

VAMPIRES REALM

FE HEATON



Reunion

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F E Heaton

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Chapter 1

A simple case.

That's what this was supposed to be.

So why did she get the horrible feeling that it was going to be anything but that?

Marise stared at the grand palace beyond the gates in front of her. Moonlight shone brightly on its façade, reflecting off the many windows and making them glint at her. She fought to suppress the feelings that being back here brought to the surface. The disappointment. The hurt.

The hatred.

She swept her chestnut hair from her face and the movement of her hand across her face seemed to wipe her emotions away, erasing them.

Holding her hand out in front of her, she looked at it, waiting for it to stop shaking before she made a move. She couldn't walk in there like this.

The car behind her pulled away.

The two guards protecting the gate came out of their rooms. They looked at her, hands on their swords, waiting.

She took another breath, forcing the air into her lungs and cursing herself for being so weak. It had been years since she'd felt the necessity to breathe. It had been

longer than she could remember since she'd had to steady herself like this.

It had been the last time she'd seen him.

She tugged at the sides of her black knee-length jacket and adjusted the stand-up collar. It felt too tight even though she knew it wasn't.

Questions crowded her mind but she pushed them away. She was here for a job. It didn't matter if he was here too. He wasn't the reason she had returned.

If she'd had her way, she wouldn't be here at all.

But she'd been called, and it was her duty to answer.

Expelling all of the air in her lungs, she raised her chin and strode towards the gates. She didn't stop when the guards saluted her, didn't even glance at their faces. It was their obligation to notice her. As for her, she was above them.

Walking at a brisk but steady pace towards the mansion, she went over the details she'd been given.

There had been an assassination attempt made on the lord of her bloodline, Timur. She had almost laughed when she'd read the report. The very idea of someone trying to kill him, a man so strong and iron-willed that he'd been leader of his bloodline for more centuries than she'd been a vampire, was nothing more than a joke in her eyes.

Only one attempt had been made in the past and that had been when the former lord of Venia, Nikolai, had been sentenced to death for revealing their existence to humans and arranging for Russian royalty to mate with a

Venia. As Nikolai's Chosen Son, Timur inherited the bloodline against the wishes of many. The man that had attempted the assassination had been dealt with slowly and very painfully. Timur had used it as a chance to show his new bloodline exactly what fate awaited any who tried to stand against him.

She walked into the mansion, not bothering to take in the opulence of the interior as she passed through room after room. She'd seen it all many times when she was a youngling. Then, she had loved this house and everything it stood for.

Now, she hated it with all her heart.

She stopped when she reached Timur's chambers. The two guards outside looked reluctant to let her in. It was understandable. Their lord had been hurt during the attempt. Who better to finish the job than a Law Keeper like herself?

She had the power to kill Timur and these two men before her knew it.

It wasn't even against the law. If she desired the position of both Law Keeper and Lady, she could take it.

Fortunately for Timur, she had no desire to become a slave to her bloodline and this house.

Becoming a Law Keeper had helped her dissolve most ties to her family.

It had helped her erase him from her heart.

The heavy wooden door in front of her creaked open, revealing the lush darkly furnished and low-lit interior of Timur's office. She entered without invitation.

She was above that too.

She looked at Timur where he sat in the oversized leather armchair, his round belly stretching his shirt and touching the ebony desk in front of him. He ran his fingers over his hair, pushing pale gold unruly curls out of his face. He was nervous.

She was above him too.

And he knew it.

“You have read the report?” he drawled in a thick Russian accent that made her skin crawl.

It sent whispered words around her head, ghosts of the things her hated lover had said to her all those times they’d been together. They sounded so alike, Timur and him.

Timur gave her a look that said he’d noticed her silent struggle. She wondered if he was privy to the reason why she’d left, or whether he was like the rest and thought it had been because of her appointment as the Venia Law Keeper.

“I have read the report. Is that all of the information, or is there something you’re not telling me?” The hostile edge to her voice didn’t go unnoticed by him. His brow raised a fraction. She shut down her feelings. It was her duty to be unaffected by emotions. Her judgement had to remain unclouded.

Being here was making that almost impossible.

She made herself comfortable in the seat opposite him, drawing her jacket carefully out behind her before she sat. A Law Keeper had to look presentable at all times.

She couldn't afford to get creases in her uniform. Here, it was all she had to hold on to. It was the only thing keeping her steady.

"You do not believe that an attempt was made on my life?"

"I don't believe that no one besides you was hurt." She leaned back, locked eyes with him, and searched them. He was hiding something. She had years of experience in interrogation and there was no way his pathetic attempt to conceal the truth was going to stop her from getting the information she wanted. "I also don't believe that the attempt came from a vampire."

"Whatever do you mean?" He countered her move, leaning back into his plush chair, sinking into it, and steepling his fingers as though it would make him look calm.

"Your wounds aren't consistent with those a vampire would give." She nodded to his arm where his shirt cuff had slipped back to reveal a long burn mark. "Unless the weaklings around here carry holy water?"

He dropped his hand and tugged his shirtsleeve down. She met his gaze again, coolly holding it and waiting to hear what he had to say. He was flustered now. A flicker of defiance was burning in his dark beady eyes. He looked ready to remind her of his status within the bloodline, but then his expression shifted and another emotion surfaced.

It wasn't anger.

It was sorrow.

She gave him a moment to gather himself. It was always wise to let the party being interrogated catch their breath, metaphorically speaking. You got more answers that way.

He drummed his fingers nervously against the desk and made a series of noises that sounded like indecision. What was he hiding from her?

“The... situation... was worse than reported.”

She noted the pauses, and felt like telling him that she’d already figured that out for herself. She wasn’t here because a weakling had attempted to overthrow a lord of the pure bloodlines. She was here because that part of the report had been such a ridiculous lie that she wanted to see just how bad the situation was. They’d had to make this into a problem between vampires so a Law Keeper could be assigned to the case. Why? She’d got the impression it wasn’t just because Timur was frightened of the possibility that his time had come.

She was certain that the reason she was called here had something to do with who had attacked him.

“How much worse?” she said, sitting forwards to show him that he had her full attention.

“Two of my best guards were killed defending me. My elite... my head guard has been injured... bad enough that we fear he may not recover.”

There was a tone to his voice that she didn’t like. It was intentionally soothing and it made cold fear steal into her veins. Who had beaten this man so badly that his body couldn’t heal? What had done this to her bloodline, reducing her lord from a man of iron strength, to a child hiding away from the world?

When she'd entered the house, she'd sensed that something was wrong. It had been too quiet and every person she'd passed had looked at her in a way that unsettled her. Death didn't usually take its toll on her species like this. Guards knew it was their duty to die to protect their family, and the family accepted it also.

Her sense said it wasn't the deaths that had shaken her noble bloodline.

It was the fact that whoever had attacked their lord had had the power to damage one of the sons of her house so severely that they were left waiting for him to die.

"Was it a message?"

Timur stared hard at the table. Clearly, he hadn't travelled down that avenue of thinking.

"I only ask because if this person had the power to murder two of our kin and leave a third to die from his injuries, then what had stopped him from killing you?"

A frown creased her brows as she waited for an answer. She could see that he didn't have one and he was just buying time. Timur wasn't experienced in battle. He didn't have the mind for it. He was born a leader, raised to stand at the back of his army, and taught to think like a strategist, not a soldier.

A soldier could tell her just what they were dealing with.

Timur had probably panicked when faced with the attack and that's why he was reluctant to speak. He hadn't seen anything.

"I must speak with the high guard," she said, standing and smoothing down her jacket. "He may be able to give me the answers that will save your life."

Timur didn't respond. He was still staring at the table.

"If this man is seriously injured as you said he is, then time is of the essence, my lord."

He looked up at her, right into her eyes, and the fear in them rocked her. A shiver ran through her as she stared into their hollow, dark depths. She dragged her gaze away and turned to face the door.

She'd never seen a vampire of the pure bloodlines look so scared.

What had come after him?

And why?

Timur passed her and the guard on this side of the door opened it. She hadn't paid any attention to him before, but now she looked at him, she recognised him as Tynan. She gave him a smile, but in return all she got was a look so full of sorrow that the fear returned, chilling her blood.

She held Tynan's gaze as she walked past him. What was wrong? He'd always been strong, far stronger than her. Some had said that he'd deserved the role of Law Keeper more than she had. What had shaken him so badly?

Had he been out with Timur and the three guards that night?

Following Timur down the corridor, she made a mental note to speak with Tynan once she'd interrogated the

injured guard. Maybe he could fill her in on what had been happening around here recently. It all seemed so different to how it had been when she'd left.

She could sense Tynan following a few steps behind but didn't look back at him. His presence was a comfort, but at the same time it made her think about her ex-lover, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Was he here still?

She prayed to the Devil that he wasn't. The last thing she needed was to see him again.

Her thoughts remained with the case as they walked, heading up a flight of stairs and through familiar corridors. She didn't look as they entered the guards' quarters and passed her old room. It held nothing but bad memories now. She didn't need to reopen those old wounds. She was here to do a job and she was going to do it, and get the hell out of here.

Timur stopped outside a room, his fingers grasping the door handle. She looked at him, wondering why he wasn't opening it, and found that same look of concern and sadness in his eyes. Either he cared a lot about his high guard, or he wasn't telling her something.

"If you don't mind?" she said, intimating the door.

He hesitated a moment, enough to make her nerves kick in again, and then opened the door.

The room was almost as dark as Timur's office. She stepped inside and heard the door close behind her. To her left was a wide bed with a single lamp lit beside it. There was a bowl on the stand with it, and several bloodied rags.

The air smelt of blood as she breathed it in.

She frowned and walked towards the bed, her throat constricting as the man lying in it rolled his head to face her and came into view.

Now everything made perfect sense—the looks people had given her, the sorrow in Timur and Tynan's eyes, and the reason she'd been called.

She swallowed, standing on trembling legs and no longer able to control her emotions.

"Jascha?"

Chapter 2

Dull violet eyes greeted her as his heavy lids opened. He blinked languidly and with too much effort for her liking. He was covered in blankets but she could see how badly injured his arms, neck and face was. A thick bandage was wrapped around his throat, the side of it stained with dark blood. His arms were covered in gashes, long lacerations that were edged with angry red and were weeping.

She shook her head and fought against the feelings inside of her and the tears rising into her eyes.

“Jascha?” she whispered his name again, wishing now that she could hear his voice and have him tell her that Timur was overreacting—he was going to be fine.

He wasn’t going to die.

Before she had time to stop herself, she was kneeling beside the bed, his right hand held firmly in hers and her cheek pressed against it. She closed her eyes and tears escaped them when his fingers closed around hers.

She wanted to ask who had done this to him. He was strong, far stronger than she had been, and yet someone had hurt him. No, this wasn’t hurting. This was butchering. Anger boiled up inside her. Someone had butchered him and left him to die. Death could be as swift for a vampire as it was for a human. Whoever had done this knew what they were doing and they’d made sure that Jascha wouldn’t die that night.

This was a message. Someone was telling her species that they were stronger than them.

Her jaw tensed and she growled.

Someone was going to pay.

Jascha's fingers flexed weakly against hers and he muttered something that made no sense. She raised her head, taking in the extent of the damage done to this face. It was covered in rich bruises and fine cuts. His split lip and swollen eye made her heart ache for him.

His eyes met hers, pupils dilating and contracting as he struggled to focus.

A tiny frown made his brows shift.

"Mari?" he breathed so quietly she almost didn't hear him.

The sound of that name brought back all the pain and she dropped his hand, standing and distancing herself from him as her heart broke all over again. She turned her back on him while she pushed all of her feelings back down inside of her and tried to lock them inside her heart.

"Mari?" he whispered again.

She turned on a pinpoint and stared at him with cold eyes.

"My name is Marise," she said and steeled herself against the darkness that entered his eyes. It was what he deserved. She couldn't remember now what they'd fought about or exactly what had been said, but she still felt the pain each day.

She moved to the foot of the bed, buying the time to get back in control of the situation and herself.

He sighed.

It said so much.

She knew she wasn't the only one who had been hurt that day. They'd both said things and done things that were the undoing of what they'd had together. Only she'd accepted the position as Law Keeper and ran away, when he'd been willing to heal the breach.

She folded her arms across her chest.

"If you're up to it, I'd like your opinion on what happened the night you were injured."

He gave her a look that conveyed exactly what he was thinking. He was right. It was cold of her to stand here, distant and uncaring while he suffered, but that was what a Law Keeper did. They didn't mix business with pleasure. Pleasure was a thing of the past for them. To hold this position meant being impartial about the bloodlines and being emotionless. Emotions got in the way and clouded your judgement.

Like hers were right now.

She turned her back again and paced across the room. She didn't need the distance it brought—she needed the darkness. It robbed her sight of its sharpness and meant she couldn't see his injuries so clearly.

"A simple nod or shake of your head will suffice. That is, if you can manage it?" She looked at him.

He gave her a tiny nod and grimaced, his hand coming up to touch his throat as he frowned. His eyes closed

and she could see the pain in his face. She'd forgotten the wound there. A part of her said to give him time to recover before questioning him, but the rest overruled it and said to get it over with and get out of here before these feelings stirring inside of her became dangerous.

He was a soldier. She was sure he understood. She needed answers for her investigation and so she could judge whether this case required a Law Keeper or not. This couldn't get personal. She couldn't go there again.

"Do you think there's a reason you were left alive?" she said, holding the tremble from her voice so he wouldn't know how much the sight of him so injured was affecting her.

He nodded.

"I think so too. Timur hasn't a clue what happened. You do though, don't you?"

He nodded again and swallowed with a grimace.

She moved a step closer so he could see her better through his one good eye, but kept far enough away that she couldn't clearly see his wounds.

"Who did this to you? A vampire?"

A shake of his head, tiny and almost imperceptible.

"I didn't think so. Were they human?"

He hesitated. There was uncertainty in his eyes.

"Niet," he said, voice strained but the accent that had always melted her was still there.

It was just like him to fall back on his native tongue. She hoped he'd keep his answers simple. She never had grasped the language.

"Did they look human?"

"Da," he croaked and rubbed his throat again.

She stepped nearer and had to look away when fresh blood seeped into the bandages around his neck. Her stomach roiled at the thought that she was hurting him by making him speak. She wanted to ask him to stick to nodding or shaking his head, but she couldn't let him see how affected she was by all of this.

"Do you think they were demon or were they wholly human?"

"`Ya ne pani` mayu." His voice sounded tight and he pushed himself up as he coughed.

Blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth.

"Damn it, Jascha! I told you to shake or nod." She stormed across the room and sat down on the bed beside him. Her hand was against his cheek, holding him and forcing him to look at her. Everything she was ready to say slipped away and instead she wiped the blood off his chin with her thumb.

She took her hand away from him, gathering herself while she wiped her thumb on the dirty cloth beside the bed.

There was a canister of blood and a stained glass pushed to the back of the small table. They were feeding him old blood? How was he supposed to heal? Anger stirred inside her and she shot a black look at the door. She

could sense Timur outside with the guards. Was Tynan there too? Surely he wouldn't let Jascha suffer like this?

She undid the buttons on her jacket sleeve and pushed it up her arm before setting to work on the buttons of her shirt cuff. She rolled it up and tugged it out of the way.

Thinking about what she was doing, she justified it by telling herself that a dead witness was of no use to her. This was about the case. This wasn't personal.

She extended her claws and pressed one into her wrist.

Blood beaded against her skin.

This wasn't personal.

She looked at Jascha. He was laying back on the bed again now, eyes closed and his jet-black hair falling loose from his ponytail. Rogue strands of it criss-crossed his face. She ignored her temptation to clear them away and extended her arm to him.

His nostrils flared.

His eyes rolled as he opened them and gave her an incredulous look.

She moved her arm closer, frowning at him, but silently pleading him to drink. Without fresh blood, he'd never heal. Her blood would suffice until she could get Tynan to hunt for her. She wondered if there was any way that she could have words with Timur about the canister of blood without it looking as though she was bringing her feelings into this.

Her eyes widened when Jascha's mouth latched onto her wrist and she gasped when he bit her. It was the last thing she'd been expecting. She half closed her eyes

when he began to drink, stirring all too familiar feelings inside of her. He was the last person to do this to her. She looked at his face, studying him and taking everything in.

Was it really fifty years since she'd seen his face?

No. She saw it each day in her dreams. He was always with her. She was just too stubborn to admit it.

His drinking slowed and before she knew it, it was over and he was licking the wound on her arm. She held it there for a moment when he stopped, the smallest part of her heart hoping he'd continue. He didn't. He lay back on the bed, his eyes still closed.

"Jascha?" she said and he looked at her. It seemed to take a lot of effort. Her blood was probably making him drowsy. "Was it a vampire hunter?"

"Da," he said.

"But not one like we've met before?"

"Niet," he whispered and closed his eyes again.

She smiled now that he couldn't see her. Ghosting her fingers down his cheek, not brave enough to touch him, she looked at him a moment longer and then rose from the bed.

"I'll arrange for fresh blood for you. I have more questions I need to ask. If you remember anything, please ask for me." She hated how cold she sounded.

Rolling her sleeve down, she stopped when she saw the marks on her wrist and stared at them. They were shallow and it wasn't because he was weak. It was because he hadn't wanted to hurt her. She ran her

fingers over the marks and then buttoned her sleeve, covering it with her jacket.

Walking over to the door, she paused and looked back at him. It hurt to look at him, to have those memories of their time together come back, and to see him in so much pain. She hurt so much. He'd taken her feelings and smashed them. That much she could remember. They'd broken each other's heart that night.

She wanted to say something more, but couldn't bring herself to. She had already brought enough emotion into this investigation. If anyone found out, she was likely to be punished.

She reached out behind her and took hold of the door handle.

Turning, she opened the door.

She hesitated a moment when he spoke.

"Da svi` daniya, ljubov moya."

She held the smile inside on hearing such familiar words. Was she still his love?

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said and closed the door behind her.

She killed all her feelings the moment the door clicked shut and turned to look at the people in the corridor around her. The two guards were still there and she didn't recognise either of them. They looked wet behind the ears, younglings no doubt.

Her eyes sought out Tynan but he was nowhere to be seen so they settled on Timur.

"I will have more questions for him come sunset tomorrow. For now, he must rest. His injuries are extensive, severe enough that a full interrogation may be the end of him. If that happens, I will have no answers to support my involvement in this situation and you will have no Law Keeper to protect you from this human."

Timur's eyes widened, showing the white around his irises and exposing his fear to her again. He fidgeted and she frowned. He was petrified of the thought of this human coming after him. Having seen what this person had done to Jascha, she could understand that fear, but as lord of his bloodline, he should not allow himself to be ruled by it. He was safe in his home. Or did he think that he wasn't?

"I will speak with the other guards and see what they know," she said, hiding her true intention. She had to find Tynan. It was unlike him to leave Jascha suffering like this. She wanted to know what had happened to change him. "Ensure that only your guards are allowed out to hunt for the house."

Timur swallowed, hard enough that she saw it.

"What is it?" She didn't give him an inch as she stepped towards him, straightening to her full height and staring down into his eyes. He was still hiding things from her, and she was beginning to get annoyed by all the secrecy. How was she supposed to do her job if she was being kept in the dark about things?

"No one is allowed to hunt," he muttered under his breath.

She frowned, her eyes narrowing.

"Are you insane?" She was tempted to take hold of his shirt collar and rattle him. Either that or she was going to throttle him. She took a deep breath and forced herself to remain calm. If he saw how shaken she was by the sight of Jascha so hurt, he wasn't going to give her the respect she needed and deserved.

"They are still out there."

She ignored his worried look and the childlike pleading in his eyes.

"You are weakening your house. You are letting Jascha die!" She clenched her fists and struggled to rein in her anger.

A dark look entered his eyes and for a moment she thought he was going to remind her who was lord of this bloodline. She couldn't believe how weak he'd become. She couldn't believe that he was risking the lives of everyone in his house because he was frightened of a vampire hunter.

"I am sending your guards out to hunt whether you like it or not. This house needs fresh blood. You have to keep your people strong or they will be lambs to the slaughter should this vampire hunter attack with allies." She didn't wait for a reply. She turned and stormed down the hall towards the guardroom.

Fury fuelled her as she took the steps down into the basement level of the house. It had been given over to the servant ranks and the guards long ago, before she was turned. The guards had their restroom down here and the training rooms. She was sure she'd find Tynan there. How could she have thought that it had been his choice to feed Jascha old blood? She should've known that he would never willingly allow Jascha to die like

this. Timur had effectively tied his hands behind his back and forced him to watch his brother die.

Pushing the door to the guardroom open, she strode in and scanned the faces. She recognised some of them. They all looked stunned to see her. Before she could locate Tynan, he was standing beside her, silent as always. She didn't acknowledge him, instead she kept her eyes fixed on the others.

"You are to hunt in groups. Bring fresh blood to the house. Timur will not punish you. I have seen to that." She held their gazes and then whispered out of the corner of her mouth to Tynan, "I need a word in private."

He nodded and left the room. She waited a moment and then followed him out into the hall. Looking around, she caught a glimpse of him heading into the armoury. She walked casually to it, her whole body shaking with the release of emotions that the idea of speaking to him brought. She knew that with him, she had no chance of remaining cold and business-like. Her heart said that he would never tell anyone about how she acted in private with him, and it seemed to give her feelings free rein to do as they pleased. She couldn't control them no matter how hard she tried.

It was a dangerous way for her to feel.

"I need a moment," Tynan said as she entered the room.

She looked at the guards and stood to one side as they began to leave. They didn't question Tynan's order, so he must have made it to a higher rank than he'd been the last time she'd seen him. Her eyes traversed the room while she waited, taking in the assortment of swords, spears, bows and axes that lined the dark walls.

She'd never liked it in here. It was always gloomy and reminded her of death. Her family never took up arms lightly, so being assigned to work in the armoury was almost a punishment. No one came here and the long hours each guard had to work were often passed alone.

Tynan turned to face her.

She avoided looking at him for as long as possible and then lifted her eyes to meet his. He looked concerned. She wished he didn't. She was having enough trouble holding herself together without him encouraging this revolt by her feelings.

He sighed, his broad shoulders heaving with it. He was taller than Jascha, and had a far broader build, but other than that they looked so similar. Their hair was black as midnight, but Tynan's was short, and they were both incredibly handsome, their fine features lending them an unusual air of grace and distinction.

When she'd first met Tynan, she'd never seen a man as beautiful as he was, until the night she'd seen his brother Jascha.

He'd made her feel as though her heart was pounding, even when that was impossible.

Tynan's dark eyes searched hers. She was glad that he differed from his brother there too. It meant that he could never wholly remind her of Jascha.

No one had eyes the stunning colour of Jascha's.

And no one could set her heart on fire with a single look like him.

Pacing the room, she gathered herself and fought for control. This was no time to fall apart, not even if Tynan would keep her secret for her. She had to be strong, as a Law Keeper should be, and stick to procedure on the case. Her old feelings for Jascha shouldn't be allowed to interfere with her work. Even this meeting with Tynan shouldn't be taking place.

She convinced herself that if she could get Jascha on the mend again by having this talk with Tynan, then she could get on with her work and forget about him again. Not that she'd ever forgotten. He'd always been at the back of her mind. The trouble was, now he was at the front of her mind and she couldn't concentrate. She had to find a way to put him to the back of it again, and this seemed like the most reasonable solution.

"They're feeding him old blood," she said, barely holding Tynan's gaze for a split second, but it was long enough to see in his dark eyes that he already knew and he didn't like it.

She paced across to the other side of the room. Tynan leaned against a table and folded his arms across his chest, making it clear to her that he was waiting to see why she'd wanted a word with him.

"Why didn't you get him fresh blood?" She didn't give him a chance to answer, instead she stepped up to him, a frown darkening her face. "You should have gone out to hunt regardless of the orders from Timur. You know as well as I that the lord of our bloodline is not thinking clearly. This vampire hunter has made him weak with fear."

"I did," Tynan said.

The sound of his voice made her think of Jascha, lying in his death bed with no company and no comfort. She bit back the tears and reminded herself of her duty and her position.

Tynan stepped past her, running his fingers over his hair and sighing heavily. "I hunted for the first two nights, but Timur threatened me... if I disobeyed his orders again, I would be tried."

"Tried?" She frowned, trying to understand just what was happening in her house.

"For sins against my bloodline."

"Ridiculous. The Law Keepers would never condemn you for trying to help your brother." She turned on the spot, following his progress around the room.

Her senses told her that he was agitated, angry. She'd seen how he could be when angered. Timur had been treading a very fine line with him.

"Were you with Jascha that night?" she said.

He paused, eyes fixed on the floor, shoulders tense.

"No."

"Did Jascha say anything when they brought him in?" She took a step towards him, torn between giving up her questioning and continuing. She didn't want to cause him hurt by reminding him of his brother's plight, but he might be able to give her the answers she needed to make a decision about this case.

"No, nothing coherent." He hesitated a moment and looked at her. She knew that look. It was about what had happened between her and Jascha. He was scared

of bringing up things from the past. "He mentioned your name."

She froze, feeling as though he'd just hit her in the stomach and knocked the wind from her. She hadn't expected that, but then, when she'd gone into the room, Jascha had known it was her and he'd called her by her old nickname. He had thought about her all these years too. It wasn't a ridiculous idea in the slightest. He had been the one willing to reconcile after all.

"Nothing else?" she said, regaining her focus and pushing away from the dark, sharp thoughts trying to creep in at the corners of her mind. She didn't want to remember that night. She didn't want to remember how painful it had been, and how it had felt to leave him.

"Nothing."

She stared at him, hating how much he looked like his brother. It brought images of Jascha back, lying in that bed, covered in cuts and blood. Stinking like death.

Turning her back on Tynan, she straightened her cuffs and lightly ran her fingers over the marks on her wrist. He'd been so gentle with her, even in his dire state. She'd expected him to be rough if anything, greedy with hunger. He'd taken barely a sip. It spoke volumes to her, pages about how he didn't want to hurt her. In a way, it had felt like an apology. She wished she could accept it.

"I have to call this in," she said and went to leave. She stopped herself and looked at Tynan again. "Jascha needs fresh, strong blood. Hunt for your brother."

She was about to turn around again when he spoke.

"Did you find out anything from him?" His voice trembled the tiniest amount and his eyes showed her that he wasn't just worried about his brother—he was worried about her too.

It had felt horrible to see Jascha like that. It still felt horrible. She couldn't erase the sight of him from her mind. She couldn't imagine how it had felt for Tynan to see him beaten and broken. It must have been worse for him than the night Jascha had been turned and killed, reborn into his world.

She shook her head and gave him an apologetic look, wishing she could bring herself to shrug off the restraints of her position and comfort him.

"He was in too much pain," she said and then smiled. "He's speaking Russian at me. The boy still hasn't learned that I don't speak the language."

Tynan smiled but she could see the sadness in it.

"Be careful tonight. Whoever did this is still out there."

Leaving him, she walked along the corridor and up the stairs to the ground floor of the expansive mansion. She tried to gather all the evidence in her head and thought about what she was going to tell the others. She couldn't leave here without finding out more about this vampire hunter.

She couldn't leave until she knew Jascha was well again.

Chapter 3

Sitting in a small reception room, Marise stared at the telephone and waited for her nerves to settle before she made the call. The room was lit by a single lamp on the desk beside her, throwing long shadows across the room. She stretched out in the worn armchair and told herself that whoever answered the phone wouldn't be able to tell something was wrong with her from what she was going to say. It was a perfectly acceptable course of action in a situation like this. She had a duty as a Law Keeper, but she had a duty as a leading member of her bloodline too.

She picked up the receiver and dialled the number of her headquarters. It seemed to ring for forever and she mused that if she still had a heartbeat, it would be rocketing right now.

"Hello," a man said.

She swallowed and told herself not to hesitate. She had to be straightforward and sound as though she was in command or he would suspect something was wrong.

"It's Marise," she said, cool and collected.

"Marise, are you home?" he said and she recognised him as Vincent, the Caelestis Law Keeper.

A part of her was thankful that it was him. He would be easier to fool than the Aureora or Validus Law Keeper.

"I'm here and have made contact with my lord. It appears we are not dealing with a vampire attack. It is

something far worse. Two elite guards were killed and a third was beaten to the point of death and now lies dying, unable to recuperate from such extensive injuries." She paused and swallowed the tight lump in her throat. She had to continue sounding as calm as she had done so far. If she raised suspicion, he could tell her to return and not continue on the case. "Timur was injured, and is now forcing his bloodline to remain indoors."

"What was responsible for the attack?"

She smiled, glad that he sounded concerned. Her chances of remaining here were increasing.

"Not a what, but a who. It seems to be a message from a human, a vampire hunter."

He laughed. "No vampire hunter could do this to four of our kind."

"I assure you they did. I have seen the guard that was left to die. He has confirmed that it was a vampire hunter. I fear that someone has been playing god, but need more time to get the evidence required." She paused and shifted the phone across to her other ear. "Vincent, I am going to remain here and find this hunter. I will judge for myself whether they are human and if they have been enhanced somehow. We must assess whether they are a threat to us and, if they are, inform the bloodlines."

"We have our hands full here," he said and her heart sank as she thought he was going to ask her to come home and assist them. "Investigate, and if you believe this hunter is a threat to our species, kill it."

She nodded, relief filling her. "I will."

"Report back when you have determined what we are up against."

The phone clicked and went dead. She placed the receiver back into the cradle and leaned back into the chair, sighing out her breath and relaxing. She wondered what had her comrades so busy, and then raised her eyes to the ceiling. Tynan would have returned from his hunt by now. Jascha would finally be getting the blood he needed in order to heal and get strong again. It would only be a few days before she was heading back to headquarters. Could she keep it together that long and resist the temptation Jascha presented? She still needed to see him again and finish her questioning.

But more than that, she needed to make sure he was all right.

* * * *

Marise looked both ways along the empty corridor and then went still. She reached out with her senses, trying to detect whether anyone was awake yet. It was early afternoon, still hours before the sun would set. There were a scattering of guards around the house, but none of them had paid her much attention.

Satisfied that she was alone, she stared at the dark wood door in front of her. She wrapped her fingers carefully around the handle and then turned it slowly and eased the door open. Her stomach flipped and she ignored it, pretending it never happened. She slid into the room and glanced out into the corridor before closing the door. She flicked the lock.

The last thing she needed was someone walking in on her.

Turning around, she looked at the bed and Jascha. She extended her senses to him and smiled to herself when she found he was asleep.

She walked over to him and studied his face. He looked healthier today, less pale and more like she remembered him. Picking up the bowl of dirty water from the bedside table, she carried it into the bathroom and emptied it into the sink. She refilled it and grabbed a fresh cloth from the side before going back to the bed.

He hadn't stirred. Hopefully he would be exhausted from trying to heal himself and would sleep throughout what she was going to do. She feared him finding out more than she feared anyone else in the house. She didn't want him to get the wrong impression. This couldn't be about feelings. It was just something she had to do, a whispered urge that had kept her awake all day, begging her to go to him. She put it down to wanting to question him again. If he was on the road to recovery, she could get her answers and get the hell away from her family home.

Sitting beside Jascha, she pulled the covers back to his waist, not daring to go any further in case he was naked. Her stomach turned at the extent of his injuries. The pale light filtering in through the windows made everything clearer than the lamp last night had.

She dipped the cloth into the fresh cool water and squeezed it out. Careful not to rouse him, she set about cleaning his wounds, dabbing lightly to lift the bloodstains so she could get a better look. There was a lot of bruising across his stomach, the flat plane of it marred with dark spots, some of which surrounded long gashes. She frowned and gently stroked along the length of them, revealing how red raw around the edges they still were.

Her eyes flickered to his chest and filled with tears when she saw the burn mark there, the pattern and shape of the cross clearly defined against his skin. The only place it hadn't burnt him was where his shoulder dipped in towards his chest. Hadn't Timur had the courage to stop this from happening? She could see from the wounds that whoever had attacked Jascha had managed to strip off his jacket. What kind of struggle had there been? How violent was this hunter and how strong?

She blinked away her tears and ignored the tight ache in her throat. Whoever did this to him would pay dearly. She would make sure of it. No one did something as horrific as this to him and lived to tell the tale.

Giving herself a moment to get her emotions back under control, she stared at the cross burn on his chest. Every intricate mark, each swirl and arch, was defined on his skin. She resisted her desire to touch it, and cleaned the cloth instead. The water was already turning pink.

She squeezed the cloth out again and when she turned back to continue her work, Jascha was watching her with eyes full of confusion and disbelief.

She wrapped the cloth up in both hands and felt like she had done all those years ago when they'd first met—hesitant and shy.

"If you remain quiet, I'll stay," she whispered and waited to see if he would play by her rules.

He said nothing, merely stared at her with violet eyes so intense that she had to avert hers to her hands. She uncurled her fists and silently cleaned the wounds on his arms, never once looking at his face.

When she was done, she stood and thought for a moment he would say something. He didn't. She could feel him watching her, and knew that just as she could sense his emotions, he would be able to sense hers. They'd never mated, but they had been close enough for long enough that a sort of bond had developed. It was quite common for lovers to develop this sense and she'd always loved it in the past, but now it frightened her. She didn't want Jascha to know how muddled being back here with him was making her feel. She didn't want him to know that she still cared for him.

Removing her jacket, she placed it on a nearby chair and then moved back to him. She knelt on the bed and took hold of his hand. A spark of electricity ran through her when he shifted his fingers against hers. She cursed him for it and for the warm feeling that settled in her chest and refused to leave.

She leaned over and slipped into her vampire guise, licking each cut on his hand and then gradually working her way up his arm until she'd sealed each one. She moved around the bed and did his other arm, feeling him watching her all the while. His feelings were intense and she couldn't stop herself from latching onto him, monitoring the minute changes in them. If she was reading him right, he was definitely glad to see her and relieved too. He felt content, almost happy, but she knew he couldn't possibly be feeling that way really. The pain he was in was probably affecting his mind, making him believe he was happy. He was probably delirious.

At least that's what she kept telling herself.

She hesitated a moment before beginning to clean the cuts on his stomach. The voice at the back of her mind kept whispering words about how nice it was to touch a man again, to touch him again. Her lips buzzed with the

feeling of his skin and the memories of things they'd done, countless nights spent locked in each other's embrace. She closed her eyes and savoured the tang of his blood, breathing in his scent and allowing herself a momentary slip in restraint. It did feel good to touch him again, to feel his soft skin against her lips, and taste him.

When she reached his chest, she looked at the burn mark and knew it would be too painful for him if she cleaned it. She concentrated on sealing the cuts on the other side of his chest instead. Her stomach flipped and jiggled when his hand brushed her hip and she had to remind herself that she wasn't a youngling anymore and he shouldn't be affecting her like this.

But she hadn't been a youngling back then either, and he'd still made her feel as giddy as a teenager in love for the first time.

Sealing the final cut on his shoulder, she left the bed without looking at him and walked around it. He shifted, sitting up, and a glance at him revealed that he hadn't bothered to move the blanket with him. Clearly he was feeling a little better and he was definitely happy to see her. She dragged her eyes away from his erect cock and motioned for him to cover it. She could almost see the smirk he'd be wearing as he obeyed her silent instruction. He'd issued a challenge, showing her without words that he still wanted her. The ball was in her court now. She wanted to puncture it and throw it back, but the part of her that was thrilled about this affirmation of his feelings overpowered her common sense.

So instead of leaving as her better judgement told her to, she sat back down beside him and looked right into his eyes. He wasn't smiling as she'd expected him to be. He was watching her with silent ardour.

She leaned forwards and carefully removed the bandage from around his throat. He winced a few times and she tensed in unison with each one, but she continued regardless. This had to be done or he'd never heal properly. Blood wasn't enough. Their family should have known that.

Picking up the cloth, she rinsed it out in the water and then dunked it back in again. She squeezed out the excess and then brought the rag to his neck. He hissed, breathing in sharply through clenched teeth when she applied the first tentative stroke and she glanced an apology at him.

Her eyes widened a little when he clenched his fists and his whole body tautened. It was still a delicious sight. Dragging her eyes away, she steeled herself against her desire and focused on cleaning his neck wound. It turned her insides to look at it and made her feel sick. The deep laceration ran around the side of his throat to his Adam's apple. It was red, seeping and open. Anger coiled in her stomach. Her family should've known they'd need to sew this in order for it to heal.

When it was clean, she lightly ran her fingers along either side of it and frowned. She didn't hide her concern when she looked at him this time. She let him see it. He needed to know that she was doing this for his own good so he was prepared for what came next. He was sensible. He'd know that she needed to sew it up.

Giving him a moment to recover, she bunched the thin covers up until they were a strip across his hips and set about cleaning his legs. There were only a few cuts on them, but it would give him enough time to ready himself. He sighed and she looked up at him. The sight of him leaning back against the headboard with his eyes closed, muscles tensed, made her pause at her work.

She took in how beautiful he still was and realised that she hadn't cleaned the wounds on his face. She wouldn't dare seal those for him. The temptation to kiss him would be too great.

She averted her eyes again when his opened. He'd be able to sense when she was staring at him. She had to start being more careful.

An image flashed across her mind and she scowled at the bed, hating the reminder of what he'd done all those years ago. Why? She held in the tears and knelt back on the bed. Her hands shook so she clenched them into fists and kept them by her sides. Why had he done that to her? He'd loved her, she knew that, and she'd loved him with all her heart. But had he loved her with all of his?

A mocking voice at the back of her head said that it was partly her fault too. She never had been one hundred percent honest with him, but it had been with good reason.

The air in the room felt suddenly oppressive and heavy, and she could sense Jascha's struggle as keenly as her own, only his was different. He was struggling against a desire to speak, knowing she'd leave if he did, while she was struggling against reason and her feelings, still trying to understand what had happened that night fifty years ago.

Rousing herself, she looked at his legs. All emotion drained away and she felt calm again inside, but hollow at the same time. She stared at the long cut across his left thigh, watched a drop of blood slide down his skin. He was still bleeding. If he didn't heal, she'd never get answers to her questions. If she didn't get answers, she'd be stuck here in this hell hole forever.

She wanted to run away.

Her whole being said to flee and not look back, never return.

Slipping from the bed, she walked over to her jacket and took a needle and thread from the pocket. She'd told one of the servants that she needed to repair her jacket. She couldn't believe she'd lied for Jascha.

She sat back on the bed, straddling his leg, and threaded the needle, using her teeth to break the string. She wasn't gentle with him and didn't feel anything whenever he hissed or jerked beneath her. Her focus was fixed on the wound. It wasn't Jascha. It was a stranger. Jascha was dead to her. In front of her was just a soldier who she needed answers from.

She bit the thread again when she'd finished sewing his leg and rethreaded the needle as she moved up the bed so she was sitting beside the pillows.

She only allowed herself a brief glance at his face and a small, sick sense of satisfaction filled her when she saw how scared he looked.

Sewing the gash across his throat, she was gentler this time, more forgiving. She frowned when tiny droplets of blood formed where the needle had punctured his skin. He tensed and growled. She raised a brow and barely resisted chiding him for his outburst. He looked worried when her eyes met his. She'd told him to keep quiet. He probably took growling as breaking that order.

She didn't leave. Instead, she continued to sew his throat until the wound was finally closed. She bit the thread to snap it and put the needle and cotton back into her jacket pocket. Returning to the bed, she lowered her

mouth to his neck and took a shallow breath to catch his scent before licking the blood off the wound and sealing it. He sighed again and she hated the light, carefree feeling it made settle inside of her.

Her eyes closed when he whispered something in Russian. She wished that she knew what he'd said, but she'd only caught the words 'my love' again.

When his cheek settled against hers, she gave him a moment and savoured the brief connection before severing it by moving away.

He looked at her with bright eyes and she was relieved to see he was more conscious now, much better than yesterday.

She took up a clean bandage and wrapped it around his throat, pinning it and smoothing the edges. Her fingers brushed his bare skin and she didn't stop herself from enjoying the feel of it beneath her touch.

His hand closed around hers and she stared at them. She knew what he wanted.

She stood and her hand slipped from his.

But she couldn't do that to herself again.

"I'll let you rest," she said and he looked disappointed. "I will come by before daybreak."

Walking to the door, she unlocked and opened it. There were footsteps in the hall. She stood in the door when a young female vampire stopped in front of her.

"Alyssa," Marise said in a cold tone.

All she got in return was a dirty look. The younger vampire tried to pass her, but Marise stepped in time with her, blocking the door and starting to wonder why she wanted to see Jascha.

She was surprised when Alyssa shoved past her.

Turning, she found Alyssa looking at Jascha and then glaring at her. She knew what this was about. Alyssa had always liked Jascha, but Jascha had never noticed her.

Jascha's attention returned to her. His eyes narrowed and a smile teased the corners of his lips.

It seemed he still didn't notice Alyssa.

Giving him a small nod, she left the room with a smile on her face.

Chapter 4

The graveyard didn't look much different to the last time she was here, and the biting spring weather was exactly as she'd remembered it. She wrapped her arms about herself, wishing she'd brought her long black coat with her and wondering how she could've forgotten how cold it was. She had known that her time here would've been spent partly outside hunting whatever did this to her family. In the few brief hours after receiving the call and before her departure, her head had been in a spin and in a way it wasn't surprising that she had forgotten to bring such things with her. She hadn't even changed into her best uniform. Everything had passed in a blur.

Taking a deep breath of the freezing air, she listened to the silent cemetery. It was only a small place, but it was one of her favourites. She had always come here to be alone and think, and that was exactly what she needed right now—space to make sense of everything that had happened over the past twenty-four hours.

Seeing Jascha again had thrown her world off balance in a way she hadn't expected. She had always known that if they were to meet again that things would be awkward to a degree, but she had always thought she'd be able to keep it together and remain detached from things, from him. Only she couldn't. Her first sight of him had rocked her, shaken her to the core and brought all her old feelings back to the surface. She'd forgotten how strong they were. The years apart had dulled them, easing her pain and leaving her free to focus on her duty. The instant she had laid eyes on him, everything had come

back, not only her feelings, but the memories of that night.

Today, she'd foolishly compounded those emotions and given them a stronger hold over her heart. They were impossible to shake now. She must have been insane to think she could walk in there and tend to Jascha's wounds without her feelings getting involved. If she was honest with herself, that's what today had been all about. It was purely her love for him driving her, not a need to get him healthy again so she could get answers. She'd had to see that he was on his way to being healed so she could focus on her work by eliminating her worry about his condition.

Her head jerked up when a twig snapped in the distance.

Her senses immediately sharpened and she searched the area with them.

A tiny blip of movement grew into something big enough to be human.

She focused on the signature and slunk behind a tomb. They were walking towards her. She stilled, disappearing into the background, as silent as the grave at her back. They were definitely human. She sniffed. Definitely. Male. She raised a brow.

There was only one kind of human crazy enough to wander through a cemetery in the dead of night.

A vampire hunter.

She tracked their progress through the headstone and bided her time, making sure they were alone before she made a move. Maybe this hunter was the one that had hurt Jascha. The thought of that made her blood boil. If

it wasn't, then she could perhaps get a little information on who and where that particular hunter was.

The hunter neared.

The bones of her face shifted to allow her teeth to extend. Her eyes switched and the world came into sharp focus, everything around her becoming clear in her senses. She could smell the dew on the grass as it froze; could hear the tiny leaves rustling in the light breeze, barely more than a whisper; could hear the heavy footfall of the vampire hunter.

She closed her eyes, focusing everything on him.

Three.

Two.

One.

In a lightning quick movement she had slipped from her hiding place, grabbed the hunter around the throat, disarmed him, and slammed him against the cold stone of the tomb. His breath left him on impact, the stake clattered onto the path, the world slowed to a more natural pace.

Her grip tightened.

He choked, his eyes going wide as though she was a vision of death himself.

Satisfied that he knew not to try anything, she loosened her fingers and let him breathe. He gasped in air, tears streaming down his face. He very sensibly kept his hands up by his sides, as though she was about to arrest him.

She didn't arrest humans, she arrested vampires.

She executed people.

"Keep calm, and you might walk away with your life," she whispered close to his face, letting him get a good look at her fangs as she smiled.

His face was in shadow but the streetlamp shone on hers. His eyes were locked with hers and she knew what he was thinking as he stared into them.

"You're one of them," he said in a trembling voice.

She realised he'd never met one from the seven pure bloodlines before. Not many hunters did, and those that were given the honour, usually didn't live to tell the tale. Unless a hunter got in their way, most pure blood vampires allowed them to do their jobs because they were a good form of pest control, killing the weakling vampires and saving them from having to do it instead.

Now another hunter had dared challenge the pure bloods, as though it wasn't bad enough that her species had to deal with the likes of Caden and Nathaniel Rivers. Only this new hunter posed a real threat. The others were mostly an irritation rather than danger to her kind.

She stared at the man in front of her. He had a good build, probably strong enough to cope with hunting the weaklings, but the bastard bloodline had far less strength and skill than her species. His dark hair was cropped short, almost shaved, and his face bore the scars of his battles, claw marks and even a set of teeth marks on his neck. He'd clearly had a few close calls in his time. It would be a shame to kill him, but duty dictated she get her answers from humans and eradicate them to avoid humans becoming aware of vampires.

"You are not like the one I am looking for," she said, giving him a frown and acting coy so he would begin to believe that he was going to survive this. He wouldn't talk as she needed him to if he thought his death was imminent. Humans had a way of going to pieces when faced with the realisation that this was it, the glorious end to their pointless little life.

Food for their superiors.

"Who are you looking for?" There it was, that spark of hope in his eyes that made her stomach warm with satisfaction. He thought that giving her information on someone else was going to convince her to spare him.

If she did, he would continue to hunt the weaklings and kill them, but he could also find this new hunter and tell them about what was happening. She couldn't allow the new hunter to be warned about the fact they were looking for him.

"A vampire hunter, an elite, a monster." She held his gaze.

A flicker of recognition crossed his face.

"You know them?" she said.

He nodded and she loosened her grip a little more, feeding his hope so he'd speak. He was young. Probably no more than mid-thirties. What kind of young man had a death wish big enough to hunt vampires?

He cleared his throat and gave her a shaky smile.

"He's not with me. I don't even know the guy. I've just seen him around. I saw what he did to a group of vampires last night." His accent was thick and definitely

not European. American possibly. It wasn't often an American knew about vampires. Most vampires had enough sense to remain on this side of the ocean in their homeland.

"What did he do?" She leaned in closer, eager to hear what the hunter was capable of and how he killed. The method would give her insight into the way this human thought and acted. It would make him easier to predict.

"Butchered them. I mean, really butchered them. It was total carnage."

She searched his eyes to see if he was telling the truth. He looked shaken enough for it to be true, but then she was holding him by the neck and she was in vampire guise. It was hard to tell whether she was frightening him, or whether it was this new hunter.

"Did he display any abnormalities?"

He frowned. "Other than the fact he could practically rip a guy limb from limb?"

It was all the answer she needed. Her suspicion had been right. Whoever this person was, they weren't wholly human, at least not anymore.

"Thank you," she said.

Relief spread across his face but quickly died when she sank her fangs into his neck and gave a sharp, deep pull on his blood. She wrapped her arms around him and delighted in the warmth and taste of the sweet ambrosia slipping down her throat. It was intoxicating after these few days without food and it went straight to her head. She tightened her grip, drinking deeper until his heart finally gave up and he went limp in her arms.

Dropping the body, she wiped her fingers across her mouth and licked them clean.

It felt as though it had been months rather than days since her last feed.

She savoured the buzz running through her, the rush from fresh strong blood, and then sighed.

Her breath turned to mist on the cold air and then disappeared. It wasn't often she got to see that anymore. It had been centuries since she'd been alive.

Turning, she walked back to the gates of the cemetery. She needed to report in her findings and maybe then she could check on Jascha as she'd said she would.

* * * *

Jascha shifted so he was sitting up in bed and tried to get his thoughts onto something other than Marise. It seemed impossible. He could think of nothing but her, about how she had tended to him today, and the feel of her against him, her lips brushing softly against his skin. He sighed. It didn't mean anything, but he wished that it did. He had more sense than to believe that Marise had come back to him, but his heart still held onto hope.

If she would only let him speak and tell her how sorry he was, maybe then she would see that they belonged together, that everything that had happened that night was in the past now.

He looked down at his torso, at each cut and fading bruise. She'd been so gentle with him, carefully healing his wounds so he'd recover. She had been the only one to tend to him, to see what he needed in order to heal, and to take the necessary steps to ensure that

happened. No one else had offered to sew his wounds, or seal them with their saliva. Not even Alyssa.

The door opened and his stomach flipped as his head turned to face it. The thrill of anticipation left him when he saw it was his brother and not Marise. She'd said she would come. Had she changed her mind? He'd sensed the struggle in her and knew that she was fighting a losing battle against her feelings.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back into the pillow behind him. Fifty years and she was still as beautiful and she still stole his attention like no other had. No one had made him feel the way she did, crazy for her, mad for her touch and hungry for her kisses. Not even in his human life.

He'd never known passion like they'd shared in their years together.

He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and reminded himself that he'd thrown it all away, discarded everything and exchanged a life full of love for an empty one. One moment of madness, or stupidity, and he still paid for it every day.

But now she was back, and he'd seen the feeling in her eyes, the love. He didn't know whether it was strong enough to convince her to give him a second chance and listen to what he had to say. She clearly feared it because each time she visited, she gave him strict instructions not to speak.

He wouldn't push her. He'd done that all those years ago, and she'd left him. He didn't want her to leave again. He couldn't go on this way, drifting through life with no purpose other than protecting his family because he couldn't protect her. He'd give it all up, his position

and his family, if she would let him be the one to protect her.

“Are you tired?” Tynan’s voice cut through his thoughts.

He opened his eyes and looked at his brother, answering him with a shake of his head.

“Waiting for her?” Tynan’s smile said it all—it was obvious he was hoping to gain her forgiveness and regain her as a lover.

“Always,” he said, his voice no longer strained by his wounds. He could feel them healing. She really had done a good job of patching him up. He owed his life to her.

His stomach turned again when the door opened and this time it was her. She was still wearing her uniform. Either she dearly loved her position, or she was using it as a shield around her heart, as a reminder of who she was now, so she didn’t fall for him again. He wished she’d take it off, to release her heart from the steel box she kept it locked in now, and listen long enough to understand how sorry he was about what had happened.

He couldn’t undo it, no matter how much he wished he could. The past couldn’t be changed. It was set in stone. It felt as though that stone was hanging around his neck.

The look in her eyes told him straight away that there would be no tender touches and concern during this visit. He didn’t even think that it was Tynan’s presence making her act indifferent and emotionless. It was as though there were two Marises, one the Law Keeper, and the other the Lover.

The woman he used to know.

She stopped at the foot of the bed and nodded a greeting to Tynan before turning a steely gaze on himself.

Jascha sat up a little more, keeping himself covered, not giving her the satisfaction of seeing him naked. Her eyes dropped to his chest briefly and then met his again.

"Are you feeling better?" she said, no trace of feeling in her tone.

He nodded.

"I have gained information from a hunter. He saw the man that tried to kill you butcher a group of weaklings. Apparently he tore them apart, literally. I don't believe we are dealing with an ordinary human."

"Is that so? They didn't seem ordinary when they fought us. They had speed, and strength... not of a pure blood, but possibly as strong as a weakling." He kept his gaze locked with hers, silently speaking different words to her. What had happened to her? What had she been doing all these years? Had she thought about him at all?

She turned away, her eyes dropping to the floor and then fixing on the curtains.

"Is there anything else that you remember? He kept you alive for a reason. He killed two others, two almost as strong as you. Your strength and skill was not an advantage in this fight. He let you survive."

Her words sent a cold chill through him but he didn't let it show on the surface. She was right. He had lost to this vampire hunter and they had shown him mercy. They had let him live. They had used him to send a message

to his species that someone was as strong as them and willing to fight.

“Even though they only had the strength of a weakling, they had an advantage over them that meant they bested two of our guards. They had intelligence, and they used it well,” he said and then cleared his throat. He was still tired and weak, and speaking was draining his energy reserves. It wouldn’t be long before the rising sun called him to sleep and there was no way he would be able to resist it. He wished that when that time came, Marise would be lying in his arms as she used to. “They separated us. I remained with Timur, to protect him, while the other two attacked the hunter. The hunter led them away from us, into the open where it was easier for him to attack. The fight was fierce and he was not unharmed. We managed to injure him, but not before he had staked the two guards and attacked me. I had to defend Timur. It was my duty.”

She frowned. He could see the flames of anger as they began to rise in her eyes. He knew that she blamed Timur for what had happened to him. That’s why he’d said it was his duty, reminding her that it was Timur’s right as lord of their bloodline to choose not to fight, instead having his guards die to defend him.

Her arms folded across her chest and she stared at him. He thought she was going to say something more, but she turned away and walked to the door. She opened it and paused, looking over her shoulder at him.

“Thank you. I will report back to my colleagues and continue with my mission. I don’t think I will need to question you again. I wish you well in your recovery.”

And she was gone.

His heart sunk straight through him, pulling him down into darkness as black emptiness filled him. He stared at the door, unable to make sense of her and what was happening. Was she leaving now? Was she going to torture him by remaining in this house until the case was closed, so near to him, but distant at the same time?

He looked at his brother, trying to see if he had understood what she'd said. Tynan had that apologetic look in his eyes that he'd always hated, even when they were human and working together as special agents in the military.

His brother had always had too much pity for his own good, often questioning his orders and feeling remorse for those he'd had to kill. He had never had that problem. An order was an order. Duty was duty. Maybe that's why he'd become an elite guard and Tynan hadn't. Maybe that was why he had taken to life as a vampire so easily. He knew his brother hadn't wanted this to happen to him, but he was glad that it had.

His gaze returned to the door.

If only because he'd met Marise. He'd known love for the first time, and the last.

"Tell me she's coming back," he said, not taking his eyes off the door.

Tynan sighed. Jascha took it as a no.

"She patched me up during the day. I woke to find her cleaning my wounds." He touched his throat and removed the bandage that was wrapped around it so his brother could see. "She was worried about me, I know it."

He looked at Tynan. His brother gave him a knowing smile.

"That was Mari. Now, she's Marise. A woman will love you while you're weak, but when you're strong enough to fight, she'll fight you again." Tynan leaned back in his chair, his smile still in place.

Jascha frowned, not quite following his brother's logic. It was true that Tynan had superior experience when it came to women, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that Marise's change in attitude had anything to do with his returning strength. It was more likely that she had used the time away from him to regain control over her emotions.

Tynan laughed.

He shot him a dark look.

"You think that fifty years is enough time for a woman to forgive a man? You don't know women, little brother." Tynan grinned at him.

Jascha winced when he turned his head and his neck hurt. He scratched at the wound.

"She did a good job on it," Tynan said.

Jascha's hand fell to the bed and he looked back at his brother. "Who called her?"

"Timur. He is frightened. What happened out there? Is it as Marise said?"

"If I had to guess, I would say she was right. Someone has been changing humans, increasing their key abilities. I don't believe this is a one off either. Once a successful transformation has taken place, and the

abilities proven, then others will follow.” Jascha leaned back and took a deep breath, his thoughts returning to Marise. He wondered where she had gone to make her call. Was it far away? He tried to reach out with his senses to locate her, but his whole body ached in response to the strain and he slumped into the bed, tired to the core.

“Do you think Marise will be in danger?” Tynan said and then hesitated a moment. Jascha gave him a look as dark as thunder, silently telling him to reveal what he knew. “She has orders to kill.”

Jascha immediately sat up and ignored the riot of pain that shot through him, making his nerve endings scream.

“That isn’t going to happen. We’re going too,” he said, moving to get out of bed.

Tynan’s hand on his shoulder stopped him. He looked at his brother.

“Our help won’t be welcome. She is still mad at you, and if we go, we will be a distraction for her.”

Frowning, Jascha covered himself again and realised that what his brother had said was true. Marise wouldn’t welcome the help. She wasn’t the lowly guard she used to be, she was a Law Keeper now. They were meant to work alone. They didn’t need help.

But he couldn’t allow her to put her life on the line because of pride and her anger.

“I don’t fully recall what I did wrong, but it couldn’t have been worthy of so long a punishment,” he muttered to his knees as he stared at them.

"You slept with Almina," Tynan said flatly.

Jascha shot him a look that could kill. It was typical of his brother to remember the details. He'd always loved bringing up all the times someone had done something wrong.

"It was one night with my sire," Jascha said in his defence.

His brother looked past him to the door and frowned.

"I think something might be amiss there," Tynan whispered, distant and as though he was thinking aloud rather than speaking to him.

"I'm going with her," Jascha said, overlooking his brother's comment and going to leave the bed again.

This time, Tynan's hand on his shoulder held more force. "You're not strong enough."

"If the hunter attacks—" Jascha started.

"Marise isn't yours to protect anymore." Tynan cut him off and Jascha glared at him for the reminder. "You lost that right fifty years ago. Rest, brother. If it is so important to you, I will not let Marise out of my sight."

Chapter 5

Marise was finding it incredibly difficult to concentrate. As though it wasn't bad enough that it was raining, freezing cold, and slippery underfoot in the cemetery, she couldn't get her thoughts off Jascha and Tynan was driving her insane.

She turned sharply to face him. He stopped, keeping the thirty foot gap between them steady. It was a wise move. If he came much closer, she'd kill him for dogging her.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. She really didn't need him following her everywhere she went. It had been annoying enough in the mansion and there she'd been able to shut herself in a room and leave him outside. Here, she couldn't shake him so easily.

"Was it Timur's idea to annoy me, or Jascha's?" she said, reaching the end of her tether.

There was no way she could continue her search for the vampire hunter when all her focus was being stolen by her increasing anger.

"Does it matter?" he said, cool and calm, as though there was a right and wrong answer and if he chose the correct one, she'd let him tag along as he so clearly wanted to.

She knew who had sent him. Her question had been pointless. Timur wouldn't have ordered him to help her. He was too busy trying to convince his entire bloodline

to remain inside the mansion and starve to death. It had been Jascha. Or had it been Tynan's idea. She knew Jascha inside and out. He was recovering well, healed enough now that he wouldn't see his injuries as a hindrance and would most likely want to protect her out of some strange, hopeless chivalry. Of course, Tynan would never allow Jascha out of bed until he was fully recovered.

"No," she said. "I'll ask you to leave either way."

Tynan took a step closer. It was a brave move, but then her bluff wasn't too hard to call. She'd never raise a finger to hurt him or Jascha. Her heart ached. She loved them both too much.

"I can't leave, Marise. I promised Jascha I would protect you."

She laughed, mirthless and bitter.

"Do I need a babysitter? Who is elder? Who has years of training as a Law Keeper? If a hunter attacks, it will be me protecting you!" She went to turn away and then held her nerve, locking eyes with Tynan and allowing her feelings to slip their leashes. "I am not a youngling. I am four times yours and Jascha's age!"

Tynan backed off. "Jascha is just concerned."

She laughed again.

"Go home, tend to your brother." She turned and walked away.

Tynan didn't seem to take the hint. She could sense him following her. She held the sigh inside. If he tailed her into the next cemetery, she'd make him leave.

“Why did you come back? Wasn’t any of your reason to do with Jascha?”

She spun on a pinpoint to face him. He had stopped a distance back, clearly before he’d spoken. Her hands shook as she struggled against the onslaught of feelings that his words had released, and she couldn’t stop herself from thinking about them to find an answer.

Looking into his eyes, she couldn’t ignore the honesty they demanded and the assurance they offered. He wouldn’t tell his brother. He was just concerned about both of them. He always had been, acting like a brother to both of them, a confidant she could speak to and know he’d never tell anyone, not even Jascha.

She gave a tiny nod, her voice tight with emotion and fear. “It was, in a way. But it doesn’t change what happened, or my feelings.”

“He doesn’t know.”

She froze, the hairs on her arms rising as she stared into his blank emotionless eyes. Sometimes he looked so much like Jascha. He could hold her motionless with just a look and a few well placed words.

“Doesn’t know what?” she said, hoping he didn’t say what she thought he was going to. He couldn’t know. He just couldn’t.

“That you’re his sire and not Almina,” he said in a tone as empty as his eyes.

She swallowed hard, fighting her instincts to run away and pretend he’d never spoken those words. He knew. She couldn’t find her voice to deny him, or explain. All she could do was stare at him.

His expression hardened.

"It was a dirty game to play, pretending that Almina was his sire because you didn't want to admit that you had feelings for him before you turned him... you still have feelings for him. Why didn't you tell him when you began your relationship with him?"

She paced a little way towards him, her emotions colliding inside her as she struggled to get a hold of them and find the right words to say, to make him understand why she'd done what she had.

Her gaze lowered to the floor and his feet. She stared at them, her eyes wide and filling with tears as she thought about all the years she'd deceived Jascha. She'd had her comeuppance in the end. She'd paid her dues for hiding the truth from him.

"I couldn't... he would've hated me."

Tynan chuckled. "He would've got over it and he wouldn't have done those things with Almina, and you would have still been together like you should be. You hurt each other... you're both as responsible for what happened as the other."

She hesitated a moment and then took another step towards him.

"Tynan... I'm not proud of what I did, and I should've told him, but I was scared that he'd only love me because I had sired him."

His whole face lightened, softening as he looked at her.

"And you wanted all his love," he said and she nodded. "But now both of you have none."

The rain fell and she listened to the sound of it as her thoughts ran over what he'd said. The cold water was soaking through her jacket, sucking what little warmth she had from her and chilling her. It only added to the feeling inside her, drawing out the despair and the hopelessness.

She sighed and clawed her wet hair from her face. "It's too late now."

"It's never too late." He stepped up to her, giving her an understanding look that made her want to cry. "Fifty years and he's thought of no one but you, Mari. I saw the work you did on his wounds. I know you still love him and he still loves you. He's going to come to find the hunter with you whether you like it or not."

"That hunter almost killed him." She couldn't hide the worry as it strained her voice. Tynan smiled.

"And your point? He loves you Mari, enough to die if he could die protecting you. Just think about telling him, please? He'll understand if you do."

He reached out to touch her and she backed away, getting the better of herself and her feelings. She was on a mission. This was no time for making amends and patching up her relationship with Jascha. She didn't even know if she wanted to be with him. He made her feel weak and vulnerable. She hated that. For fifty years she'd felt invincible, the elite of the elite, stronger than stone and steel. Seeing Jascha again had rendered her powerless and pathetic. She had become a slave to her feelings again, and she didn't want to lose control. She was happy as a Law Keeper. She loved her position.

But did she love it more than Jascha?

She shook her head and water ran down over her brow and her cheeks.

"Leave me alone, Tynan. It doesn't matter how I feel, I can't do this... can't you see that? I can't. I'm not allowed." She held onto those last words, desperate to convince herself of their truth so everything would become easier.

She couldn't love Jascha, not now that she was a Law Keeper. She was supposed to be emotionless, impartial. They weren't supposed to love. Love was a weakness.

Tynan's face darkened and he straightened to his full height. The rain bounced off his broad shoulders and she wished he would speak because waiting for him to shout at her was unsettling her.

"Then tell him that," he said with obvious restraint. "If you truly believe it. I won't sit here like I did that day. If I hadn't gone to that club that night, you would have never met him and he would've had a normal life. Why turn him and then turn your back on him?"

She lowered her eyes away from his, unable to hold his gaze as what he'd said made guilt well up inside of her. He was right. She was so wrong. She never should have turned Jascha and then left him to another to teach. She should've have kept her distance. Her chest ached and she pressed her hand against it.

Tynan growled.

"Forget it!" He almost roared the words. The strength behind them hit her hard, making her shrink back in a way she hadn't done since the days her sire had been angry with her. "You're a perfect Law Keeper, Marise—heartless!"

Her head snapped up and she stared at his retreating back, watching him as he disappeared into the gloom. The rain got in her eyes but she didn't look away. She kept looking into the distance.

"I was scared," she whispered to the night. "I ran away and then he made moves on me and I couldn't resist him, and then it went wrong like I'd feared it would... and I ran away again."

Tears mingled with the rain as they ran down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to gain a little comfort. The rain grew heavier, sending the smell of damp earth up into the air and clouding her senses. She lowered her head and sighed, thinking about all the years she'd spent with Jascha and how blindly she'd believed that it would all be fine.

Was Tynan telling the truth when he said that Jascha still loved her? She'd seen feelings in Jascha's eyes during the time she'd spent with him, had sensed them, but she didn't dare believe that she was reading him right. Surely his own brother would be able to see his feelings? Had Jascha told Tynan that he was still in love with her?

Her eyes widened and she spun on the spot the second she sensed someone through the gloom.

She slipped into her vampire guise and growled at the man standing before her.

He raised his hand and she saw the stake. A few steps backwards put a more comfortable distance between them and her senses were fixing on him, trying to see if he was just an ordinary hunter or the one who had hurt Jascha.

Jascha.

She roared and the man didn't even flinch.

"I never realised that vampires had lover's spats," he said, a well-bred English accent making the words roll effortlessly off his tongue. They were laced with amusement.

She cocked her head to one side and assessed him. He was taller than her. Young, probably in his early thirties or late twenties. Fair haired and nothing out of the ordinary in the looks department. He pushed his glasses up his nose, his focus wholly on her.

She got the feeling he was going to be hard to trick. There was a sparkle of intelligence in his eyes, and something else too. She narrowed her gaze on him and tried to discern what it was she had seen.

It was confidence, but not at a normal level. The power he possessed had gone to his head, giving him a maniacal edge to this expression. He clearly thought he was invulnerable. Whatever someone had done to him, it had been too much for his weak human mind to handle.

Jascha had been wrong. It wasn't his intelligence that made him dangerous, it was this madness she could see in his eyes. He believed no one could kill him. It made him reckless, and fierce.

Taking a deep breath, she held it in, letting her own confidence grow and she remembered all the battles she'd fought and the people she'd killed. He wasn't immortal. He was just strong and maybe a little quicker than a human. He was no more dangerous than a weakling or a werewolf.

He would die by her hand.

Lunging forwards, she swiped at him with her claws and satisfaction hunger flooded her when she smelt his blood in the air. She turned and blocked his attack, keeping alert and not letting the fact she'd hurt him go to her head. The smell of blood drove her on and she countered each of his moves, making sure that he couldn't hit her with the stake. She rolled when he threw a punch and turned as she came to her feet. Back flipping, she put a little distance between them and then came around again.

She watched him closely, studying the way he moved and his tactics. She had to make sure that she remained alert and didn't let her guard down. So far, he'd done nothing to prove his strength or skill. Was he biding his time and waiting for her to slip up?

She kicked him in the stomach, launching him backwards and smiling with grim satisfaction when he slammed into a headstone and slumped to the floor. She didn't wait for him to stand, instead she stood over him and kicked him in the stomach again.

He grunted in pain and her smile became a grin.

This was for Jascha.

She went to kick him again but he caught her foot and twisted it, sending her crashing to the ground. She rolled away, avoiding the blur that was a stake and breathing hard as she gathered herself. He'd just upped the game.

Baring her fangs, she circled him.

"What are you?" he said, curiosity in his eyes. "You're not a guard like the others were, but what you're wearing looks awfully like a uniform."

"I'm death," she said, calm and steady, ready for his next move.

He tried to side step her but she punched him hard across the face and followed through with an elbow. He didn't cry out in pain as she'd expected him to. He stumbled backwards and wiped his bloodied nose on the back of his hand. He stared at it, brows raised, and then gave her a stunned look.

She flashed him a toothy smile, glad that she could be the one to give him a reminder that he was still human and he could still die.

She was ready for him when he rushed her, throwing his body weight into it. Her hands grabbed his wrists and she made it close to biting him, but he twisted in her grip and evaded her. She turned with him, pulling him close and wrestling to get the stake out of his hand. He growled with effort, not a vampire growl, but a mere human noise of frustration. He'd underestimated her. He was pissed off.

Pushing with all her might, she flipped him over and slammed him into the ground. He pressed his feet into her stomach and propelled her backwards, sending her to the ground a few feet from him. She realised that Jascha was right, he was only as strong as a weakling.

She was almost on her feet when he barrelled into her, knocking her back down, and she felt a sharp pain in her right forearm and then a white hot burning.

She roared and scratched his face, gouging his cheek and kicking him off her at the same time. Shuffling backwards, she bought herself time and got to her feet. When she looked around, he was running, his hand pressed against his cheek. She flicked the blood off her

hand and then wrapped it around the wound on her other arm as it stung and burnt. Damn holy wood.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she began the short walk back to the mansion. She removed her hand and looked at her jacket. The stake had torn through her sleeve, wrecking it. She growled and then grimaced when her wound hurt. She placed her hand back over it to stem the flow of blood.

He was definitely dead now.

The next time she saw him would be his last day on Earth.

Chapter 6

The walk to his room seemed longer than before. Her arm was killing her, burning fiercely, and the blood covered her hand. No one seemed to notice it as she made her way to Jascha, dripping water in a trail behind her. She had to check on him. She had to look him in the eye and see if she was brave enough to do as Tynan asked of her.

Reaching his door, she hesitated for a mere second before opening it. She locked it behind her, instinct telling her that Alyssa would be along as soon as someone mentioned where she was. In a way, she felt sorry for the girl, loving a man who loved another. It was no way to spend eternity.

Her eyes found Jascha and she saw he was awake, sitting up in bed and reading. She walked to the bed and sat down beside him, not caring that she was making the bed damp. Her gaze skipped from cut to cut on his exposed chest and abdomen, checking him. The sight of them still turned her stomach and brought her concern to the surface.

She reached out and brushed her fingers over them, pausing only when she saw the blood coating her hand.

Jascha had seen it too.

He grabbed her hand and tugged it to him before turning gentle and cradling it as though he would hurt her by holding it. She didn't stop him as he inspected it and didn't hide the pain from him when he looked into his

eyes. She wanted to fall into his arms and feel them around her, holding her, taking away all her hurt and tiredness. She wanted him to make her feel safe as he used to.

"Take it off," he said with a nod to her jacket.

She obeyed, silently removing the coat and letting it drop to the floor. It was ruined now. The sight of it torn and wrecked seemed to break the shackles and smash the defences around her heart. Reality sunk in swift and painful. She didn't want to spend eternity without Jascha.

Loving him and not having him would make eternity hell and she didn't think she could bear it any more.

"Who did this?" His voice was soft, as gentle as his touch.

Her eyes followed his fingers as he rolled her sleeve up to reveal the wound on her arm. He breathed in sharply and she wondered if the cut was worthy of such a reaction. She looked at it, taking in the deep gash and the charred skin where the stake had rested long enough to burn her. She'd had worse injuries, but something about the careful, tender way that Jascha was treating it, made her feel as though this little scratch was life threatening. He seemed to see it that way.

His grip on her arm was so light, barely touching her as he cradled it and his thumb brushed along the skin beside the wound. Her focus shifted to his face, drinking in the sight of all that concern directed at her. There was so much love and affection in his expression and all of his actions. It melted her heart, releasing the last of the chains around it and leaving her free to accept her love for him.

She couldn't stop herself from smiling, from feeling light and wholly painless because of how he was acting. It was endearing, beautiful. She'd never felt so loved.

"The vampire hunter. I hurt him too. I know I can defeat him now."

"This needs to be sealed," he said in a low voice and glanced at her with eyes that clearly expressed his feelings.

She nodded and then closed her eyes when he changed into his vampire guise and lowered his head to her arm. She tensed at the first tentative stroke of his tongue against the wound and then sighed when he began to clean and seal the cut in earnest. The kisses he pressed against her arm didn't go unnoticed. They made her chest ache and her stomach flip and tighten. She wanted to cry, and laugh, and tell herself that she was crazy for keeping away from him for so long. Fifty years of robbing herself of this pleasure, of the warmth of his affection and the comfort of his embrace. She must have been insane.

He licked her arm again and then pulled away. She frowned at the loss of contact and opened her eyes to look at him. He was smiling, evidently satisfied by the effect he'd had on her. She smiled in return and then gave him a confused look when his smile faded into a sorrowful look.

She kept her eyes locked on his face as he wrapped a bandage around her arm, pinning it in place. He smoothed it, trailing his fingers down to her hand and holding it.

"I know an apology won't fix things between us, Mari, but I am sorry," he said and then looked up into her

eyes. She hated all the hurt she could see in them. She'd made him suffer for fifty years because she hadn't had the bravery to tell him, to admit to things and take part of the responsibility for what had happened. "I missed you. I thought about committing some offence so you'd have to come for me."

She shook her head.

"I'm glad you didn't," she said. "If you'd done that, I would've had to kill you."

He smiled.

Reaching over, she ran trembling fingers over the bite marks on his neck. His gaze slid down to watch what she was doing. Could he feel how scared she was? Could he sense how nervous he made her now?

"They always looked good on you," she whispered.

He frowned and met her eyes again. "They're my sire's marks... yours are the other side."

She hesitated and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"No, they're not."

He frowned for a moment and then a spark of understanding flickered in his violet eyes.

She brought her hand up and caressed his cheek, pushing rogue strands of his long black hair behind his ear. She'd missed him so much.

"They're all mine," she whispered and dropped her hands to her lap and stared at them.

"What?" His voice was loud in the silent room and it startled her to hear the force in it.

"All mine... that night when Tynan showed you to me, I wanted you, and in the heat of the moment I took what I wanted and then I was scared. Almira offered to take over, to convince you that she was your sire and to train you so I could keep my distance. Only I couldn't. When you kissed me that day, I should've told you who I was. Tynan was right. All this could've been avoided."

She struggled to keep her eyes on her lap. They wanted to see his face, to judge his feelings, but she couldn't stand the idea that he might be angry with her. He might hate her.

The silence ate away at her, stealing a little more of her hope with each passing second.

"You spoke with Tynan? He knows?" His voice held no anger, but she still couldn't find the courage to look at him.

She nodded. "He didn't speak so much as shout. And yes, he knows."

"So why the confession?" There it was, that tiny edge of anger she'd been waiting for, only it seemed restrained, controlled. Wasn't he mad at her for never telling him? Didn't he hate her?

Her heart said it was too much to hope for.

"Because Tynan was right. You deserve to know. I'll be gone in a few days. Please don't follow me when I face the vampire hunter. I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt. If you love me, stay here." She rose from the bed and stared at the floor.

"You know I can't do that. It's my love for you that drives me to protect you," he said with so much conviction that her chest ached.

Leaning over, she pressed a light, shaky kiss to his lips and breathed in when he responded. Breaking away, she sighed.

"Thanks for the arm."

Jascha watched her walk to the door, anger rising inside of him. How could she turn so cold again? He'd thought they were on the brink of reconciliation, and now she was leaving again. He frowned. She was running away.

Throwing the covers aside, he got out of bed. He was damned if he was going to let her run again.

He yanked the door open and followed her out into the hall, not caring that he was naked and that the guards walking past were staring.

Marise was barely a few steps outside his door. Grabbing her arm, he pulled her back into the room, slammed the door and shoved her up against it.

She squeaked.

He silenced her with a kiss.

His lips claimed hers with passionate strength and demand. He parted them with his tongue and delved into her sweet mouth, his heart rejoicing when she began to respond. Her tongue brushed against his and then her hands were on his shoulders, pulling him to her.

He closed his eyes when her fingertips grazed his skin, light tentative strokes that called to him, luring his body into responding. It had been so long since he'd kissed a

woman, since he'd kissed her. Fifty years was a long time to be without the woman you loved, to be without love, and without another's touch.

His hands slid down her arms to her hands. He held them a moment before moving his hands to her waist and pulling at her shirt to free it from her trousers. She broke the kiss, leaning her head back into the door behind them. He watched her face as he finally freed her shirt and raised it. She bit her lip at the first brush of his fingers against her soft skin. His stomach tightened with anticipation, his desire escalating as his body responded in the only way it knew how.

She moaned when he pressed his thumbs into her sides below her ribs and ground his hard cock against her crotch.

Her head tilted back, beautifully exposing her milky throat and his eyes dropped there. He stared at the marks on her neck—his marks—and remembered all the times they'd spent together.

Running the pads of his fingers over her throat in a light caress, he thought about what she'd said to him. She was his sire but she'd been scared. What had frightened her enough to drive her into the decision to let another raise him?

He brought his mouth close to her neck and pressed his cheek against hers.

"Why did you run away after you turned me?" he whispered against her ear.

She shivered in his arms and sighed. He thought she wasn't going to answer.

"I thought you'd only love me because I was your sire," she said, her voice trembling and betraying her nerves. He could sense it in her, had always been able to feel the tiniest trace of her emotions.

"The moment I laid eyes on you that night... across that dance floor... I fell in love with you."

She pushed him backwards, her eyes wide and her face echoing her shock.

"You did?" Her tone matched her look—surprised and stunned. "When you were human?"

"When I woke to another... I thought I was going insane. I swore I'd fallen asleep with you. I hated what had happened to me." He pressed a finger against her lip to silence and reassure her when she leaned forwards to speak. He smiled and his eyes followed his fingers as he brushed the strands of hair from her forehead. "But then I saw you, and realised you were like me, a vampire, and after that... I did everything I could to make you notice me."

She smiled but there were tears in her eyes.

"The thought that I had fallen asleep with you the night I died plagued me, but it soon drifted to the back of my mind as I tried to prove myself worthy to you. I used to follow you everywhere. I used to love watching you in the garden when you thought no one was around." He wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I knew you were watching... that's why I'd go there, to let you watch, in the hopes that you'd come to me." Her hand lightly cupped his cheek and then trailed down to his neck. She stared at it and he knew she was staring at the marks on his throat.

She was his sire. He realised that meant she was the only one to ever bite him. He'd never allowed Almina to.

"I love you, Mari." He held her gaze, furrowing his brows so she could see the apology mixed in with what he'd said. He'd never meant to hurt her.

Her expression remained flat for a moment and then she smiled.

"I feel like I've always loved you, Jascha."

He grinned and pulled her close, wrapping her up in his arms and savouring the gentle pressure of her cool fingers against his bare back.

Pressing kisses to her throat, he steadily traced the curve of it, licking her earlobe as he reached it. He kissed along her jaw to her mouth, claiming her lips again and stealing all her breath away as his tongue tackled hers.

Marise closed her eyes and surrendered to her feelings, and Jascha. She ran her fingers down the arch of his back to the smooth globes of his buttocks and smiled when she refreshed her memory of them. She'd spent countless hours studying the beautiful curves of his body as he'd slept. Sometimes she'd wished she could draw so she could capture his graceful, lean but powerful physique on paper so the world could see how perfect he was.

She bit back the tears that wanted to come when happiness filled her and ignored the voice at the back of her head that reminded her of her duties.

Jascha swept her thoughts away for her when he scooped her up into his arms and carried her across the

room. Panic that he would reopen his wounds filled her mind, but all sensible thought quickly left her when he laid her down on the bed. His eyes sparkled with love and fire. She smiled back at him and then frowned when he pulled back and she saw all the marks on his body again.

“You’re really in no condition—”

He cut her off with a kiss, rough and powerful, deliciously demanding. She melted into the bed, every bone in her body going limp beneath his persuasive kisses and tender touch. He lifted her shirt up, bunching it around her breasts, and grazed her stomach with his fingertips. She sucked it in to evade him, giggling as it tickled. He pressed a kiss to her chin and then disappeared. She closed her eyes and arched her back when he licked her stomach, running his tongue around her belly button and then nipping at her side with blunt teeth.

She got the feeling that she wasn’t going to be able to convince him that he wasn’t up to making love with her.

He hissed and she frowned. Sitting up, she forced him to get up too, and looked at his wounds. He shifted his shoulder and it was all the evidence she needed to prove that he wasn’t healed enough. The burn mark from the cross was still red and sore.

“Lie down,” she said and he looked disappointed.

She smiled reassuringly and walked to the door. Locking it, she turned around to face him. She slowly stripped her shirt off as she walked back to the bed, and tossed it to one side so it fell in the same place her jacket was on the floor. Her fingers made fast work of the button and

zip of her black trousers and she shimmied out of them, turning her back on him as she bent over.

He growled.

Her smile became a grin.

Stepping out of her trousers, she moved to the bed and looked down at him. His eyes scanned her body, full of desire and hunger. Had it really been fifty years since they'd last done this? She'd thought of no one but him. She'd wanted no one but him. Had he been the same?

She thought about Alyssa and her expression darkened.

"Have you... with anyone?" she said before she'd even thought about what she was asking.

He shook his head. "Call me crazy... but I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"Crazy," she said with a broad smile.

He smiled too so she wiped it off his face by removing her bra. His lips parted and he swallowed hard. Slipping out of her knickers, she hesitated a moment and then knelt on the bed. She could feel how slick with arousal she was as she moved over to Jascha.

Her eyes strayed to his hard cock and she bit her lip. It was as big and beautiful as ever, ready and waiting to take her away from the world to a place where only her and Jascha existed.

Straddling his stomach, she lowered herself so she trapped his cock between their bodies and rubbed herself against it. It teased her clit and she moaned, her hands grasping his sides as the delicious feeling of him beneath her made her belly hot with fire.

She opened her eyes and stared into his violet ones. They were full of disbelief, as though he couldn't quite accept that this was really happening. She couldn't believe it either.

Her hands trembled as she raised herself and guided his cock to her entrance. She settled back a little, just nudging him inside her and then sank slowly onto him, relishing each inch of him and how good it felt to have him back inside where he belonged.

The disbelief in his eyes was gone, chased away by the reality of this moment. She wriggled to get comfortable and smiled internally when he moaned and gripped her hips with his hands. The Devil, she'd forgotten how wonderful it was to have his long cock filling her up. No one had ever felt like him. No one had ever come close, not in all her years as a vampire.

Her pleasure was shattered by a knock at the door and someone jiggled the handle. She looked at Jascha.

He growled something in Russian.

There was a moment of silence and then retreating footsteps echoed in the hall.

She frowned at Jascha but he stole her voice by pulling out of her and then thrusting back into her depths. She closed her eyes again and leaned her head back, her hands covering his where they tightly held her hips. Gripping his hips with her knees, she lost herself in the maddening pleasure of their joining as he moved her on his cock, raising her off it and then slipping back in as deep as he could go. She wanted him deeper, wanted to remember this time forever.

She increased the pace of the thrusts, struggling to contain her moans for fear that someone would hear them. Jascha didn't seem to care. He was groaning beneath her, his hips jerking hard with each powerful thrust of his cock into her. She tightened her grip on his hands and whispered pleas at him, begging him for more as the feeling inside of her began to border on painful. She wanted to feel him cum, she wanted him to fill her wholly and completely, to make her tremble as she used to when they made love.

He flipped her onto her back and did as she'd asked, slamming into her and driving her out of her mind with pleasure as his pelvis hit her clit with each thrust. She wrapped her legs around him, her hands gripping his shoulders and then pulling him down to her. She closed her eyes and then cried out her release when his teeth sunk into her neck. She quivered against him, her whole body shaking as her orgasm swept through her. He gave a few short pulls on her blood and she couldn't resist joining him. She wanted to taste him too. She wanted this to be complete and as intimate as possible.

Kissing his neck, she teased him for a moment before sinking her fangs into it. She pulled gently on his blood, letting it pool in her mouth before swallowing it.

He growled against her throat as he came, filling her with his seed and making her moan. She drank deeper, getting her fill and sating her need to taste him. He rolled onto his side and took her with him, and she was content to curl up in his arms. Releasing his neck at the same time as he withdrew his fangs from hers, she wrapped her arms around him and held him as tight as she could without hurting him.

She didn't know what happened now. She didn't want to think about it. What had happened hadn't changed her

mind about one thing—she still didn't want him coming with her to find the vampire hunter.

As for the rest, her struggle to resist him was going to be replaced with one to leave him.

She didn't know if she could.

Was she strong enough to turn her back on him again?

Or would her heart win over her sense?

Chapter 7

Marise ignored the two men following her at a distance so close it was obvious she was being tailed. They were making no effort to hide themselves. She continued to sweep the area with her senses, searching for something human. Instinct told her that the hunter would return here. He would want to finish off their fight as much as she did.

She rolled her shoulders to loosen up and then looked down at the black jacket she was wearing. It had been a long time since she'd worn the uniform of her bloodline's guard. She wished that her jacket hadn't been ruined. There was something powerful and confidence building about the uniform of a Law Keeper. It was her shield. It gave her strength and conviction. When she was wearing it, her purpose was clear, her duty ruling her actions. Now she was without it, thoughts about Jascha crowded her mind and she was scared that she would lose this fight against the hunter.

Turning and heading into the cemetery, she caught sight of Jascha out of the corner of her eye. He did look stunning in his uniform. Being the head guard suited him. He looked hotter in it than he'd ever done in his regular guard uniform and she'd always thought that he deserved a higher position within the family. Her eyes lingered on him and her senses followed suit, trying to pick out each subtle emotion he was feeling. It was hard enough when she was close to him; at this distance it was almost impossible. Sometimes she wondered if, had they remained together, he would've wanted to bond with her and become her mate. Then she would've been

able to sense his feelings with ease, feeling them as though they were her own. Sometimes she wondered if he'd want that now. She frowned and stifled her feelings, switching her senses back to her surroundings.

"Go home," she said, throwing the words over her shoulder at him and Tynan. "Stop following me."

"We're not." Jascha's voice was clear in the still night, breaking the soothing silence. "We are just going the same way. We need to eat."

She rolled her eyes. Did he honestly think she was going to accept that as an excuse for him following her? She wasn't turned yesterday.

"Go a different way," she said without looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on the distant gates. The hunter had to be somewhere in this cemetery. Maybe she was too early. It had been later last time.

"We always go this way," Tynan said.

She cursed him for siding with his brother. Couldn't he see that Jascha wasn't up to a fight? His injuries were still healing. He'd been at full strength last time and the hunter had almost defeated him.

He'd almost killed him.

Her stomach lurched at that thought and she wanted to turn around and push Jascha all the way home. When she got him there, she'd lock him in his room and tell the guards to not let him out until she returned. She didn't though. She just kept walking.

A smile flickered on her lips.

She went down a different path, veering off to the left.

They followed her.

"You're following me," she said, the smile still fixed in place. She'd like to see him get out of this one.

There was a jumbled conversation in Russian.

Silence.

"No," Jascha said, as confident as ever. "We took your advice and a different route sounds interesting."

She growled in frustration and then bit back a squeal when she was suddenly being spun on the spot to face him. She gave an imploring glance to Tynan. He shrugged and dropped back, giving them space. Typical. He always had let his little brother do whatever he pleased.

Swatting Jascha's hands away, she frowned at him, showing him clearly how angry she was with him, but how concerned she was at the same time.

He seized her shoulders again, his eyes dark and daring her to try and shift him again.

"You may as well give up," he said, his thick accent melting her almost as much as the feelings she could see in his eyes. "Get used to us being here. You're not fighting alone."

She frowned harder and then relaxed.

"Fine," she muttered.

His brows rose into a stunned look.

"In that case, you can help." She grabbed his arm.

He looked down at it and then back into her eyes. He nodded.

"You're bait," she said, and before he had a chance to question her, she'd bitten down on his neck, pulling blood to the surface.

She gasped when he twisted her body close to his and bit her too, giving her a taste of her own medicine. Her eyes swam out of focus and she released him, tilting her head back and struggling to resist holding him as he drank from her. She felt giddy, light, and painfully aroused.

"Get a room," Tynan mumbled in the distance.

She smiled at the stars. "You want to join in?"

Jascha released her and growled in his brother's direction. She silenced him by lightly touching his cheek and bringing his attention to her.

"Be careful. We'll be watching." She wiped the blood off his lower lip with her thumb and then licked it clean as she walked to where Tynan stood.

Gesturing towards a tomb that was surrounded by bushes, she waited for him to nod in agreement before moving behind them. She squatted down, making sure they were both well hidden from all angles and then peered through the bush at Jascha.

He was stroking his neck and idly cleaning the blood off his fingers. Her gaze tracked him as he paced. He really did look good in his uniform, the long black jacket resembling that of a Law Keeper.

His dark hair was tied at the nape of his neck, his eyes like black pin pricks from this distance. She could sense that he was still in his vampire guise. Her eyes dropped to his neck as he turned again and she saw the fading marks from last night and the fresh dark ones from tonight. A smile curved the corners of her lips. The sight of him like this, marked by her, all hers, made her feel light and airy inside, and she couldn't wipe the smile off her face. Grinning like a silly youngling was hardly how a Law Keeper should be acting, but it was impossible to maintain a calm façade.

A jolt ran through her, her senses immediately latching onto the motion they'd detected. She stared blankly at Jascha while she tried to locate the source of the movement. He turned his head and she knew he'd sensed it too. A glance at Tynan revealed that he had also felt it. She closed her eyes and called her full strength to the surface. Her bones shifted, locking tighter together, and her teeth extended, the tips of them neatly sliding into place beside her lower canines as they sharpened too. Her senses heightened, bringing everything into focus and making it easy to detect the barest movement within a few hundred yards.

Jascha moved suddenly and she was on her feet. Tynan's hand on her arm stopped her. She frowned down at him, her heart screaming at her to get to Jascha and protect him. Tynan shook his head and she looked at Jascha to see that it wasn't the vampire hunter approaching him.

It was a woman.

Marise allowed Tynan to pull her back down behind the bush. She cursed the fact her hands were shaking and firmly gripped her knees with them to hide their trembling from Tynan as he looked at her. She couldn't

let him see how badly this was all affecting her. She was a Law Keeper. She was supposed to be strong, fearless and in command at all times. Since returning to her bloodline's home, she'd been unable to control herself. Her emotions had been ruling her, her fear at the reins. She felt weak, but it wasn't because of her lack of control. It was Jascha. It was her love for him. It made her feel weak, crowding her mind with dark terrible thoughts, voices there taunting her by saying she wouldn't be able to protect him.

She went to move again, her heart overruling her mind and telling her to protect him now. The vampire hunter didn't matter. This woman could be in league with him.

Tynan growled and she froze, hearing the command in it. She looked at him, brows furrowed, eyes searching his for the reassurance she needed. He placed his hand over hers and smiled. The warmth and understanding in his dark eyes soothed her. He was confident that Jascha would be fine. She trusted his judgement, had to when she couldn't trust her own. Her feelings were clouding hers, making her want to abort this mission at the risk of a tribunal.

He pointed towards Jascha and she looked there. A strange sense of relief filled her when she saw that he was talking to the woman. She listened to their conversation in Russian but could only pick a few words out that she recognised. All this time of living in St. Petersburg and she had never once thought about learning the language. She made a mental note to start once this was all over. Hopefully Jascha could teach her a little.

Her eyes widened when Jascha shifted and with lightning speed was on the woman, his face buried into her neck and his hand covering her mouth. Marise stared at him,

desire and heat flooding her as she watched him draining the woman. The metallic tang of blood drifted on the air, stirring her senses and making her stomach tight with need. It had been so long since she'd watched another kill, since she'd seen Jascha kill. The sight of it had always driven her wild with passion and hunger, drawing out her innermost desires. Their coupling afterwards had always been swift and brutal, more often than not taking place only a few feet from the human he'd killed. She never could wait. Neither of them could.

He dropped the body and looked in her direction. The Devil she wanted to go to him when he looked like that, face bloodied, eyes dark and his own hunger calling to her.

"You both reek of sex," Tynan muttered beside her, bringing her crashing back to Earth.

She realised she was panting, breathing hard in time with Jascha as she stared at him.

"Shut up," she said. She took a deep breath and held it, trying to rein in her feelings and calm back down.

Jascha licked his lips and she felt the tug inside her, the pull that said to break cover and go to him. She didn't care if Tynan watched. She just wanted Jascha.

Tynan laughed quietly.

"You told him then," he whispered, his hand still over hers where it gripped her knee.

Jascha started pacing again, occasionally looking in her direction. She dropped her gaze to Tynan's hand, thankful for the anchor it represented, the only thing stopping her from going to Jascha.

She nodded.

"It is a good thing," he said and released her hand.

She sighed and felt the calm wash over her again, carrying away her desire to go to Jascha and bringing back her focus.

"He needed to know and you both needed to move past it." Tynan shifted closer. "I know what you're thinking... to be a Law Keeper is to forsake all chance at love, all feeling. It isn't true. You can still be a Law Keeper and love Jascha."

She stared at Jascha and let Tynan's words sink in. Was he right? Could she love Jascha, be with him and still be a Law Keeper? Could she? Her heart said that she could but her mind still held doubts. Would the others accept this from her? To be a Law Keeper was to be impartial, emotionless, but only towards her missions and those involved. Jascha wasn't her mission, he was her love. She couldn't go through the rest of her life without love. The past fifty years had been so hard. A life without any feeling was an empty, pointless life. Not even her sense of pride and duty was strong enough to carry her for eternity. One day she would look back and regret what she had become, the path she had chosen. She didn't want that. She always wanted to be happy with her position and her choices in life. She hadn't been happy for the past fifty years, she could see that now. She had been waiting for the day that brought love back into her life, and that was why she'd feared returning home. She hadn't feared seeing Jascha again, she had feared coming home only to discover he was dead or had found solitude and love in the arms of another.

"You could still be together," Tynan said, his voice hushed and soothing. She looked at him, cursing the

tears blurring her vision. "It has happened with other Law Keepers and there is no law against loving one of your own bloodline."

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't find the words to tell him that he was right. She could love Jascha and still do her duty. If anything, she would do it better so each night she could return to him.

Her head snapped around when she heard a growl and immediately sprung into action. She ran full speed at Jascha's attacker and stepped in between them, taking the blow meant for her love. She shook her head to clear it and then punched the hunter solidly across the jaw. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Tynan had joined the fight and was coming around behind the hunter.

She roared, exposing sharp teeth and drawing an almost startled look from the vampire hunter. His face still bore the marks of their last meeting and she grinned to see they hadn't healed. He wasn't as strong as he thought he was. His healing ability wasn't like her own, or even that of the weaklings.

Tynan attacked him from behind and when he spun to fight him, she took her opportunity to check on Jascha. He glared at her, clearly unimpressed.

"You took your time," he said, voice hoarse as he rubbed his throat.

"Your brother was distracting me," she said and brushed her fingers over the still healing wound on his neck. He hadn't reopened it, but there was a chance he would if he continued to fight.

"How?"

"I'll tell you later." She smiled and then frowned. "Are you up to this?"

Jascha looked over her shoulder and nodded.

She sprung into action and he watched her and his brother for a few moments. He drew a deep breath and focused his senses, sharpening them so he wouldn't be bested in the fight. He was up to this. He wasn't at full strength yet but his thirst for vengeance would help him though, giving him the power he needed to ensure this vampire hunter met the end he deserved.

He growled when the hunter managed to hit Marise, sending her stumbling backwards. She didn't lose her footing though and was back in the midst of the fight in the blink of an eye.

Tynan looked at him.

He read his expression clearly and made his move.

Sweeping into the middle of the three fighters, Jascha grinned as Marise and Tynan halted their attack, leaving him face to face with the hunter.

Jascha roared.

The flicker of recognition in the hunter's eyes was replaced with fear.

Jascha sharpened his claws and levelled a punch at the man's face. The hunter dodged it, but didn't evade the next one he threw. It caught the man hard across the jaw, toppling him. Before Jascha could grab him, the hunter had rolled away, flipped backwards and was attacking again.

He saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye and Marise and Tynan were past him, both throwing punches at the hunter and not giving him a chance to respond.

The hunter ducked and dodged, weaving free of them and coming face to face with him again. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment and then the hunter ran.

Tynan went to go after him.

"Wait," Jascha said and his brother froze to the spot, turning to look at him. "We can't get split up... that's how he succeeded last time."

Marise nodded in agreement and Tynan fell back into line.

"We can't stand here though," she said, concern in her eyes as she looked at him.

His eyes widened when his senses screamed at him and he shot his hand out towards Marise, his fingers closing around the crossbow dart. It burned into his palm, a sure sign that the hunter was clever enough to use bolts made from holy wood. He stared at his hand and the tip of the bolt. It was barely inches from Marise's heart. Anger washed over him, filling his veins with pure venom.

He snapped the bolt in two and roared.

Marise growled.

Tynan followed suit.

"We move," Marise said.

Jascha obeyed her command. She was superior to him and this was her mission, not his. He was just lucky enough that she'd finally allowed him to help her. All he wanted was to protect her. He kept pace with her and his brother, his senses sharp and searching for any sign of another attack. Wherever the hunter had gone, he had been concealing a weapon there.

He wondered how many other weapons the hunter had in the cemetery grounds.

They broke through some bushes and came out in a wide open space scattered with graves. They were exposed but it might be their only way of drawing the hunter out of hiding. He reached with his senses, trying to find the hunter. Another bolt flew at them and Marise growled as she caught it.

"He's toying with us if he thinks these stupid bolts will kill us," she muttered, snapping it and dropping it to the floor.

Jascha felt like reminding her that one of those stupid bolts had come very close to killing her, but he didn't. Her words were a revolt against the fear the sight of the slim shaft of holy wood so close to her chest had caused. He'd felt that fear too, as though it had been his chest the bolt had almost pierced.

Another bolt shot out of the darkness and narrowly missed them. Marise was already running in the direction it had come from by the time he had figured out the hunter's location. He chased after her, dodging each bolt and catching any that posed more than a passing threat.

Tynan caught up with him, falling into line beside him and Marise. He glanced at his brother, trying to silently

convey something that was on his mind. If something happened to him, Tynan had to protect Marise in his stead. He looked at Marise and then back at Tynan. His brother nodded in understanding.

Marise leapt over a low tomb and then rolled to dodge a bolt as it flew over her head. Jascha followed her and then grabbed her and dragged her down with him, causing another bolt to narrowly miss them. He pulled her to safety behind a tomb and nodded to Tynan who was hiding behind another one close by.

“This man is playing by tactics.” He looked at Marise.

She frowned and then nodded. He’d spent years as a special operative for the Russian government. Both he and his brother were trained in this kind of combat. Was Marise? He didn’t know what kind of training she’d undergone when becoming a Law Keeper. He stared at her, trying to read in her eyes whether she was thinking along the same lines as him or whether her thoughts were running along a different path.

She swallowed hard and looked out from behind the tomb. He pulled her back when a bolt zipped by.

“Trying to get yourself killed?” he said with a frown.

She met it with a dark look.

He signalled to his brother, telling him in code what he planned to do. It only took a glance at Marise to see she wasn’t following at all. Her eyes were wide and she looked confused.

He gestured in the direction of the next tomb over. She looked there and then back at him. He motioned with his fingers that they were going to run there. She nodded.

Taking hold of her hand, he pulled her up so she was crouched beside him on the grass, ready. He signalled his brother and watched as he ran in the other direction, drawing the hunter's fire. He counted, waiting, always patient as he needed to be.

The second Tynan was almost at the point he'd planned, he ran with Marise, silently slipping from tomb to tomb. He stopped behind one, pressing his back against the cool stone. Poking his head out, he smiled when he saw the hunter behind a tomb, still firing at Tynan. This hunter wasn't as clever as he'd first thought. Any vampire hunter worth his salt knew that a vampire could easily run at a speed human eyes would find difficult to register, meaning Tynan was toying with him by running at an almost human speed.

He released Marise's hand and motioned for her to come closer. She did, her body pressing close to him, making him ache to touch her. He nodded towards where the hunter was hiding. She frowned and then grinned, revealing sharp canines.

He watched Tynan's progress and the second the hunter had his back fully to him, he ran with Marise tailing behind. He had precious few seconds before the hunter realised what was happening. It would be enough to get Marise the chance she needed to kill the man.

He just hoped it wasn't going to hurt too much.

Keeping in front of Marise, he blocked the hunter's view of her, just as he'd planned, giving her the best chance possible.

Marise's eyes widened when Jascha growled in pain and stumbled forwards, his hands coming up. Her heart clenched and her throat tightened. She choked on her

feelings and pressed on, shutting down her breathing. Jascha growled again and she sprinted past him, not even glancing at him as she attacked the hunter.

The hunter's face was a mask of shock as she appeared from nowhere. She roared and launched herself at him, slashing across his throat. He fell into the gravestone and went to reach for the crossbow but she knocked it away with her foot. She grabbed his throat, digging her claws in until blood was flowing from the wounds. Bringing her hand away, she licked the scarlet liquid off her fingers and frowned hard at him.

It didn't taste human. He tasted almost like a vampire.

Someone had changed him, done something to him, but who and what?

Jascha moaned behind her and her anger came back full force, mixing with her fear and intoxicating her until she lost all restraint. She stared at the man in front of her, his dark eyes full of certainty with a hint of satisfaction that only fuelled the feelings inside of her. Growling, she slashed across his throat, unleashing all of her feelings. The surety in his expression turned to alarm as the blood began to spill in rivulets, trickling down his neck and pooling around his collarbone before sliding onto his chest.

"Where did you come from?" she said, hoping he'd be more willing to answer her questions now that he was sure he was facing death. "What happened to you?"

He smiled in a way she didn't like.

It was full of 'you'll see' and it sent a shiver through her.

Anger getting the better of her, she grabbed his neck and choked him, trying to get an answer out of him. He continued to smile calmly, staring straight into her eyes, his expression unwavering.

“Tell me!”

There was an almost imperceptible twitch in his look and then he slumped against the headstone.

His eyes went glassy, fixed on her in a sightless stare.

She pushed him away from her and released him. Her gaze dropped to his chest and she frowned at the knife protruding from it. He’d killed himself. She couldn’t believe it. He’d killed himself to avoid answering her questions. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she glared at him. What kind of human was he? If he was human.

Her eyes widened when she remembered Jascha and she turned on a pinpoint to face him.

Her heart lightened and warmed when she saw that the bolts had missed their target. She knelt beside him where he was resting against a gravestone. He grimaced and clenched his jaw as he yanked a bolt out of his left shoulder. She pulled the one in his right arm out and tossed it to the floor.

She didn’t look at Tynan when he stopped beside them, panting.

“You all right, little brother?” he said, concern in his voice.

Jascha nodded. “Better than I’d expected.”

Marise realised that he’d planned to be her shield, to hide her and protect her from the vampire hunter. She

sighed and brushed the backs of her fingers against his cheek, letting him know that she was grateful for what he'd done but at the same time he'd worried her sick.

She helped him to his feet and then looked down at the body of the vampire hunter.

"We need to get it to headquarters for an autopsy... we need to know what we're dealing with," she said, her eyes unmoving.

Tynan bent over and picked the body up, slinging it over his shoulder. Blood spilled from the hunter's throat onto the ground. She watched it slow to a steady drip. It wouldn't be long before it stopped bleeding completely. It was best they waited so they didn't leave a trail back to their home.

She looked at Jascha and raised her hand again, tentatively touching his wounds. Her brows furrowed and she met his eyes, not hiding how concerned she was about him and how scared she'd been. He smiled and brushed his fingers across her cheek.

Her earlier conversation with Tynan came back and she realised she'd never made a decision about what she was going to do. Could she be a Law Keeper and a lover at the same time? Would the others accept it? She stared into Jascha's violet eyes, willing him to make up her mind for her. A single look or word was all it would take to bring her to a decision.

His smile widened, his eyes brightening with affection and tenderness.

She'd missed the way he could do that, look at her and show her all the love he held for her. She'd missed his smell, his taste and his touch. She'd missed all of him.

She couldn't continue on alone anymore. She had to at least try and see if she could balance being a Law Keeper and a lover.

Holding her hand out to him, she waited for him to take it before speaking.

"Come with me."

He frowned.

"When I take the body to headquarters," she said.
"Come with me."

He continued to frown for a few seconds and then the confusion in his eyes became incredulity. He opened his mouth but she answered his question before he'd voiced it.

She kissed him.

Chapter 8

When Marise had left the Venia mansion it had been with a lighter heart and a new found love for her home. The return journey to the Law Keeper headquarters had been shorter than outward one. With Jascha there and so much catching up to do, it had passed like minutes rather than hours.

She looked across at him as he walked beside her, carrying the body of the vampire hunter. They'd placed it in a body bag back at the mansion and had kept it in the boot of the car during the journey. Jascha's gaze slid across to meet hers and she smiled at him, trying to cover all the feelings colliding inside of her. She was no longer scared of her family's home—she was petrified of this building instead.

Her eyes ran over the cold stone of the mansion. It was dark and foreboding against a backdrop of cloud strewn night sky. The moon was nowhere to be seen and the only light was that coming from one of the ground floor windows. The rest were dark, making them look like the hollow eyes of the building.

She realised that Jascha had moved past her and had stopped by the door. He was watching her and she managed another smile. This time he seemed to see straight through it. He walked back to her, dumping the body at her feet. His look melted into one of concern and she caught his hand to stop it as it rose. She held it tightly, squeezing it and taking comfort from his touch. She wanted him to caress her cheek as much as he did,

but she was afraid that someone might see. She still didn't know how to break things to her comrades.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice a little shaky and giving Jascha all the evidence he needed to pin down her feelings.

His thumb brushed against the back of her hand and then he stepped closer to her, bringing his body into contact with hers.

At this distance, he'd easily be able to sense the barest bones of her emotions, enough to truly know how she felt.

She glanced at the house to make sure that no one was watching and then moved into his embrace, resting her head against his chest and closing her eyes. She reached out a little, latching onto the feelings she could sense in him and using them to comfort and soothe her. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her hair. She didn't feel as strong as she had done when she'd left this place to visit her home and discover who had attacked Timur. With Jascha being strong for her, she was letting herself be weak, relying on him to help her though.

He smiled when she stepped away from him and looked into his eyes.

She was strong. Her gaze dropped to the sleeve of her jacket. The servants had done an admirable job of repairing it, and although it would never be the same again, it was still her shield and it still gave her power and conviction. She wore this uniform for a reason. She had been chosen because of her strength and sense of duty. She wasn't weak, she was just in love, and it was something that could make her stronger too. Her desire

to return to Jascha, to protect him, would be another part of her shield now—it would give her the strength to do her job, regardless of the danger it involved.

Picking up the body, she carried it towards the house and knocked on the door. It opened within a few seconds, revealing the familiar low lit interior and the Caelestis Law Keeper. He smiled and then raised a brow when he noticed Jascha.

She thanked him with a smile of her own as he stepped to one side and gave her room to enter. She walked into the house and went straight to the study. As expected, the Vehemens and Tenebrae Law Keepers were there.

“Mission completed. I have brought back his body as evidence. I tasted his blood... whatever he was, he wasn’t all human. There was a trace of vampire in him.” She dumped the body down on the table they were sitting at.

They both stared at it and then looked past her. She swallowed hard, waiting for someone to mention her company. None of them did.

“Is everyone here?” she said.

The Vehemens shook his head. “The Aureora have called Daemon home... some business about the prophecy. Serge has been asked to investigate Ineru’s escape from exile and see if it was assisted or not.”

She noticed his pause and frowned at him. It wasn’t like him to stop halfway through a report.

“And Natyla?” she said, watching him closely.

His eyes flickered with something for a moment and then all emotion disappeared from his face as though someone had wiped it away.

"Natyla has been called back to Budapest. She has business to attend to." There was a darkness in his voice that made her look at Jascha.

She'd heard something similar in his a thousand times. A hint of jealousy. It was probably just her imagination. Eduard would never be jealous. He never showed any feelings at all.

He stood and picked the body up. "We must see what has been done to this man."

She watched him go and then caught the eye of the Caelestis Law Keeper, Vincent.

"He was in a fight and his target escaped, disappeared. Natyla apparently got in the way, misjudged her attack and caused Eduard's injury. He has not spoken to her since." Vincent shrugged in a way that said it was all he knew.

She could swallow that easier than the thought of Eduard being jealous. He had always been the kind of man you didn't cross and definitely didn't get in the way of during a fight.

"Who is your friend, little Marise?" The amused tones of Balthazar drew her attention to him. He was leaning back in his chair beside the table, an open book in front of him and his dark eyes boring into her. He'd always been the only one of her comrades to unsettle her. Quiet, secretive and with a vicious streak a mile wide, he reminded her of what the humans called serial killers. There was a blackness inside him that made him the

perfect Law Keeper. Here was a man that no emotion could touch.

"He is my child and elite guard of Venia," she replied flatly, not letting her feelings come to the surface as they wanted to.

He scrutinised her a moment longer and then stood, brushing his jacket down. He gave a disinterested look at Jascha and then left the room.

"Eduard will be ready for us by now," Vincent said and then walked away.

She looked at Jascha. He raised a brow.

"Friendly aren't they?" he said with a smile.

"This isn't the barracks, Jascha. This is the way we are expected to be. This is what it means to be a Law Keeper."

His smile widened and he pushed her hair behind her ears. She was surprised that he didn't say anything. She'd been expecting him to crack a joke, or reassure her that she wasn't like the others, she wasn't heartless as Tynan had told her the other night.

She held his gaze, searching his face for a sign of what he was thinking. He closed his eyes, stealing their light from her world and dipped his head towards her. She didn't stop him when he kissed her, instead she responded in kind, teasing his tongue with her own and showing him that regardless of what happened here today, she loved him and wanted to be with him again.

He broke the kiss and held both of her cheeks in his hands. When he drew back, he was looking at her with

so much emotion that she wanted to look away. He held her steady, forcing her to look at him.

“Lubov moya,” he whispered and she melted into the pool of warmth inside her.

She smiled and caught his hands, bringing them away from her face and holding them.

Looking into his eyes, there were so many things she wanted to say to him, but she couldn’t find a voice for any of them. She smiled at him a moment longer and then turned, leading him from the room.

When they reached the room where Eduard had taken the body, the others were already discussing the findings so far. She stepped up to the table where Eduard was studying a slide of blood under a microscope and then stared at the little machine beside it. She didn’t understand any of it. In his time as a human, Eduard had been passionate about science. In her time as a human, she’d been taught to run a household and catch a husband.

She looked at Jascha where he stood by the door. He looked awkward and out of place, not a part of this group but an outsider. She signalled for him to join her, not wanting him to feel as though she had abandoned him. She needed his strength too.

Eduard looked at her and she leaned her backside against the table. She told him everything that had happened down to the very last detail. He frowned a few times, and made the odd remark to Vincent and Balthazar. She tried to keep her attention away from Jascha but her eyes kept straying to him, her hand itching to be in his again, to feel his slim fingers closed tightly around it, reassuring her.

She was glad that Daemon wasn't here. Of all the Law Keepers, he was the one she most expected to cause trouble about her relationship with Jascha. Natyla would understand her need for love because she suspected that the Nocens Law Keeper had a lover of her own. The lord of Serge's bloodline, Hyperion, was an advocate of love, regardless of the law, and she knew that in some small way, Serge shared his master's view.

"Your child is strong and courageous," Eduard said with a nod of respect in Jascha's direction. "He deserves recognition for his help."

She tensed when Jascha stepped forwards.

"I did not do it for recognition," he said, thick Russian accent making his words sound proud and true.

All three Law Keepers looked at Jascha and then at her and then back again. She took a deep breath and stepped forwards towards Jascha, her hand sliding easily into his and her fingers curling around it, confirming their suspicion for them.

She looked at all of them, waiting for one of them to speak or give her a look that said they didn't approve of what she was doing. None of them gave an outward sign of disapproval and she was surprised when Eduard smiled.

"The humans have done something to this man," he said, pointing towards the body on the table. "His blood is different, more like ours."

"We suspected that someone has been playing god to give the humans an advantage in their fight against us," she said.

He nodded. "They are unravelling our secrets and must be stopped. We cannot tolerate such disobedience. We must discover the source of this change and destroy all evidence."

There was a general murmur of agreement. She glanced at the window and closed her eyes as the sun called to her. She was still tired and sore from the fight with the hunter and Jascha needed his rest. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and smiled shyly when she found he was staring at her. Well, he needed rest amongst other things. They did have a lot of catching up to do.

Leading him towards the door, she paused when she reached it and looked back at the room. She thought about what had happened and while she was glad to finally be back with the man that she loved, she couldn't be happy about the circumstances that had brought them back together.

"I am tired and Jascha must rest to heal his injuries," she said and Eduard stood, nodding in understanding. "Wake me if you discover how the change in this human has happened. When night falls and we have more evidence, we must contact our comrades and then we must warn the bloodlines."

She looked at Vincent and Balthazar, her eyes lingering on him longest of all. In his eyes was something she hadn't seen before.

A trace of fear.

She held Jascha's hand tighter, needing to feel the connection and know he was there with her. She needed the comfort as she contemplated what she was about to

say. It was something everyone here knew, but no one wanted to voice.

"We must warn all vampires that a new breed of hunter has awoken."

They stared at her.

She looked at Jascha, knowing that the times ahead of them were going to be dangerous and lives were going to be lost, and thankful that he would be with her through it all. She would do all in her power to protect him, and she knew in her heart that he would do everything he could to defend her. They would stand together to the very end and into eternity beyond.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the room, finding everyone still waiting for her to finally say what was on all of their minds, to name the fear inside all of them.

She straightened out her uniform and stood tall at the same time as her comrades.

"The time has come... sooner than expected. Our duty is written in blood. We must uphold the law and protect the bloodlines. We must see with clear eyes and heart."

She took a deep breath and pushed the words out.

"The humans have become dangerous."

The End

About the Author:

Felicity Heaton, who writes under both her real name and F E Heaton, has been interested in all things preternatural since she was just a child. She used to while away days at school and college dreaming of vampires, werewolves and witches, and used to while away evenings watching movies about them or reading gothic horror stories and romances.

Having tried her hand at various romance genres, it was only natural for her to turn her passion back on the paranormal. She loves to write vampires, werewolves and witches, and makes no excuses for how brutal they can be. She writes them as they are: merciless hunters—seductive, sexy and strong. They're vicious, dark and dangerous, but, at the same time, they love, they laugh and they feel every emotion as strongly as anyone. She says that this is their world; she's just honoured to write down their adventures.

To see her other novels, visit:

<http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>

or visit the official Vampires Realm website:

<http://www.vampiresrealm.com>

Other stories in the Vampires Realm series:

Prophecy: Child of Light [book 1]

A girl unlike any other girl, a vampire unlike any other vampire, Prophecy lives life in the dark until the night she breaks the rules. Leaving the family mansion to hunt for the first time, she encounters Valentine, a vampire from her family's enemy and a man who will change her life forever.

Suddenly at the centre of a prophecy, she is kidnapped by Valentine, the man who should have been her executioner, and forced to run with him in order to save herself. Required to work together, the tension between them builds as a dark evil threatens to destroy the world, their families and the Law Keepers attempt

hunt them down, and Prophecy discovers that her feelings for Valentine control her new found power.

When the truth about her is revealed, will Prophecy be strong enough? Will they discover a way to save the world from Hell? And will they finally see past the hatred bred into them by their families and surrender to their love?

The first of the Vampires Realm novels being written by five star author F E Heaton, *Prophecy: Child of Light*, is part one in an epic tale of love and war that is sure to capture your heart and leave you craving more.

Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea [book 2]

The final battle draws closer. Prophecy's world becomes darker and more dangerous, pushing her to the limit and testing her strength and her heart, almost breaking her. Old friends turn their backs, leaving her to fight with the help of an unlikely ally and forcing her to call on the devastatingly seductive and powerful Lord Hyperion for assistance.

Struggling to rescue Valentine from the malicious hands of her blood brother, Arkalus and the lord of Aurorea, Kalinor, Prophecy discovers just how powerful she is and how far people will go to stop her from fulfilling her destiny. Lives are lost, battles are won, and the scroll foretelling the prophecy is finally completed, but nothing can prepare them for what lies ahead.

When her visions show her the path that must be taken, will Prophecy be able to do what is necessary? Are Prophecy and Valentine ready to command the power they'd never thought would be theirs? And are they strong enough to fight the evil of their true enemy?

Following on from *Prophecy: Child of Light*, the tension rises and love grows in *Prophecy: Caelestis & Aurorea*, a thrilling second part to this story that draws you into a dark, dangerous world of vampires, magic and the war to end all wars.

Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising [book 3]

An enemy with unimaginable power and bloodlines with centuries of hatred bred into them, two things that threaten to tear Prophecy and Valentine apart as they fight for their lives and their future together. Their vain attempt to join their houses into one army drains the last of their strength, leaving them more vulnerable than they've ever been. The tension escalates between the bloodlines, and, more dangerously, between Valentine, Prophecy and Venturi.

As everything crumbles around them, defeat seems inevitable. In one decisive move, their enemy turns the tables against them, taking what is most important to Prophecy and leaving her to fear that the terrifying visions she's been having are coming true. An enemy becomes a friend, guiding her in her time of need, and a friend becomes an enemy. Death, destruction and danger surround her, but the help of an old ally brings her the army she needs and the dark moon brings her the power to fight the legions of Hell.

When the time comes, will Prophecy be able to do what's necessary or will the sacrifice she must make be too painful to go through with? Does she have the strength to stop Hell from being unleashed into the world and save the ones she loves at the same time?

The dramatic conclusion to the *Prophecy* story, *Prophecy: Dark Moon Rising* is a gripping tale of love and war that will take hold of you, set your heart racing and not let you go until the very last page.