccupied with her employer. I had a feeling wedding bells would be following them soon.

"Hey, babe, I'm gonna go out for a bit. I'll be back later."

"Oh, okay. Have fun?" I didn't know where he was going. He'd been a bit quiet all afternoon, although with Mel around, I didn't know if he didn't have anything to say or just wasn't being given the chance to speak.

The second he walked out the door, Craig looked at me. "He's been weird today. Not his usual Ellen self."

"I was hoping I was the only one to notice."

"Did you get a gander inside his noggin?"

"No. Wall's been up all day," I frowned.

"Well, it's great to have you back. I was a little lonely without you all," Beth smiled, distracting us from her son.

"It's great to be back!"

"And it's only going to get better when I join the gang!" Mel exclaimed.

—

Chapter Thirty-Two

KELLAN

This was something I felt I had to do. It wasn't what I wanted to do, but I'd feel better knowing I had.

I parked in front of the Bladang's lake house, using the front door rather than the garage without Lexi. Kai opened the door on the first knock.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" He eyed me for a minute debating before nodding once and stepping back so I could enter.

"What's up?" His body was tense, his hands stuffed into the front pockets of his jeans.

"I don't like you, but for some reason she loves you. Let's not make this a Jacob and Edward thing, but if anything happens to me I want you to take care of her." I clenched my jaw. I never thought I'd be saying these words to the damn vamp, especially since I almost lost Lexi to him once before. This wasn't about me though; this was about her. Knowing what that stupid binder said and what Jack had shown of the future, I had to face the fact that anything is possible, especially death, and I loved her enough to make sure she'd be taken care of and protected long after I was gone. "As much as it pains me to say this, you're the best man for her in that situation. You'd sacrifice yourself to save her, and that means a lot."

He didn't relax his stance, only continued to glare at me, eyes narrowed as if assessing whether or not I was telling him the truth. Satisfied with whatever he saw, he nodded and offered me his hand. We shook on it.

We tucked our hands into our pockets, awkwardly avoiding eye contact until Kai finally broke the silence. "I'll always love and protect her. As much as you hate it, know I hate it too. It's hard as hell to watch you with her; you don't make it easy slobbering all over her every chance you get. I've always planned to wait for the moment you're gone to pursue her again. It's not like I needed your blessing to do it, but it's nice that I can at least tell her you gave it to me,"

he said, relaxing a bit as the idea formulated in his head. I knew the second the picture was complete when a genuine smile broke out on his face, despite his eyes being off in the distance.

I struggled to control my anger. Serum oozed over my teeth and gums, my fists clenched at my side. *I'm doing this for her.* I had to remember that. This wasn't about me.

I took a deep breath, my nostrils flaring on the release as I struggled not to picture the same damn picture I knew he was. I'd already glimpsed it once before, losing her to him; them locked in each other's arms happily gazing into each other's eyes. *Damn it!*

"Glad we worked this out." I strained to remain polite. He nodded, understanding remotely in his view. He knew this was hard as fuck, but it didn't stop him from gloating in it.

I turned and walked out, needing some fresh air to clear my head and reassure my heart that I'd made the right decision. I was doing this because I loved her, but the selfish part of me wanted her to mourn me forever. I wanted some stupid Twilight parallel where she avenged my death, but couldn't handle the thought of her losing her life to do it, especially if the projected vision was right and we had a child together.

Damn him! *He'll be raising my damn child over my dead body.* Great. How fucking ironic a phrase to use.

I sighed. A baby. With Lexi. I couldn't picture anything closer to perfection. She was gorgeous with her rounded belly, and just as graceful in her fight sequence. Now that I'd seen that fight though, I knew I would be there for her. It wouldn't play out like that.

Fuck it! I was going to make sure all this shit never happened. I'd be damned if any man raised my child or kissed my wife besides me. She's mine; only mine. I didn't give a shit what some quack job predicted; I didn't care what I had to sacrifice to be beside her forever. I'd do whatever I had to ensure it. She was never going to lose me. Never.

—

Epilogue.

Years later...

"What story do you want mommy to read you tonight?" I asked, carrying my son over to the bookshelf to make his selection. He immediately reached out to grab the well-worn binding we'd read more times than I could count.

"Mommy and Daddy! Mommy and Daddy!" he shouted excitedly, nearly dropping the heavy journal as he jumped in my arms.

"Again?" I smiled, kissing his chubby toddler cheeks. My heart fluttered as his emerald eyes beamed back at me, a small dimple in his left cheek as he laughed.

"Again, again!" His laughter was music to my ears, and I could never say no to him anyways.

I lay down on the bed and cuddled him in my lap, pulling the blanket over us both. He helped me turn to the first page before leaning back against my chest and placing his thumb in his mouth. I kissed his messy dark brown hair.

"Hundreds of years ago, a vampire and vampeen couple was predicted..."

"Mommy and Daddy!" he exclaimed.

“Yes, Mommy and Daddy,” I laughed. So we were...

—

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And now, a sneak peek at the next book in the Vamp Chronicles series, Vamp Versus Vamp.

Please note that a short story titled, The Innocence of White, falls between Hit the Road Jack and Vamp Versus Vamp. It is an indulgence, offering a more in-depth look at Gabi and Jack’s relationship, not a necessity to keep up with the storyline.

VAMP VERSUS VAMP

Vamps don’t get a day of rest. Or so it seems to Lexi Jackson, especially when a new predator comes at her, and this time, he’s hitting close to home. With her best friend Mel’s transformation approaching quickly, Lexi must gather those she trusts to face the enemy from her own bloodline.

But when there’s a kink in your front line, when your relationships are rocked to the core, how do you face the threat with confidence? Lexi can’t, which forces new protectors to step forward, and old insecurities to eat away at Kellan.

Kellan’s fought hard for his fiancé in the past, but with others continually intruding on his territory, his anger is brewing. With a lot to prove and more to work through, he unites forces with several power players in the vamp world creating his own attack unit. It’s his place to protect his fiancé, not anyone else’s.

With the enemy closing in on them, will Lexi and her

friends be able to put aside their differences in time to defeat the newest legion of discontented vamps together?

Will Kellan and Lexi's personal struggles chip away at the foundation of their relationship, causing all to crumble, including the prophecy?

—

Vamp Versus Vamp

Preface.

"Wow. I can't believe it's been two whole months with no vampy woo-woo going on," Mel said as we made our way to fourth period. We all had the same schedule; Kellan made sure of that.

"Really, Mel? Now you just went and totally jinxed us." I sighed. "Ugh. Kellan, find me some wood so I can force her to knock on it."

Kellan laughed. "You don't really believe in that crap, do you?"

I shrugged. His brow shot up. "Please." I gave him a small smile.

"Very superstitious; writing's on the wall. Very superstitious; ladder's 'bout to fall," he sang, grinning before he sped out of sight around a corner.

"So I take it things are going good between the two of you," Mel chuckled.

"Yeah. These last couple months have been great between us. We're stronger than ever as a couple."

"But?" She pinned me with a knowing stare.

“But I can’t help feeling like... I don’t know. Like something is off or maybe what we have isn’t strong enough or...” I heaved a heavy sigh. “I don’t know. Something just feels wrong despite how right Kellan feels to me.”

“Hmm. Maybe you two need to go on a romantic weekend getaway or something. I mean, you’re rarely alone. Every time I stop by someone’s always there.”

“Yeah, well, since you’ve been practically shacking up with Craig, you haven’t exactly been by often,” I teased. We laughed together, before silence fell between us, replaced by a more serious atmosphere.

“Oh, God, Lex, I can’t believe I’m going to be a vampire in three days. I’m finally going to be in on everything. I’ll no longer be the outcast human hanging with a bunch of vamps,” she stated, her eyes a porthole to the excitement and vulnerability she felt.

“I know.” I smiled. “It’s been a long time coming. Who would have thought all those years ago when we met that we would be here today?”

“I’m excited, but nervous. I can already tell you’re going to have to talk me off the ledge Thursday.” She shuffled her feet beside the classroom door, clutching the strap of her book bag tightly.

“I’ll be there. I promise I’ll be there every step of the way.”

We stared at each other, the years passing between us. She understood in that moment that this would be merely a pinprick of a memory in the timeline of her life, but it was one that we would look back on together.

Chapter One

“I wonder what the guys are planning on doing,” Mel asked as we walked into my house.

“Who knows with those two? My guess is they’ll head to the beach.” I raced towards the alarm box, prepared to shut it off, but stopped short when I didn’t hear the beeps, signaling it was on.

I flew to Mel’s side, standing protectively in front of her. I looked around the house, straining my ears to listen for any subtle noises that indicated the intruder was still here. When all I heard was silence, I signaled for Mel to remain where she was so I could check things out. She nodded her head, her eyes full of fear and worry. She knew I would protect her, but as I’d found out through experience, we were a lot more vulnerable than we liked to boast.

I took one step forward and froze when he walked around the corner into the family room. His predatory glare sent chills racing down my spine as serum flooded my mouth.

“Hello, ladies.” His rose-colored lips lifted slightly at the corners, the only indication of his amusement.

There was a distinct European flair about this man. His shaggy black hair contrasted against his tan skin. He didn’t have much muscle tone to him, or so it appeared through his suit. *A suit is an odd thing to be doing dirty vamp business in.* He was medium height, and while he was thin, he wasn’t etched muscle thin. It was his green eyes, similar in shade to my mother’s, that cast a familiar glow about him, though.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?” I demanded, pulling Mel against my back.

“God, why couldn’t the myths about invitations be true?” Mel groaned behind me. I bumped her with my butt to get her to shut up. I didn’t know who the heck this guy was or if there was more of them.

“Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing in my house?” My voice was louder this time; my tone took on a harsh quality as my anxiety began to skyrocket.

He started to walk past the sectional towards us, undoing the top button of his jacket casually. I backed Mel up towards the back door to the garage, ready to shove her out so she could run at a moment’s notice. He stopped three feet in front of us.

“Now, is that any way to greet your grandfather?”

I shook my head. “Guh...grandfather?” I stuttered. I knew he was vamp, but without my nose, I couldn’t tell if he was a vampeen or a vampire.

“Yes. Didn’t your mother tell you about me?”

I studied him up and down before cautiously shaking my head ‘no.’

“Such a disappointment that woman was. I swear, she and Claire were the worst of the lot.” The hairs on my body stood at attention. Something was majorly wrong with him.

“How old are you?” I was surprised I had found my voice and that it didn’t shake.

He chuckled. “Old. I’m the second vampeen ever born.”

“I thought Cristianna was the second vampeen,” I countered, finally feeling like my feet were landing on solid ground.

“Given how my father was, you are truly to believe that he remained in one woman’s bed when he was looking to create an army?”

I stared at him, unsure whether to trust him or not. “What’s your real name?”

“Very good, granddaughter. It’s certainly not Charles Maxwell.” He laughed; it reminded me of chalk scraping along a blackboard. I cringed as if he had.

Abruptly he was in my face. I leaned back, covering Mel. “Cesar! My name is Cesar Euskadi.”

I closed my eyes, trying to calm my reaction. Over the past couple months Kellan and I had practiced controlling my new surge of electricity; it was still a work in progress though.

I heard him walk away from us. When he opened the fridge, I opened my eyes, my gaze locked on him. “What do you want?”

“I’m merely here to protect the girl.” He flicked his hand beyond me to Mel.

“Why would you want to protect her?”

He slammed the refrigerator door and was a few feet away again within the blink of an eye. Suddenly, I was very grateful for Sir Staten’s blood. By the looks of things I would need to activate my gift just to have a chance at survival against my own flesh and blood. “You need my protection,” he bit out.

“Why would you want to protect me? And where were you five months ago when I needed protection?” I leaned forward, aiming myself in his direction.

He calmed down in a flash; it was as if someone had turned off his internal switch. "Because she's one of us." He locked eyes with me. "And they aren't. But she is, so I'm offering you my protection. Do you want it or not?"

I looked at Mel. She was scared, starting to curl into herself; her arms couldn't wrap any tighter around her ultra-slim waist. "It's going to be okay, Mel. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. They'll get you over my dead body." That was a promise I intended to keep.

"I would reconsider that if I were you, Alexa," Cesar casually stated, the slightest hint of repercussions imminent.

"Why? What is it that you want from me?"

"I want you."

"Why me? Why now?"

"Because, without Kellan, with the two of you separated, I can do exactly what I want and get away with it. No political power plays to hold off."

"You're the reason I'm taking a stand. Blood or not, I don't take kindly to racists."

"You are naïve."

"Maybe I am, but I know for certain that your prejudice will be your greatest downfall, Cesar." His features began to scrunch before he replaced his frown with a tranquil façade.

"Boys! Get them!" Cesar stood back, his hands folded in front of him, watching the scene unfold with pleasure.

Three vampeens, faster than most of the vamps I came across, raced towards us. Two came directly at me; the last

one went straight for Mel.

“Let me go!” she screamed, pulling on her arm to no avail. The vamp laughed in her face and had her pinned to the ground in half a second.

“No! No, no, no!” I yelled, illuminating like a Christmas tree. Within seconds I snapped the necks of the two who attacked me. I grabbed the third by the back of his shirt and threw him across the room, slamming him into the cupboards, effectively wrecking my mother’s beautiful kitchen.

“What the hell, Lex?” Mel gasped, slowly inching away from me towards the corner. She was visibly shaking.

“It’s alright, Mel. I promise I’m still me.” She swallowed hard. I threw my arm out, knocking the vamp into the wall again as he launched himself at me. She glanced at the vamp; averting her eyes from me, she nodded.

“Well done, Alexa.” Cesar clapped his hands dramatically. He was already grating on me. I gathered that he was theatrical about everything despite knowing him less than an hour. “So what’s it going to be, granddaughter?”

“Go to hell.” I scowled, disdain clear in my tone.

He laughed, as if I’d merely made a joke. “I’ll give you some time. Clearly you don’t understand the stakes here.”

A chill ran up my spine; foreboding twisted my gut. “What stakes?”

“This.” He held out a smart phone showing a live video stream.

The lighting was ample despite the dark environment. Stacked cement blocks created the wall behind where Kellan and Craig were in chains. It appeared to be a cellar, though where I couldn't ascertain.

Kellan was the worse for wear. He'd been stripped down to his boxers. Cuts and bruises covered his body; he wasn't healing quickly, as blood pooled near his feet. Abruptly someone poked Kellan, electricity running through the metal chains and over his body. He grunted in pain, still trying to be brave; abruptly he collapsed to the ground. Craig yanked and pulled with all his might on his own restraints, but they were soldered tight.

"Craig's a vampire. He's one of us," I said. My voice was flat, devoid of all emotion. I'd almost turned off what I saw, and would have gotten away with it had that one traitorous tear not escaped.

"The moment you protect a vampire, you become one of them. You become our enemy."

And just as quickly as he'd appeared, he was gone, leaving me with no clues as to what city, let alone what neighborhood, the basement cellar where my fiancé was being tortured was located.

Rage burst through me. My body shook with tension. My heart was breaking, slowly blackening at the thought of a life without Kellan. My palms flew open, facing the heavens as wind slapped my face, swirling throughout the space. My veins illuminated, taking on a red light, finally the color of blood. My vision blurred at the edges as a heavy power sprouted from my core.

"Ahhh!" I bellowed my cry over the suffering of my love right as electricity began to crackle around my skin. I threw my hands up, electricity shooting out from my palms.

The ceiling cracked along its surface above me, spider-webbing outwards, with my harsh blow. My breathing became labored and my balance tilted as I fought to remain conscious. I had to control this. It was a power, but it used my energy, my emotions, as fuel. If I hit empty, so did my body.

I stumbled, catching and ripping the back of the sofa with my enhanced strength right as my world was covered in darkness.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Christin Lovell was born and raised in Charleston, SC, but now lives in the hottest place on earth: Orlando, FL. She has three beautiful children who keep her running non-stop, but would love to adopt a few more. When she's not juggling life and kids, you'll find her huddled away somewhere writing her next book or happily reading someone else's. Like most authors she's come across, she's a coffee addict, owns far too many books than she can fit on her shelves, and she goes to work in her pajamas a lot.

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