



mystik guardians

# Vampire's Cross

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**Mystik Guardians**  
**Vampire's Cross**  
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## **Dedication**

To my dearest husband, John, you are my everything. Thank you so much for all the help you gave me while creating this book, and for listening to my endless rambling about the characters as they developed on the pages. You are my world, a true source of inspiration.

This book is also dedicated to Nicole Austin and Kscove for the help with the ménage scene when I got stuck and considered tossing the whole thing; your input was invaluable. To Sandy, Jess, and Ang for their help in bringing this thing together, and to all the wonderful readers out there who kept me motivated enough to see this thing through to the end. I thank you all. And now, welcome to the world of the Mystik Guardians.

## Prologue

More than twenty-thousand feet in the air, Alexis Chantal found herself wishing—not for the first time—she’d made the effort to learn her powers.. If she had taken the time, she could have flashed herself to the doorway leading to the Hall of Wisdom in no time at all; instead, she spent the last two days trudging through thick snow in sub-freezing temperatures, the arctic wind blowing snow and ice into her face. Though the cold wouldn’t kill her and a fall, even from this height, wouldn’t be fatal, it was still uncomfortable and annoying as all hell. She didn’t even like the Moirae, yet the moment she’d received the summons she went running. It so sucked to be her at times.

Mt. Everest was every mountain climber’s dream, yet to Alexis it was a total nightmare. She couldn’t even use the normal—easier—routes to get to the top. Oh no, the Moirae had to be on the most out of the way ledge they could find on the whole damned mountain—the one it’d take a miracle just to reach. She should have asked Maximal to flash her to the door, but it was too late for that now. Two long, cold, exhausting days too late.

In some cases ignorance was bliss. Where the Moirae were concerned this was certainly the case, and how she wished she knew nothing of them. They made her already miserable life a living hell, which was quite a feat. Alexis hated them from the moment she first learned of their existence—when they had originally informed her of this whole preordained destiny bullshit. She hadn’t asked them to elaborate. A part of her hoped that by ignoring their words they would go away. Boy was she ever wrong. All she wanted was to see her sire dead and the Moirae only served to make that goal harder to obtain. Simon, her best friend, tried to teach her patience where the fate dealers were concerned, but she didn’t believe in miracles and told him not to hold his breath waiting.

Why couldn’t the old biddies just rent a room in Guarda del Sino, her home base on the Texas-Mexico border, and meet her there? Because that would have been easy on her and they never liked the easy path. No, instead of being in a nice, cozy room back home having this stupid meeting, Alexis was forced to plaster herself to an icy, sheer-rock facing as she inched her way to the top.

A strong gust of icy wind blew through the valley between the mountains, whipping Alexis’ dark hair into her face and mouth in the process. She spit and sputtered in an attempt to dislodge the bothersome hair from her teeth and cracked lips. Though she’d tied it back at the onset of her journey, the harsh conditions had made quick work in pulling the long strands free of their bonds.. Snow and ice bit into her skin, carried by the harsh gusts of air she’d bet good money were sent by the Moirae to hinder her journey.

She pulled herself up, anchoring herself securely against the rock wall. There was no way in hell she was about to look down despite heights not bothering her in the least. She wasn’t really afraid of falling, even if it would hurt like hell if she did. No, her main concern at that point was to keep her infamous temper in check. The last thing she needed was her temper distracting her into making a mistake, costing her hours of hard work. If she fell, she would have to start all over again. Then she’d be royally pissed—which would defeat the purpose of her trying to stay calm.

For two days she’d done nothing but stew over how idiotic it was to be traipsing up the

side of a snow-covered mountain, just to talk to three women who did nothing but speak in riddles.. They could have just as easily scribbled it onto a piece of magickal parchment and had one of the messenger gods deliver it, but oh no, *that* would have been considered *too* easy. So here she was, glued to a rock face as the wind gusted, pushing her, trying to knock her loose.

The raging winds increased in strength and fury as she neared the ledge where the secret doorway into the Hall of Wisdom lay hidden. It wrapped around her like a fist and pulled, nearly dislodging her from her perch. A pebble broke loose and fell with an ominous thump, thump, thump, all the way down until even her sensitive hearing could no longer detect the sound over the roaring wind.

"I hate rock climbing," she muttered as she pulled herself up onto a small ledge. The wind was biting cold, numbing her fingers, nose and ears.. Despite not having to worry about freezing to death, or suffering frostbite, she was more annoyed than grateful. She hated being cold, or too hot—not that that would be a problem any time soon.

Alexis leaned back against the solid wall behind her and glanced up at the ledge that was her goal. As if the trek up wasn't bad enough, she'd still have to make her way down to the bottom again—another two days wasted on the whims of the gods. Would she never learn? Humans had it so easy, because most had no clue that supernatural beings even existed. Life had been so much easier before the life she now led was forced upon her. However, with a little luck on her side, that would soon come to an end and her humanity would be returned to her. It was all she truly wanted...well, that and to be off this infernal rock!

With a heavy sigh, she hefted herself up and climbed the rest of the way to where she needed to be on the ledge. Only a few more feet and about fifty more near falls to reach her goal.

"You can do this, Alexis. You're tougher than they are," she whispered, coaxing herself to keep moving forward when her entire body screamed at her to stop and sleep for—oh, several years. Every muscle ached—even ones she hadn't realized she'd had. After her last run in with the Moirae, she'd sworn she'd never go running when they called again. Yet, like the fool she obviously was, here she was at their proverbial doorstep.

Alexis grabbed the ledge with one hand then quickly swung up her other arm to grab hold of it. Slowly, she pulled herself up until her upper half rested on the cold rock and her feet remained dangling below her. She huffed for air, trying to fill her burning lungs before pulling herself up the rest of the way onto the rocky shelf.

She lay face down on the cold stone with her eyes closed, breathing heavily. "The things I get myself into."

The air this high up was thin and though she seriously doubted she'd die of asphyxiation, she wasn't exactly willing to test the theory out.. The Nosferatu could slow their hearts and breathing way down, but they still had to pump blood throughout their bodies and breathe. Where did humans get the idea that Nosferatu didn't need to have air to live? If only that were true, then her lungs wouldn't be burning at the moment in protest at the lack of oxygen.

This was stupid. All the Moirae would do is piss her off and then she'd do something painfully stupid, just as Simon predicted. It really sucked he knew her so damned well at

times. He was forever chastising her for things she hadn't even done yet. It was downright uncanny how he did that.

She pushed herself up and climbed to her feet.. No sense putting it off any longer than she already had. Wiping her hands on her pants leg, she glanced over the edge. It was a very long way down.

Alexis removed her pack and snowsuit, dropping them onto the ledge. She put the pack on top of her suit to keep it from blowing away and then placed a large rock on it as an extra precaution against the gusting winds. She was doing one of the things Simon had specifically told her not to — intentionally provoke the Moirae.

She quickly redid her ponytail to keep her hair from her eyes. There was nothing like the eerie red glow of a pissed off Nos' eyes to let the one she stared at know just how pissed she really was. Before she even reached the rock facing, a stray strand of dark hair fell into her eyes. Alexis drew in a deep breath and blew it out in a huff, causing the hair to dance before her face. She scowled at it before reaching up to tuck the wayward strand behind her ear. She'd just redone that. There was no way the winds could have already tugged it loose.

Hands on her hips, she glared around her at the scenery. Power emanated throughout the air, telling her she was close. *Now, to figure out where that damned door is hidden.*

She cautiously made her way to the solid wall before her and extended her hands, palms out, toward her obstacle. Pressing her palms against the multi-colored, frost-covered rock, she felt the invisible barrier give, allowing her entrance into the hidden temple.

Warmth instantly surrounded her, a stark contrast from the frigid cold of the outside world. Despite her hatred of temperature extremes, the Nosferatu had learned long ago to ignore the harshness of nature and thrive regardless of their environment, which was a good thing considering the outfit she wore. Her jeans had holes in the knees and her barely-there, hot-pink t-shirt had the words 'Life Sucks' emblazoned on the front in big, bright, red-gold letters. *Anything to piss off the Moirae.*

Matching columns flanked the doorway. Identical in every way, right down to the niches etched into their surfaces, which should have been individual in nature, they stood guard over the ancient trio's home. Orange light flickered deeper in the chamber, casting shadows that danced along the walls, ceiling and white-tiled floor.

Alexis raised a brow as she noted the décor.. White. Damned near everything in the chamber was white or pale silver. Maybe that's what the old hags' problem was — lack of taste and boredom. She moved deeper into the room, noting how her shoes made not one single sound on the tiled floor. Even with her skill as a hunter, she expected their magick would have given them at least some warning they were no longer alone.

"Why are you here, young one?" a monotone feminine voice asked from everywhere, yet nowhere.

Alexis quickly looked around her in search of the source but saw no one. The question pricked her temper. "I'm here because you summoned me," she replied, trying not to let her annoyance show in her voice. She mentally shook her head. This was going to be so much fun — not! *Haven't been here five minutes and already they're up to their old tricks.*

A large platform slowly rose from the floor a few feet in front of where she stood. On top of that, a large golden cauldron held a blazing fire — presumably the source of the firelight that had shadows dancing all around the room. She narrowed her eyes at the cauldron.

"Show yourselves," she whispered.

As if on command, three fiery-haired maidens appeared around the fire. Their unblinking milky-white eyes stared at her as they held their hands up over the flames. Even if history and myths reported them as old hags, they looked no more than teenagers. It was their eyes that betrayed them, holding a wisdom that only came with age. The Moirae were older than time itself—older than the world. However, age did little for their manners or compassion—of which they had none.

They knew all: past, present and future, but shared very little of that knowledge with anyone besides themselves. She just hoped whatever they had to say was good, because once they voiced it there was no going back and undoing it.

The achromatic sheath-like dresses they wore wrapped around their slender forms as if caressing their every curve, yet left their arms and most of their shoulders bare. The crisp, milky color of their skin contrasted greatly with the flaming red-orange of their upswept hair, secured by tiny, golden combs shaped like the flames flickering before them.

"You come in seek of answers," the woman on the right said in her sing-song voice.

Alexis shook her head, dislodging the strand of hair she'd tucked behind her ear earlier. "No...I'm here because you told me to come. Now what do you want?"

Simon had warned her to keep her temper in check, but they made it damned near impossible. How could she keep from getting pissed when they intentionally goaded her all the fucking time?

"Patience, young vampire. All will be revealed in time," the center maiden replied.

Alexis closed her eyes and prayed for strength as her hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. Her heart rate slowly picked up speed as her growing anger consumed her. "Let me get this straight. You called me all the way up here only to tell me you have forgotten what you wanted me for?" Well, that was the impression they gave..

The third woman waved her hand dismissively. "We know all."

*And you say even less.* She should have stayed home. At least then she wouldn't be missing her favorite television show—a hot man in military attire jetting out all over the universe in an attempt to save the world from an alien threat. She just hoped she set the VCR correctly this time.

"Then can you tell me how my show ends tonight? It's the conclusion from last week's episode," she quipped.

She couldn't be certain but she'd have sworn the old woman rolled her eyes at her.

"Your means of entertainment are of no consequence to us. Your destiny and the future of us all is our only concern." The middle woman's gaze bore down on her, making her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

Alexis swallowed and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She hated their eyes. They had a way of making her feel as if they were seeing into her very soul, reading all her secrets, no matter how intimate and private.

"Then by all means, enlighten me as to why I'm here." Her blood pressure had probably already risen at least a good ten points and continued to go higher by the minute.

"You cannot complete your task alone," the woman replied, completely unabashed by Alexis' tone.

She raised a brow at that. "And just who am I supposed to get to help me?"

"The Slayer," came the calm reply.

Alexis' heart stopped beating all together and her mouth went very dry. "The Slayer? As in *the* Slayer? The *Master* Slayer? Oh, you've *so* got to be kidding me. There is *no* way in hell that man will help me do anything but die," she raged at the trio. She felt her powers roil beneath her skin, itching to get out and do some damage to something—anything. If only she'd taken the time to learn what those powers were instead of ignoring what she'd become so many years ago against her will.

"He will help you in this task, young vampire," the trio's leader replied.

Alexis glared at the center woman. "Keep your insults to yourself," she said through clenched teeth. She hated the way her accent slipped through when agitated, but it was something that couldn't be helped. "'Tis Nosferatu."

The woman shrugged and moved her hand in a dismissive manner. "Same difference." She moved her hand through the flames. "Diego cannot be stopped any other way."

Alexis wanted to scream. The last thing she needed, or wanted, to hear was she had to enlist the help of *that* man. Any other she could have dealt with, but not him. Never him. She had so much reason to hate him and now she was expected to find him, plead her case, and get him to help her. They had to be out of their collective fucking minds.

"I never asked for this," she ground out.

"Destiny does not care, child. This is your task to burden and you must follow it through."

*Yeah, as if that line helped any.* "Any idea how I convince him to help me? I can't just walk up and say, 'Hey Dalton, remember me? You tried to murder me about twenty years ago but now I need your help to kill my sire. How about it?' Somehow I don't think he'll go for it."

They turned their backs on her and started to walk away.. "It will come to you when the time is right."

"Oh hell no you don't," Alexis growled as she rushed forward. An invisible wall blocked her path.. She slammed into the unseen barrier and flew backward, landing hard on her ass.. She quickly climbed to her feet and pounded her fists against the shield, growling out her frustrations. Stinging pain shot up her arms, but she ignored it as she continued to punch the wall. Blood trickled down her hands and forearms before she finally ceased her attack. The intoxicating scent of her own blood only fueled her ire.

"You cannot harm us, young vampire. You waste time with your illogical emotions. Time is of the essence and grows ever shorter. You must find the one now and do as you were born to do."

*Riddles. Nothing but fucking riddles. Why couldn't they ever learn to speak in English? They are ageless—old as time itself. You'd think anyone who lived that long would learn to express themselves at least a little better.*

"'Tis not our place to tell you everything that will unfold. We are merely the guides who make sure all runs as it is meant to be. Your destiny is in your own hands and all choices you make will affect one and all. Go, child, and choose wisely."

Before Alexis could blink an eye, the woman and her two counterparts were gone—vanished from sight. Oh this was just peachy. Nearly two days of climbing a near sheer, snow-covered mountainside for *that* little bit of conversation! A storm was blowing in and



was bound to hit before she reached her resting place safe from the sun, and all they could tell her for her troubles was that she needed a human—one she despised no less—to help her complete her destiny. “Give me a fucking break already,” she muttered.

She lashed out at the invisible wall once more before pausing to watch her hands heal. Two centuries as a Nosferatu and the simple act of healing still fascinated her. She wiped the blood onto her jeans before reaching up to tuck the troublesome strand of hair back behind her ear.

“Thanks a lot,” she muttered, turning to stalk back out of the cave. The climb back down to the ‘real’ world was definitely going to be a much longer one than the trek up, and she’d only just made it to the top. With the Moirae, it always had to be the hard way for the one they were supposed to be helping.

Before heading back out, she generated a large ball of icy energy between her hands, enjoying the prickly feel of it between her palms before thrusting it toward the burning cauldron. The energy ball instantly extinguished the fire and Alexis smiled as she rolled her shoulders. She was still tense, but at least she felt a little better—even if she didn’t know how she’d created the energy ball.

Releasing a sigh, she stomped out the door. She’d better get a move on if she wanted to make her checkpoint before the sun broke the dawn sky. Though the morning light wouldn’t kill her, it would hurt like hell. Besides, she was still young enough to succumb to the sleep of the Nosferatu without realizing it.. If that were to happen when she was in an exposed position...well, so much for her so-called destiny.

The trek back down the mountain would be a long one, but at least it gave her time to work out her frustrations. She pulled her snowsuit back on and dug into her pack for something to snack on. Blood was out of the question; in her opinion there was nothing worse than cold blood.

“What’s this?” she murmured, pulling a smaller pack from her bag. “Simon, you devil.”

She strapped the smaller pack on and stood at the edge of the cliff. Glancing back at the larger pack, she realized there was nothing in it that was really important. Her blood still boiled despite the cold, but the trip down should give her time to cool off. No matter how angry she got, she had standards by which she lived. Long ago, even before becoming the monster she now was, she’d taken a vow and it was one she took very seriously. She vowed to protect human life, not take it. With that thought she leapt off the ledge, enjoying the bite of the wind against her face on the way down.

## Chapter One

*Three months later, Guarda del Sino...*

Alexis walked down the sidewalk with a huge knot in her stomach. Tonight was the moment she'd worked so hard for the past three months to reach, and she was anything but happy about it. Her emotions were in turmoil. Dread roiled inside her, coiled and ready to strike like a poisonous asp hiding in the grass. Hatred seethed just below the surface, bubbling and brewing in anticipation of an escape—a chance to avenge the past. She paused, nearly stumbling under the force of the conflicting emotions running rampant throughout her. No matter how badly she wanted to, she could not kill the man she went to meet—and gods how she wanted to kill him.

The man she sought had taken everything from her. The one person she'd allowed herself to care for since this hellish life had been forced upon her had been ruthlessly and mercilessly taken from her by Dalton's very hand. She couldn't believe the Moirae actually expected her to work with him for a common purpose. The moment he learned the truth about who and what she was, he'd turn on her and she didn't have to be a mind reader or soothsayer to know that. It was in a slayer's blood to destroy the creatures of the night.. She knew that better than anyone.

She smoothed her hands down the soft leather of her mini-skirt as she tried to regain control over her senses. This really wasn't a good time for such a confrontation, but she had little choice. Regardless of what myth and legend said, Nosferatu could and did reproduce. Unfortunately, this was the time of her cycle, which meant she was in dire need of a good fuck. Hell, she needed to get laid as badly, if not more so, than she needed to feed—and that was saying something. A Nosferatu's bloodlust was a thing of legend. A true legend.

Drawing in a deep, calming breath, she blew it out slowly and then resumed walking. Heartbeats from unseen people thrummed in her ears, heightening her need for blood. She ran her tongue over the back of her teeth, lingering on the sharp prick of her fangs. No, that would never do. She squeezed her eyes shut for a brief moment and willed her fangs to retract. It would never do to let the hunted know he was the prey so very soon in the game.

Alexis rounded the corner and drew up short as she noticed the long line of people covering the sidewalk before it disappeared around the corner she'd just turned. The line outside the door to Olympus was unusually long. She glanced at her watch: 9:00pm. The crowd should have dwindled down to just a few latecomers by now instead of covering the sidewalk all the way down the street. What was going on tonight to make things so different?

Ignoring the glares and rude remarks as she passed by the line, she made her way to the front where Jake, the doorman, stood checking IDs. "Busy night, Jake?" She smiled and winked in his direction.

"You know it," he grunted as he checked another driver's license thrust into his craggy face. He looked at the card and back to the person who'd handed it to him. "You don't look to be twenty-three."

"Oh, come on man. I look young for my age," the young man replied in a somewhat whiny tone.

Jake shook his silvery head and handed the card back. "Sorry, you'll have to go try your luck somewhere else."

"What's the deal tonight?" Alexis tried not to show her impatience to get inside.

"Live band." He took the next ID offered him and glanced at it before handing it back and letting the girl enter. "Wizardry. They seem to be very popular."

Alexis nodded. She knew of Wizardry. They rocked hard and loud and all night long. Of course, the members were Nosferatu, Lycan and Mage, but that wasn't common knowledge. Her gaze moved over the crowd outside the building that was like a home to her. Okay, so it was her home, even if the doorman didn't know that, but still... She'd been away the past few nights staying with a friend and hadn't known about the performance tonight. Live band nights were always crowded and a bit wilder than normal, though tonight was worse.

"Going inside or standing here to keep me company?" the big man asked.

She smiled and blew him a kiss. "Going in I suppose. As much as I adore you Jake, I have business with Simon."

He turned the full force of his dark gaze on her and winked. "Then I suggest you get going."

"Thanks." Jake wasn't bad—for a human. She started inside.

"Hey, wait a minute," the young man from moments earlier yelled. "You didn't check her ID and she looks younger than I do."

*Great, just what I need. Some loud-mouthed punk drawing unwanted attention to me.* She turned and smiled coldly at him as she allowed her eyes to flash red for just the briefest of moments.

"She's a regular." Jake crossed his arms over his massive chest and glared at the younger man.

Poor Jake. He probably thought the hasty step back the boy took was because of him. She smiled secretly. Let him keep his illusions.

"I don't have to check her ID if I don't want to," Jake finished saying as the boy disappeared into the crowd.

*Good thing since I don't have an ID.* She could just see the look on the face of the DMV office worker who took her application for one, too. "Is this age a typo?" they'd ask. "Why no, I really am two-hundred and thirty-three years old, and I'm a vampire, too." That'd go over real well—not!

She moved into the small alcove leading to the door, pausing to listen to the familiar hum of muffled conversation that mingled with the quieted thrum of music, signifying her arrival at the hottest club in the city. With a firm hold on her predatory and womanly urges, she reached forward and pulled the door open.

A cloud of smoke roiled out onto the sidewalk where she stood and dissipated into the cool night air like a phantom as she stepped into Olympus. Heaven on earth and her sanctuary. The muffled sounds of moments before were now a loud, pulsing roar. She paused just inside and extended her left hand with a smile and a wink at the large, burly man sitting, reclined back in his chair next to the door.

"How's the crowd tonight, Andre?" She shouted so he could hear her over the loud music blaring through the numerous large speakers scattered throughout the building.

He nodded, his blue-green eyes sparkling in amusement. "Looks like a good one," he shouted back, though she'd have heard him even if he'd whispered the words.

Andre pressed the rubber stamp he held to the back of her hand, leaving a green, Celtic-looking symbol on her skin. It was meant as proof of payment for entry into the club, but she never paid. Just one of the perks of knowing the owner. Simon would never charge her admittance into Olympus; he liked her entirely too much, not to mention the fact she lived there in her own private room hidden in the basement.

She eyed the symbol on her hand carefully. It was the logo for Olympus Simon had carefully designed, though she couldn't help but wonder what the meaning behind the intricate swirls were. Knowing Simon as well as she did, she knew without a doubt that the symbol meant something. Perhaps it was just a form of protection for the patrons since fights never broke out in Olympus, no matter how high the tension.

"Have fun kiddo," Andre said with his usual smile.

*Kiddo.* She could have laughed at that. There was at least a good two centuries between them, not that he'd have any clue.

She blew him a kiss as she sauntered off into the dimly-lit interior, swaying her hips gently in time with the music. The atmosphere was intoxicating, and in more ways than one. Smoke filled the air, both from cigarettes and the pyrotechnics used on stage by the band performing. Loud music pulsed its way through the building like a living, breathing creature. The mingled scents of the numerous drinks served in the club blended with the smoke until it was difficult for even her sensitive sense of smell to distinguish the two.

This was the last place she needed to be during her cycle, but she had no choice. Since this whole destiny thing had begun, all her choices had been taken away from her and she found herself doing rather distasteful things just to survive. Like seeking out the one man she hated nearly as much as her sire.

She shook her head. Dwelling on that would get her nowhere but angry. Too much time had already been wasted while searching for the Slayer. It had taken her three long months, time she felt she didn't have, and a few favors she'd been saving up just to get to this point. The last thing she needed was to lose her temper and blow the whole thing. Besides, an overwhelming sense of urgency built ever stronger within her. Almost as if time were running out.

Alexis weaved her way through the small yet tall round tables with their long-legged chairs and littered tops. Glasses of all shapes and sizes adorned the tables with either long, red straws or tiny, multi-colored umbrellas. Wadded up napkins covered the tables and floor, wherever patrons carelessly discarded them.

A wave of lust washed over the room and nearly doubled her over in need. She paused to scan her surroundings, seeking out the source of such powerful emotions. Her fingers played at the laces of the black leather bustier she wore to match her mini-skirt and thigh-high boots. She was dressed to kill, though not literally – no matter how badly she might want to. Her outfit wasn't helping her situation any with the way it hugged her body intimately. Already the lust filtering through the air had her in knots, but she couldn't let it control her. She was stronger than that.

Red, green and blue lights danced in time to the music's frantic rhythm; the cadence of the bass addictive. Masses of bodies writhed and twisted around each other, bringing images

of a large orgy to mind. Heat crept its way through her, dispersed down her limbs and her vaginal walls clenched in unfulfilled desire as another wave of lust washed over her.

Her head snapped around and her eyes flashed as she caught sight of a couple hidden in a shadow-filled corner, necking as if they were completely alone. A smile curved her lips upward as she slowly weaved her way ever closer to the unsuspecting pair.

Alexis' entire body tingled in anticipation. Heat pulsed through her with each step she took. A low moan escaped her lips. So close. So, so close. All she had to do was reach out and she could touch the young man's shoulder, then absorb the power of his lust into her body through her heated skin. Relief was but a heartbeat away.

*Alexis.*

Her name whispered through the noisy, crowded club and caressed her skin like a feathery touch. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back as she drew in a deep breath, releasing it on a sigh. With great effort, she shook off the trance lust the young pair before her had caused. So close...

*I'm fine, Simon. Will be with you soon.* She just couldn't face him yet. Not after that close call. Besides, she needed to scope out the place, get a feel for the crowd just in case things got dicey.

She headed for the stairs leading to the second floor, which was really just a balcony wrapped around three out of the four interior walls of the club. The space over the stage and the rather good band performing was left open so bands would have plenty of room for their sound equipment.

Alexis made her way to the center of the middle banister and moved her gaze over the crowd. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, slowly, meticulously analyzing each particle of the scents assaulting her. Her eyes snapped open. He was here.

"Let the games begin," she murmured.

A set of steely arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her tight against a hard, warm muscular wall. "Let what games begin?" a gravelly voice growled into her ear, sending excited little pulses racing over her skin.

Alexis stroked his arm, enjoying the tickle of the fine hairs there against her fingertips. She turned her head to the side and leaned back against him as he nuzzled her neck, sweeping his incredibly long and talented tongue across her pulse point. A shiver raced through her in response to his caresses and she nearly creamed right there in his arms. Not a good thing since she wore no underwear. "Not a game you can play, Malachi."

He pouted. "And here I thought I was your only one."

Alexis laughed, the moment lost. This was an old game they'd played since first meeting more than a century and a half ago. She turned in his arms and placed a hand on the center of his chest, taking a moment to admire the fine lines of his well-built body.. Her fangs extended and she was sure he could see them, especially since he knew what she was and what signs to look for.

"You're hunting." He didn't ask but stated it as fact.

"Sort of." She turned back to the railing and grasped it tightly in both hands. He was below somewhere and Simon was still waiting. She could feel his call winding through the bar. Odd how he could do that since he was only an empath.

"It has to do with that stupid prophecy, doesn't it? You don't need him to help you,

Lex. I can do it. I'm definitely more powerful than he is."

Alexis couldn't help but smile. He meant well. She turned and reached up to caress his whiskered cheek. "I know you are, Mal, but it is not for us to decide who does what in this particular walk of life. I cannot change what has been decreed by the Moirae. You know that as well as anyone."

He took her hand into his large one and lifted it to his lips. "I worry about you."

"Join the club," she murmured, darting her gaze to the first floor and the bar where Simon stood watching them. "I have to go. I need to talk to Simon before I...encounter the Slayer."

Malachi's disgust was evident by the look in his eyes. "A vamp seeking out a slayer is just asking for trouble."

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him as she shoved him back. "I am not a vamp," she said through clenched teeth.

Mal rubbed his chest and grimaced. "Did you have to shove so hard? I'll have a bruise there now for sure." He straightened and dropped his hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. It just slipped out." He pooched out his bottom lip and got that puppy dog-eyed look on his face. "Forgive me?"

Alexis closed her eyes and prayed to the gods for strength. The man was insufferable. "Just don't make a habit of it," she said, pointing her finger at him as she reopened her eyes.

*Alexis.*

Her name wrapped around her, played at her hair like fingers. She glanced toward the bar down below. The man was determined. She'd give him that much.

"I have go, Malachi, but I will talk to you later." She started past him then stopped and glanced back at him. "Do try to avoid Simon. He doesn't like you very much."

"The feeling's mutual." He kissed her on the forehead. "Tell baldy hello for me."

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Great way to mend fences there, Mal. Stay out of trouble."

Alexis walked backward as she watched him put his hand over his heart and take on a sincere look, though she knew he was full of shit. Malachi didn't know how to be careful. He was a wolf and young by their standards, though he was only around three decades her junior. Despite his youth and troublemaking tendencies, he was still a good friend—even if Simon didn't approve.

She moved down the stairs back to the first floor and focused her gaze on the bar and the man in question. Simon Ramsey, her dearest friend, had once again pulled her from the brink. Another few minutes and she might have given in to Malachi's charms. Her entire body tingled and ached from pent up desire, but there was nothing she could do about that at the moment. If she gave in to the lust now, she'd miss the opportunity to beseech one of her worst enemies for his help, and that simply wouldn't do.

Alexis fastened her gaze on Simon like he was a life preserver. Even though he was a highly attractive man with his bronzed skin, wide shoulders and that lovely, muscular chest of his, there had just never been that type of connection between them. He stood behind the bar, polishing a glass she was certain didn't need it. She suspected he did it more out of the need for something to do than for any other reason.

His bald head reflected the room's dancing lights and brought a smile to her lips. Bald

wasn't normally a thing she found attractive, but it suited him quite well. She found it a perfect match for his bulking muscles which stretched the white t-shirt he wore to near breaking point.

Of the two she was supposed to be the scary one, but if you asked her, she believed the title belonged to Simon. His gray eyes had a tendency to turn a swirling silver, sending shivers of fear racing through her body – though she'd never admit it to him. He gave her the creeps at times, as much as she adored him. Empaths were supposed to feel others' emotions, not do creepy things with their eyes.

She unzipped her jacket the rest of the way and slipped out of it as she approached him. Tossing it at him, Simon deftly caught it and tucked it underneath the bar in one smooth motion.

"The usual?" his deep, husky voice asked, not missing a beat.

Alexis smiled. "Same as always." She drummed her blood-red nailed fingers on the counter, a frantic rhythm that matched the beat of the music that continued to thrum in the air as she listened to bits of conversation filtering through the club. "They're here."

Simon narrowed his eyes at her as he poured a thick, red liquid into her glass and recapped the dark green bottle. He replaced the bottle under the bar and slid the glass to her. "Can tell that already, can you?"

She shrugged and lifted the glass to her lips, savoring the metallic taste as it washed over her tongue.

"They arrived just after we started to get busy. They're –"

"In the far back corner," she finished for him. She took another swig of her drink and practically purred. "Mmm. AB neg, a delicacy."

He gave her his infamous half smile. "I know what you like. By the way, Rodrigo says hello." Simon wiped the bar though she could see no real reason for it.

She raised a delicate brow. "Should I be worried?" Rodrigo was a character. He fancied himself in love with her and she hadn't the heart to tell him he didn't interest her in any romantic way. "He didn't spike it, did he?" She sniffed the contents of her glass when Simon failed to respond to her first question.. Rodrigo was a Mage and though he was still young, he was already quite powerful. She wouldn't put it past him to slip a love potion into the red, life-giving fluid.

Simon threw his head back and roared with laughter. "No, there's no need to worry. I warned him good and proper. As much as he fancies himself in love, he's not stupid enough to piss you off."

Alexis drew back and eyed him suspiciously. "Simon, such language. I didn't think you had it in you.." Simon was good for the soul. A bright spot in a world filled with darkness.

"I only use it when I feel it necessary and your accent is showing." He leaned closer. "Looks like your plan to draw him here worked. Care to tell me what you did?"

Alexis bit down on the tip of her tongue to keep from smiling. "A woman never tells her secrets and you know it shows when I'm agitated. Tonight isn't a good night for me to be here."

"Then why are you here?"

She glared at him. "You know I didn't have a choice." She drew in a deep breath and

let it out slowly. The longer she went, the worse her accent got. It simply wouldn't do.

"That string of unsolved murders wasn't you, was it?" he quietly asked.

Alexis felt the familiar sting of her eyes as they heated and began to glow red. She didn't need the mirror behind the countless rows of liquor bottles across the bar to know that bit of information. Right after turning she'd spent many a long night before the mirror, learning her new form and characteristics. "I do *not* kill," she said between clenched teeth, careful of her enunciation.

"I had to ask, Alexis. This is my city as much as it's yours, and this whole destiny thing isn't exactly helping your attitude any."

She shot him a rather nasty look he just shrugged off. Odd how he'd never once acted as though he feared her. She sat her glass down on the bar's top and leaned closer. "You don't fear me, do you?"

He closed the gap between them until their faces were mere inches apart, their noses nearly touching. "There are far worse things out there than you, Alexis."

She pulled back. He spoke as though he knew that from experience and she knew better than to ask. "I didn't—did not—harm anyone, though I may have tampered a wee bit." She hated confessing that, especially after she caught a glimpse of the disapproving look on his face. Inwardly, she winced.

Simon tilted his head in the familiar way of his that more than adequately showed his disapproval. "How will they catch the real criminals if you tamper with the evidence?" His tone was anything but comforting. In fact, it sounded fatherly—or at least what she thought fatherly should sound like. She'd never had a father, so she had no real experience with such things.

She waved a dismissive hand toward him as she took another sip of her drink. "I spoke with Melyn first. She knows how important this is. In fact, she helped me out." She furrowed her brow. "Come to think of it, she was awfully eager about it."

"You two are nothing but trouble. She'll lose her job and then what good will she be to the others?"

Alexis rolled her eyes and fought the urge to stick her tongue out at him. "We're both grown women, Simon. 'Twas only this once. I needed that man to come to town."

"On a witch hunt," he added for her.

She shook her head. "No, a vampire hunt." She flashed him a grin and waggled her eyebrows at him.

Simon sighed and reached for a new glass as he chuckled. "Now that he's here, what do you plan to do?"

"Why, I plan to waltz right up to him and introduce myself." Alexis threw her head back and laughed at the shocked look on his face. "Relax, Simon, I have no aspirations to kill this night."

"Don't sound so arrogant, Alexis. There are six of them and only one of you. Not to mention you don't exactly have full control over your powers."

Now that hurt. She was more than capable of taking on six measly ole slayers by herself. After all, she wasn't a newbie. She narrowed her eyes at him as she tried to maintain control of her temper. "So? It wouldn't take much effort at all to extinguish their pitiful lives."

"You've been hanging around Malachi too long. His arrogance has rubbed off on you."



He swiped over the counter with his rag. "You aren't supposed to kill him. Remember? Don't you need him to help you out with something rather important?" he asked pointedly with a raised brow.

## Chapter Two

Jonathan Eli Dalton listened to his men as they laughed and told jokes about the work they'd done over the past several days. He wouldn't admit it to them, but something about this didn't seem right. The evidence pointed to vampiric activity in the area, yet they hadn't found much upon arrival. Just last night another mysterious murder had occurred, and again he'd been unable to find any signs of a vampire in the area, other than the body. What was going on here?

He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand as he ran a finger over his glass, drawing designs in the moisture collected on it. Distraction was a dangerous thing in his line of work, but he couldn't seem to help himself. It felt as if a sixth sense told him to look deeper, but he had no clue what to look for.

A tall, blonde waitress walked up to the table with more drinks and a basket of fries. She smiled at him and winked, but he just wasn't interested. His body ached with need of a female body, yet for some reason his mind refused to acknowledge any possible attraction. Just any woman wouldn't do. He needed a very special lady to help sate his starved body. The problem was finding the right woman.

"Hey, boss," Santos yelled over the loud music. "I think the waitress was in to you."

Dalton gave his men a half smile and shook his head. "I think I'll pass. She's probably been ridden by every man in the joint."

They all laughed at his joke. In all honesty, he had no idea what kind of woman she was or if she was promiscuous, but it was enough to keep them off his back about it.

Adams got up and moved around to kneel down beside him, draping an arm over his shoulders. "Well, boss, pick yourself a lady out of the crowd and we'll get her for you. Any one of them," Adams said, sweeping a hand toward the crowd.

Dalton leaned back in his chair. "Why don't you pick yourself one out, Adams? Or are you too drunk to get it up?"

The crew roared with laughter as a red hue traveled up into Adams' face. He nodded his head good-naturedly. "All right, you got me there, boss. That was a good one."

Dalton laughed as Adams climbed back to his feet and reclaimed his seat. Beau raised his hand up in the air and waved it wildly to summon the waitress back.

The blonde returned, tray in hand and leaned down so she could hear what Beau had to say. "I'll have another whisky," he yelled, "and the boss down there will have a blow job." Everyone else at the table but Dalton laughed. Beau waved a twenty in front of the waitress' face. She grabbed the twenty, slapped him across the face and stalked off.

Another loud roar of laughter sounded. Beau held his hand over his cheek. "What?"

"That'll teach you to keep your damned mouth shut," Dalton replied, pointing at the young man. "You're lucky they don't throw your ass out for that."

"If they do, y'all will leave, too. Right?" Beau looked from one colleague to another, sounding every bit the kid he was.

Each man shook his head no. Dalton looked toward the young man and shook his head. "Nope. They kick you out, you're on your own. Go back to the room and sleep it off."

The young man's face fell. The others laughed even harder when the waitress returned

with a large, bald man in tow who Dalton recognized as one of the doormen. The man grabbed Beau by the shirt and jerked him to his feet before escorting him through the crowd toward the door. The rest of the crew howled with laughter.

Dalton chuckled. Normally he'd stand up for his men, but in this case it wouldn't hurt the young man to learn a thing or two from his actions. He leaned back in his chair and scanned the crowd. What he looked for he didn't know, but he felt he was here for a purpose other than drinking and cutting up with his crew.

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Alexis growled. *Must everyone keep reminding me of that?* "What do you take me for, Simon? A fool?" she hissed. "I'm well aware of the circumstances under which I live." She closed her eyes to regain control of herself. Cracking one eye open, she peered at the man across the bar from her. "I should tell Malachi what you said about him."

"Go ahead, tell him. You can also tell him he's young and irrational as well as rebellious," he replied then added, "Therefore a bad influence on you. So by all means, tell him if you like."

"He's not so bad, Simon. Really. Why do you always pick on him?" He was the one being irrational.

He just looked at her and breathed slowly, in and out, as his heart beat the same, steady rhythm it always did.. She'd taken to listening to his heart when they spoke, curious if anything ever riled the man. It seemed he could remain calm no matter the subject matter.

"Haven't I already stated enough reasons?" He shook his head. "You're so young."

"No, I'm not," she denied. She hated it when he treated her like a child.

"In your world, you are. You may be a few years older than Malachi, but unlike you, he was born into his powers." His silvery-gray eyes bore into her darker ones. "I never have figured out why you refuse to embrace your own powers."

She jerked back as if he'd struck her. "I never asked to be a part of this world or to possess such powers," she growled. She slammed the glass down on the countertop, sending a fine crack through its previously smooth surface. "I do not understand how so much can lie in my hands when I did not want it to begin with."

This conversation had passed its expiration date—long ago. The only thing he was doing now was royally pissing her off. She glared at him, hoping no one else noticed her burning eyes.

"You can't change what has happened, Alexis. Embrace it and make the most of what you have been given." His pale eyes drifted to the glass then back up to her. "Did you have to break it?" he asked on a sigh.

Alexis closed her eyes and drew in an exasperated breath. "I didn't mean to break your precious glass." She opened her eyes and stared at him. "And I didn't ask for this life. This whole destiny thing is really starting to get on my nerves."

He shrugged as he picked up the glass and discarded it then reached for a new one, filling it without even asking if she wanted another. "We must all play the hand we are dealt, Alexis."

"This isn't fucking cards, Simon."

"No, but the same rules apply. You never know what the next card in the deck will be. So live for the moment, not for what may or may not happen."

Oh how she hated it when he took on that whole enigmatic, seer-type persona of his. She narrowed her eyes at him. Come to think of it, he took on that attitude quite often and not for the first time her thoughts drifted to the Moirae.

"What?" His question jerked her out of her thoughts when she continued to stare at him.

She shook her dark head. "Nothing." Reaching up, she rubbed her forehead. Nosferatu weren't supposed to be able to get headaches, but that didn't do anything to alleviate the pounding behind her eyes and against her skull. She ignored Simon for a moment and concentrated on the music filtering throughout the club. It was the perfect rhythm to hunt by – to fuck by. Alexis squirmed in her seat as another wave of desire and lust built inside her. "I need to get out of here," she rasped.

Simon smiled knowingly and she badly wanted to lash out, to wipe that look from his face. "Why not use it to your advantage?"

Her head snapped up. Now, why hadn't she – ? She raised a brow at him. "Why, what a delightful idea, Simon. I may just have to do that, though the very idea turns me stomach."

"It was a long time ago, Alexis. Let it go already."

She seethed inside. It was sometimes very disconcerting he could pick up on the things she was feeling and sometimes thinking. Alexis glared at him. "Easier said than done. Because of him, Paul is dead."

He shook his gleaming head. "No, Alexis. It's not his fault."

Her rage boiled forth before she could stop it.. She slid to her feet and slapped her hands down on the bar so hard the glasses all up and down it bounced with the action.. "How dare you!" She leaned closer so as not to be overheard by any of the club's regulars. Already, she could feel their gazes burning into her back. "Was it not he who pierced Paul's heart with a silver stake?"

"But it was *you* who turned him after Diego had his fun."

Pain sliced through her as his words stung worse than a fist in the gut. But he was right. She slowly lowered herself back onto the stool. It hadn't been Dalton's fault, or even Diego's. It had been hers. Plain and simple. If she'd never gotten involved with the boy, Diego wouldn't have decided to include him in his little games. If she'd kept her distance, Paul would have lived out the remainder of his mortal days in peace. Instead, he lived a life he never liked, feeding from her each night because he refused to hunt, to embrace what he'd become. Like her.

*I turned him into the very thing I hated.* She lifted her gaze to Simon's silvery one. Was the man right? Should she have spent the time to embrace her new life? So many years of hatred and regret, fear and loathing. All for what?

"Let it go, Alexis. Tearing yourself up over it won't fix anything."

Those words rang all too true. She blinked as she gazed into his knowing eyes. "I'm the one responsible." Her voice was more a cracked whisper than anything.

He shook his head. "No, you had no way of knowing what would happen. You should know by now that everything happens for a purpose. Your lives were meant to cross paths, just as it was meant for you and Dalton to cross the same paths. Everything in your life has led you to this moment in time."

"He won't help me," she whispered.. Sorrow, deep and mournful, washed over her.

Despair so dark it wrapped itself around her like a shroud, taking hold. "They ask too much."

Simon caressed her cheek, the lightest of touches. "Baby, he will if you'll just give him a chance."

"I am the very thing he hates." She tightened her grip on the glass before her and then loosened it, not wanting to break another of his precious items.

Simon stared at her with an unnerving resolve.. "But you were once in his shoes, Alexis. If anyone can get through to him, it is you." Simon topped up the glass before her. "Drink up.. You'll need your strength for this."

Alexis shook her head and lowered her lashes as she picked up the glass and took a large gulp, once again savoring its coppery taste on her tongue. Simon always did have a knack for stocking up the good stuff for her. Life from a bottle—the only way to go as far as she was concerned. Rule number one: never kill while feeding. One didn't have to kill in order to survive, though many humans believed the Nosferatu killed for the sheer pleasure of it. Some certainly did.

"That was so very long ago," she finally said, replacing the glass on the countertop and watching as Simon quickly refilled it yet again. Alexis picked up the glass and took a large gulp. Her need for blood was more prominent than most nights. Her cycle demanded either more blood or sex, and sex just wasn't on the menu at the moment. Simon knew this and did all he could to make this night's unique hunt easier for her.

"I dare say I've forgotten what it was like to be human. I forgot what the sun looked and felt like so very long ago I ache for the loss of such knowledge. But once Diego is dead, I shall once again walk in the light."

"Are you sure that will work? Do you know of a single person who successfully carried out the task you're about to attempt?" he asked.

"You are very dear to me, Simon, but at times you try me patience."

He flashed a grin. "And I take great pleasure in that, but you didn't answer my question."

She sat the glass back on the countertop with more force than necessary, causing it to crack. "No, I haven't. Happy now?"

"Not really." Simon glanced at the glass her fingers were still wrapped around and sighed. "Now that's two. You've got to get that temper of yours under control."

"I'm Irish. What did you expect?" Alexis shook her head as she stretched lazily on the stool. She ran a hand up over her shoulder and around the back of her neck, rubbing some of the tension out of her already aching muscles. "You know I didn't mean to break your glass...either of them." She lowered her hand and sat up straighter. "This has to work, Simon. Why else would the Moirae insist I need the help of a human—the Slayer, no less—to defeat Diego?"

She tapped her fingers on the bar. "They don't exactly exude a load of confidence in me, you know? I'm glad so many people have so little faith in my abilities to do this on my own."

"I'm sure this has nothing to do with your abilities, Alexis. Didn't you ask them more questions before you left?"

She suddenly felt very guilty and it showed on her face.

He narrowed those knowing eyes on her. "What did you do?"

"Umm, did you know they surround themselves with a protective shield?" she prevaricated instead of answering him.

He groaned and shook his head. "Tell me you didn't."

"She started it!"

"Oh, Alexis. Didn't I tell you to control your temper before going up there?" He sounded so disappointed in her at that moment.

"I tried, Simon," she whispered. "I really did, but all they did was insult me and rub my nose in the fact they don't seem to think I can do this by myself."

She glanced at him from under her lashes and sighed. "I asked, but they wouldn't tell me."

"Your accent is really showing, Alexis. Calm down."

"I can't help it.." She paused and took a deep calming breath. "I can't help it," she repeated. "This whole situation has me in knots and the fool Moirae aren't helping a bit."

But he was right. If she didn't regain control over herself, all of this was for naught. She was trying to hide her identity and her past; letting her accent fly wasn't the way to do that. There were no pictures of her on record, but her family history – what little there was – was on Sanctum record.

"Maybe they didn't know."

Alexis scoffed again. "Maybe they were just afraid to tell me the truth. A lot of ancients will die if this turns out to be true."

"Not all ancients have sired new ranks. Don't listen to the rumors, Alexis. No matter what anyone says, the Nosferatu aren't a dying race. Their numbers are strong, especially where the true bloods are concerned."

"I guess that puts me in my place." She stared into the mirror, watching the throng of people behind her move around the club's interior. "I just wish to regain that which was stolen from me."

"You should know by now not to dwell on the past, Alexis. Everything is as it should be."

Sadness overwhelmed her, though she knew not why. Over the years she'd killed more of the Nosferatu than all the men in the hunters' little group put together, most after she'd been turned. But unlike them, she knew how to discern the difference between the good and the bad.

Nosferatu and humans weren't that different. Each had good as well as evil, though the lives of the Nosferatu were much more complex than those of their mortal counterparts.

So many misconceptions surrounded the clan that she had found herself shocked time and again, after being turned, as more and more of her beliefs were cast aside as nothing more than silly wives' tales and myths. The only thing she'd learned as a slayer that rang true was that sunlight was deadly, as was fire. She reached between her breasts and fingered the small silver cross that hung there. *Crosses were a joke.*

The Cross of Ignatius. Symbol of the Sanctum. The mark of a slayer. Once the cross was bestowed upon a slayer, he or she wore it until the time of his or her death, when it disintegrated. Since she wasn't truly dead, hers survived the centuries right along with her, and she wore it proudly.

"You're not listening to me, are you?" Simon's deep baritone broke into her thoughts.

"Sorry. I was lost in thought."

"You can't afford to have your attention divided, Alexis. This is too great a task. Focus." He picked up another glass and set to work polishing it. "Now stop wallowing in self-pity and do what needs to be done." Pointing to the cross she held between her fingers, he added, "That thing will only get you caught and clue him in to what you really are."

She growled at him to which his eyes turned a swirling silver. "I will not take it off."

"Well, don't come crying to me when he catches on to you, either."

She stuck her tongue out at him to which he responded with his eyes going all silvery again.

Alexis shuddered. "I hate it when you do that," she muttered, turning away.

His laughter rang loudly in her head and almost completely drowned out the music in the club. *Be careful*, his warning drifted into her mind.

She shook her head. *Empath my ass. One of these days, that man is going to spill all his secrets...*

## Chapter Three

Diego stared out the window as his rage grew. "I can't find that fucking book," he growled, turning away from the moonlit night. His gaze fell to the Hexad he'd created. She cowered against the opposite wall, curling herself into the smallest ball possible. Hexads were foul creatures. Neither human nor vampire they were something in between, the culmination of the worst parts of both species.

She fed on flesh and blood yet still held her human emotions, which made her a rather delicious treat for him. He crooked his finger at her. "Come here, my pet."

She obediently crawled across the floor, her entire body shaking with the fear he felt coming off her in waves. He inhaled deeply, enjoying her fear. The Hexad paused on her hands and knees at his feet and he petted her on the head like the animal she was. Diego was certain she had a name, but he'd already forgotten what it was. Oh well, it was of no consequence anyhow. She no longer interested him—and that never boded well for the object of his attention, or lack thereof.

"Make me happy," he ordered, standing still as a statue as the red-haired abomination rose up on her knees. The long, once vibrant locks of her hair were now dull and severely knotted as they stuck out in all directions from her head.

She fumbled with the fly of his jeans and he growled in warning. He abhorred incompetence. A sigh escaped his lips when she pulled his flaccid cock from his pants. Pity the poor fool—she could no longer get him going, but her fear and anxiety were doing wonders for his abilities where her skill failed.

Diego fisted a hand in her hair and yanked hard, bringing tears to her dark eyes. His cock hardened as her emotions wrapped around him, feeding him on a whole other level.. The Hexad—he'd just name her Bitch, it was easier to say and think—played with his penis with trembling fingers. He shook his head; this would never do.

"Suck it," he ordered, pulling harder on her hair.

Bitch obliged by opening her wobbly mouth wide and taking his semi-hard dick into the heated cavern. She moved her head back and forth—with some guidance from Diego's hands—but still she couldn't make him feel enough to harden it further. Then she nipped him with her teeth.

"You stupid bitch!" He back-handed her, knocking her across the room. Never taking his eyes from her, he lifted his hand and pointed to the far corner. With a crook of his finger, he ordered, "Come."

Renaldo stepped out of the shadows and moved to stand in front of his master. He was such a pretty boy with his wavy, golden locks—and Diego liked pretty boys. Hell, he liked them all. Pretty boys, beautiful girls—it didn't matter to him.

Diego touched the other man's shoulder and Renaldo automatically dropped to his knees and took up where the woman left off. "Show her how it's done, my boy."

"Yes, master," Renaldo replied around a mouth full of hardening cock.

The boy was good. Not near enough fear in him, but he had one very talented mouth. The perfect amount of suction, just the right pressure with his tongue and the faintest of scrapping with his teeth... Ah yes, the boy certainly knew what he was doing.



Renaldo sucked and licked at the head of Diego's cock as he pumped his hand along the lower shaft. With his free hand, the younger man cupped Diego's balls, rolling them gently between his fingers.

The telling build of pressure behind his scrotum told Diego he was close to orgasm. He placed a hand on Renaldo's shoulder and squeezed, letting the other man know to stop.

Renaldo lifted his head, a questioning gleam in his eyes. "I displease you?"

Diego shook his head. "No, but I have other plans." He turned his gaze to Bitch huddled in the corner, her hand cupping the cheek he'd struck. His fangs distended as he watched her with intent in his eyes. She shuddered visibly. Oh yes, this would be good.

Bitch tried to crawl away but he caught her by the hips and jerked her back against him. He smacked her on the ass, enjoying her startled cry as it resonated through him.

"Enough," he whispered, causing her struggles to instantly cease. Although her body was motionless, he felt her mind race as it processed the situation she was now in. The spell of immobility he'd cast only fanned the flames of her fear. A side effect he rather enjoyed.

"Renaldo." The other man was instantly at his side, rubbing oil along the long shaft of Diego's cock. "That's a good boy." Praise wasn't something he did often, but Renaldo had proved one of his better acquisitions.

The younger man moved away and Diego smiled evilly as he rubbed the tip of his cock between the crack of Bitch's ass. She whimpered despite the entrapment spell, but he didn't care. Let her cry, whimper and moan to her heart's content. It wouldn't change a thing.

"I think a cigarette is in order, Renaldo," Diego purred, raking his nails along the woman's hips.

Renaldo reappeared at his side in seconds, a lit and smoking cigarette in his hand.

A cruel smile twisted Diego's mouth as he took the smoke and pressed the burning tip to her skin. She screamed, the sound echoing off the walls. Her pain and fear tightened his cock, making it harder. He'd make her last night one he wouldn't soon forget.

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Renaldo watched Diego toy with the creature that was once a beautiful woman with a heavy heart. Helplessly, he'd watched as Diego changed her from her once human form into a creature more loathsome than what he, himself, had become. His gaze never wavered from Diego. He hated the sadistic bastard, but what could he do about it? Diego had sired him and was definitely the stronger of the two. The things he did just to survive made his stomach churn. He fought down the bile rising in his throat. *Can't show weakness.* Diego would swoop down on him so fast he'd wish he'd never been born.

He watched in morbid fascination as his sire fucked the girl in the ass repeatedly while hitting and pinching her between thrusts. She screamed in pain each time he touched the lit cigarette to her skin or raked his claws into her flesh. It was enough to make him want to walk out and greet the dawn, but Diego never let him far enough away to pull it off. Fortunately, he'd learned to hide a tiny portion of his mind from the other man, giving him at least some peace in a world filled with pain and torment.

Diego's sadistic fascination with the woman didn't last nearly long enough to suit Renaldo's tastes, though he was sure it lasted way too long for her. The girl no longer held Diego's interest and that was bad—very bad. He feared what would happen to her in the coming hours before dawn.

“Take her,” Diego ordered, pulling him from his thoughts.

Renaldo swallowed, keeping his eyes lowered in submission as he approached the disheveled bed against the wall and the sobbing girl who lay curled in a ball all battered, bruised and burned. If only he could mask her pain for her, but Diego would know and make it all the worse on her—and him. Resigning himself to what he must do, Renaldo pulled the girl closer and began to fuck her as Diego watched with an evil grin plastered on his horrid face.

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Alexis moved her body in time to the music, dancing her way through the crowd. People moved out of her way almost as if they could feel her power leeching out into the air, though she knew it wasn't. The Slayers were a talented group of individuals. Any display of power could tip them off and be potentially fatal—for one or the other of them.

This wasn't a night for bloodshed. This was a night for mending old wounds, for forging new alliances no matter how unlikely they were.

She paused to dance with a young man who flashed a pretty smile her way. Alexis lowered her lashes, dipping her head down as she swayed her hips in the same rhythmic motions in which he moved his own behind her. His growing cock slid against her ass, increasing the sexual need simmering just below the surface within her.

Spinning around, she trailed her finger along his jaw line and blew him a kiss before disappearing into the crowd. She made her way ever closer to the table where Dalton and his men sat bragging about the day's kills.

It was easy to get caught up in the fever consuming the room. The hard, rhythmic pulse of the music was far more intoxicating than the sweetest of wines and more than just a little sexual in feel. She twisted and writhed her way through the crowd as they swayed in time with the beat.

The one thing Alexis never figured out was why she needed the help of a human to defeat her sire. Diego wasn't an ancient by far, though she wouldn't deny he was certainly more powerful than she. He had at least a couple centuries on her, though she had learned fast. Where her powers lacked, her skill as a fighter reigned. Behind her iron will lay the promise of regained humanity once the fatal blow was dealt, and she fully intended to be the one to deal that blow.

It was that grim determination that had her pushing her way across a crowded dance floor to seduce a man, a human man who just so happened to be the Master Slayer, into helping her. The thought of asking him for help made her stomach churn, but who was she to deny the Moirae? If they said she needed him, then by the gods she needed him. Even if the thought left a bad taste in her mouth.

From where she stood she caught an occasional glimpse of the beast she hunted. As bodies bounced and twitched from side to side, they moved out of her line of sight just long enough to allow her gaze to fall upon him. As far as she could tell, he was a rather handsome brute. Though the two had never actually met face to face, she'd heard the stories of the great hunter of vampires. He left none standing when he attacked during their weakest hours, killing indiscriminately all who were in his wake.

Again, her stomach churned. She knew first hand about his indiscriminate ways. Paul, her companion, had been murdered by his hand—the first kill of many for a career murderer.

She could have easily killed him that morning since his guard was down and his attention focused elsewhere, but Maximal had intervened. Now she understood why the elder Nosferatu had stopped her. The fact she needed him didn't lessen her distaste of the man a single bit, but if this was to work and work properly, she'd have to hide her hatred until her task was completed. Then she'd kill him.

Her heart thundered in anticipation and her muscles tensed. A familiar prick in her gums warned of descending fangs. She paused to close her eyes and willed them to retract. This hunt wasn't for the kill, as much as the thought displeased her. Nosferatu—the vampire—and humans didn't mix.. The last time she befriended a human, things had ended very badly. She lived with the consequences of that interaction each and every day of her existence.

With the reaffirmation this wasn't a hunt, her fangs retracted and Alexis opened her eyes. She blew out a deep breath. Cautiously, she placed one foot in front of the other and made her way through the pulsing mob of humans writhing around her. It took all her willpower to control her natural urges. Thankfully, Simon's drinks had helped to sate her hunger, if only on a temporary basis. If she screwed up and revealed her true self to the Slayer too soon, all hope of defeating Diego would die with the large man sitting at the table, unaware he was being stalked.

*Damn it!* No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get the thought of a hunt out of her mind. If she harmed so much as a hair on his head, the Fates would never forgive her and would most likely do something drastic as punishment. Contrary to popular belief, the Nosferatu were not immortal, nor were they invincible. They had just as many weaknesses as the humans did, only her kind were much better at staying clear of those weaknesses—most of the time. Being in the club at the moment was a major weakness for Alexis. She was cycling and the need for sex was far greater than at any other time of the month, though with luck this would be the last night of her cycle. Damn the moon and the foul things it did with a woman's hormones, be her human or not. And damn the Slayer for finding it necessary to boast about his day's kill in a room full of highly sexual beings.

She hoped she wasn't sweating. Dots of blood on her forehead and cheeks at this moment wouldn't be a good thing. Normally, she was quite good at controlling her body's temperature and her thoughts, but the rush of hormones racing through her veins made the normally simple task even harder.. Alexis licked her dry lips and hovered at the edge of the crowded dance floor, waiting for the music to change. She didn't have long to wait.

The new rhythm that filled the air had a Latin feel to it. The pulsing tunes were fast and hard, enveloping her with its invigorating and wildly intoxicating beats. She moved to the very edge of the dance floor and carefully wrapped herself around one of the numerous poles surrounding the smooth, hardwood area. Alexis swirled around before spinning out away from the brass post toward the Slayers' table. She swiveled her hips and tossed her head back and forth, covering her face with the dark curtain of her hair. Her body gyrated and spun in time with the frantic pulse of the music. Completely lost in the dance, she no longer paid any mind to the man sitting at the table.

She returned to the dance floor where a small group of dancers had paused to watch her move. A tall, dark-haired man with a trim build joined her in the semicircle, pulling her close against his body. His heartbeat caused the front of his loose, black silk shirt to jump. The

sound thundered and echoed in her ears, even over the loud, consuming music. Alexis closed her eyes and lost herself in the dance once more, trying to drown out the hypnotic beat of his heart.

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Dalton sat with his back to the wall, ignoring his men as he watched the room. He didn't trust people, regardless if they were human or not. He didn't get to where he was in life by leaving himself open for an attack, even in a crowded room.

His gaze roved over the crowd, watching for anyone or anything that stood out, as if it didn't belong in this place so full of life. And then he saw *her*. She danced as if there was no tomorrow and he found himself drawn to her. The black leather outfit she wore clung to her body like a second skin. The laced up bustier pushed her breasts up high and closer together as it left a good section of the creamy, rounded twin peaks exposed to his eyes.

Her hips swayed in time to the music as she dipped and swirled with the rhythm. A man with her on the dance floor placed his hands on those deliciously curved hips. Dalton wanted to rip them away and lay claim to this woman. He paused, noting for the first time he was in the process of standing even though he hadn't realized he'd moved. What had come over him? He narrowed his eyes at the woman across the room. Even from this distance he could tell her skin had a healthy hue to it. Maybe the lack of a bed partner had finally gotten to him.

"Where you going, boss?" Santos chuckled, no doubt laughing at his odd behavior.

"To the dance floor."

"But you don't dance," Adams piped in.

Dalton shrugged. There was a first time for everything. He couldn't deny he very much enjoyed the way her body moved. It sang to him, much like a siren's call and he couldn't wait to get closer, to feel the skin that looked so silky and sweet from across the way.

Each step toward her was painful, his cock growing harder and harder with each sway and shake of her hips. He ran his tongue along the back of his teeth to keep from licking his lips at the thought of that sweet little thing writhing underneath his body in a large, rumped bed.

He moved right up behind her gyrating body, so close he could smell the aromatic, fruity scent of her hair with a hint of jasmine and lavender surrounding her as well. Drawing in a deep breath, he inhaled her arousing scents into his body, savoring the taste of her on his tongue. Damn, she was hot.

She suddenly turned and bumped into him, gasping at the contact. He smiled and from the uneasy look on her face, assumed it must have been a predatory one. But he wasn't going to hold anything back with this one. He wanted her and he would have her, no matter what it took. If he had to plow over her like a bulldozer, then so be it. But she *would* be his.

He reached up and traced his finger over her forehead. "Why the long look?" For some strange reason he couldn't explain, she seemed...familiar to him.

"You just startled me, is all.." She tilted her head and looked up at him with a sly smile on her lips. "I had hoped you'd decide to join me."

"Is that so?" This was getting more interesting by the minute. He slid his finger down the side of her face, along her jaw and down her neck to the soft swell of her breasts. She shuddered beneath his touch and his smile broadened. Oh, she was ripe for the picking. This

one he would savor for the whole night, never mind the fact he hadn't come in here looking for a bed partner. He moved his hands to her hips and jerked her up against him as he lowered his head to her ear. "I want you," he growled.

He felt her body tremble. "I can tell." She lifted her gaze to his, her dark eyes flashing. Then she did something that surprised him. She licked his cheek as she cupped his hardening length in her hand.

"Mmm," she practically purred. "You taste good." She pulled her hand away from his crotch and backed up a step. "Care to dance?"

"I don't dance," he replied.

"Such a pity." She made a pouty face up at him. "It isn't hard. All you have to do is sway with the music." Putting words to action, she demonstrated by spinning around and grinding her ass against his growing cock. "Mmm, so big," she murmured then spun around to face him. "I have a question for you, cowboy."

He shook his head. "I'm no cowboy but ask away.."

"Do you have a place for us to go? Or do you plan to fuck me right here in the middle of the dance floor?"

He threw his head back and laughed, ignoring the curious stares from the dancers nearby. This woman had gall that was for sure. He dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a key. "I have a room though I'm sure they wouldn't mind the show. I could probably teach you a few tricks."

She snatched the key from between his fingers and smiled demurely up at him. "I dunno about that. I'm no novice."

He narrowed his eyes as he took another good look at her. She looked so...young. "How old are you?"

"Old enough to know better and young enough not to care," came her pert response.

"Seriously."

"Thirty-three."

He shook his head. "You don't look it."

She shrugged a slender shoulder, drawing his eye to the smooth lines of her throat. Her pale skin appeared healthy and yet was in perfect contrast to her ebony hair and the jet-black leather outfit she wore.

"The offer stands, cowboy. If you're still interested?"

"Oh, I'm interested all right."

She smiled. "Then, by all means, lead the way."

A tiny tremor of power weaved its way through the club like the deathly fingers of a skeleton. It slowly grew in intensity until it beat at the mental blocks surrounding his mind. Dalton paused, his gaze moving over the crowd in search of the source.

*Vampire!*

*Damn, shit, fuck!* He mentally went through a list of his favorite words. Of all the fucking times for one to show up, it had to be now. Right when he was about to become the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the club. Oh, this was one kill he'd thoroughly enjoy.

He grabbed the small woman before him by the shoulders and made her look up into his eyes. "Whatever you do, do *not* leave this club until I get back. Do you hear me? I mean it. It's not safe out there right now. When I'm done, I'll come back for you."

Dalton started to move away and then quickly moved back to her side. For some reason beyond him, he kissed her on the forehead. Releasing her, he rushed over to the table where his men were and grabbed up his jacket, sliding into it. "Let's go," he said in a gruff voice to his crew before leading the way through the crowd to the exit. They had a blood-sucking vampire to hunt and when he found the bastard, it'd be sorry it chose this particular club as a feasting ground tonight.

The cold air outside hit him across the face like someone's hand, but he didn't let it faze him. He was on the hunt and when in hunting mode, nothing else seeped in. If he allowed himself to become distracted, it could mean his life or that of one of his men. He'd already lost so much since he first learned of the existence of vampires.. There was no way he'd lose more, if he could help it.

## Chapter Four

Alexis stood with her mouth open, staring after the man who'd just kissed her on the forehead like she was some ninny. She wasn't quite sure what pissed her off more, his dismissing her as helpless or the asshole who just ruined her night and three months' worth of planning. Ironically stomping her foot on the floor like some spoilt mindless bimbo, she spun on her heel and stalked to the bar, smiling grimly as the crowd parted like the Red Sea to allow her passage. Simon held up her jacket when he spotted her coming his way.

"What happened?" She jerked her jacket out of his grasp, slipped it on and pushed Dalton's key into its pocket.

"Didn't you feel it?"

"I think everyone did," he replied, darting his gaze over the crowd who acted as though they hadn't just been in danger.

"I'm going to rip the bloody bastard's heart out," she said through clenched teeth, pulling her hair out from between her jacket and her back. She'd been so close to getting Dalton right where she wanted him and then some asshole on a power trip had to go and ruin it for her. He was so dead as soon as she found him. If the horse's ass was dumb enough to barge into a crowded nightclub with slayers inside, then he deserved to die.. She knew the fuckwit was a male. It was hard to miss the hint of masculine arrogance that had gone out in the summons.

"Be careful," Simon said for the second time that night as she turned away and stalked through the maze of tables.

*Fuck careful.* She was out for blood. Her anger festered deep inside her, boiling until she could barely contain it. Fangs descended and she curled her tongue up around one, enjoying the sharp prick of it against her flesh. Her tumultuous emotions took over calm rationality. She'd rather enjoy ripping out some idiot's heart and feeding it to him before it stopped beating.

Her anger was so intense, she didn't even say goodbye to Andre. A couple opened the door and she barged right through them, ignoring their startled cries. She was on the prowl, and if they knew what was good for them, they'd stay the hell out of her way.

She paused out on the sidewalk and closed her eyes. Instead of clearing her mind, images of Dalton flooded her mind. His 'Got Milk?' t-shirt had been pulled taut across his massive chest, stretched to the hilt at his muscular arms. The denims he wore showed his legs to perfection, clinging to him as if made especially for his lithe limbs. Her mouth watered just thinking about the man and damn it, she wasn't supposed to.. Attraction to this man was not a part of the plan.

Her eyes flew open and a growl rumbled out of her throat. The boy she recalled from twenty years ago was no more. Why had that never occurred to her? The boy she could have dealt with. The dark-haired, blue-eyed man and the desire he had burning within her...she wasn't so sure about.

Banishing Dalton from her mind, she again closed her eyes and focused on the trail of power the careless one had left behind. With a sense of direction, she opened her eyes and slipped into the shadows of the alley running alongside Olympus. This was going to be too

easy.

Alexis moved within the darkness as if born to it. She zipped and zigzagged through the alleys and side streets, always on the hunt. A slight tremor of power told her she was close. She slowed her step, paused, and then stepped out into the pale stream of light pouring from the streetlamp on the corner.

A faint splash of water and a soft step on the pavement sounded behind her and Alexis smiled. She relaxed her stance, ready to strike.

The air stirred ever so slightly at her back. Alexis spun so fast his surprised gasp barely had time to slip past his lips before she slammed him against the building's brick wall. His feet dangled inches from the ground and his fingers dug at hers, frantically trying to loosen her grip on his throat.

She tilted her head, her fangs bared, and hissed as she glared up at him. Inhaling deeply, she wrinkled her nose. "You reek of the grave," she growled. Nosferatu weren't really dead, though fledglings often slept in graves to escape the sun's deadly rays.

"So young. So careless.." She increased the pressure of her fingers around his neck until his eyes bulged and he pulled harder at her fingers.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't stake you myself. That place was full of slayers, you idiot!"

She loosened her grip only enough for him to speak. "I was hungry," he gasped.

Alexis closed her eyes and prayed for patience.. "When were you made?" she asked as she dropped him.

The boy crumpled to the ground, a hand at his throat as he continued to gasp for air. "Three days ago. I've eaten nothing yet."

She sighed. For reasons unknown she felt sorry for him. Of course, she had been in his shoes – once – long, long ago.

Her gaze roamed over him from the top of his red head to the bottoms of his big feet. He looked no more than a kid and carried himself with a painful lack of confidence. Reaching into her inside pocket, she pulled out a card and handed it to him. "Go here. Use the back door and give them this card. They'll see to it you get something to eat and a place to stay until you learn the necessary skills."

She turned to walk away, but paused, pinning him with a malevolent glare. "Just remember, whatever you do, don't kill when you feed or you'll have me to contend with."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," he said in a rush of words before he disappeared into the darkness.

Alexis rubbed her forehead. She had a killer headache. A noise sounded just around the corner. She could detect the faint scent of alcohol mingled with soap on the night breeze. Dalton was close. Wiping the tension off her face, she relaxed her features and took on a dazed look before turning to stumble back down the alley toward the club.

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Of all the fucking times to have a blood-sucker show up. Just when he was on the verge of getting exactly what – no, *who* he wanted. He only hoped she'd kept her sweet little ass in the club like he'd told her to. However, as soon as he rounded the corner, all those hopes died a horrible painful death; she stood before him looking dazed and confused.

"Hey boss, ain't that your lady from the club?" Adams elbowed him in the ribs.



He glared at the other man before turning his gaze back to her. "What the hell is she doing out here?" he asked of no one in particular. "I specifically told her to stay put."

"Go get her, boss," one of his men murmured under his breath.

He spun and glared at the lot, uncertain who exactly had spoken. Narrowing his eyes, he pointed to each and every one of them. "Watch yourselves."

Dalton moved forward as fast as he could without actually running and grabbed her by the shoulders. Jerking her around to face him, he stared into her dark, dazed eyes and inspected her neck for puncture marks. Nothing. His breath sighed out in relief.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

She shook her head, causing her long, wavy and incredibly-dark hair to dance around her beautiful face.

"Didn't I tell you to stay inside?" He shook her as fear and frustration mingled to cloud his judgment.

"I...I don't know how I got out here," she weakly stammered.

He pulled her against him and ran his hands over her back. "Did you see anyone out here?"

He felt her head shake and her voice vibrate against his chest as she answered. "No. No one but you."

His heart thundered in his chest. Emotions washed over him as he reacted to this woman in a way he hadn't experienced in years. He closed his eyes to ward off the still painful memories.

He'd been eighteen. Fresh out of school, newly married to his high school sweetheart with a baby on the way. So many dreams for the future and all shattered on that one fateful night. If only he'd come straight home instead of going out to play pool with the guys from school. Maybe then Isabelle wouldn't have died alone at the hands of monsters.

He mentally shook himself. No, she hadn't died at the hands of a monster. She'd died at his hands. The creature had left her for him to deal with.

Dalton opened his pain-filled eyes and stared over the head of the woman he held in his arms. That was the past. His reason for being. And she wasn't Isabelle, though in a small way she reminded him of his long, lost wife.

"Umm...boss?" Santos asked, jerking him from his painful memories.

He lifted his head and turned to gaze at his men. "Think y'all can handle patrolling for that thing on your own?" There was no way he would say vampire in front of her. She'd had enough of a shock for one night. Hell, most of the population believed vamps to be nothing more than a myth, a legend. If only they'd seen the horrors he'd lived over the years.

"Sure boss," they responded in unison.

Dalton turned her back toward the club. "Let's go get you a drink."

She shook her head. "I think it was the drink that got me into this mess in the first place."

He looked down at her, noting the sparkle in her eyes.

"Oh, really? And what type of drink was that?"

"Water. Don't you know they put all types of horrid things in the drinking water today?"

She sounded so serious it was all he could do not to laugh. Instead, he nodded his head

knowingly. "Oh, I know. I think they do it just to make sure we're on our toes."

She smiled. "See, I knew you'd understand."

"Then how about that dance you wanted so bad?"

She tilted her head and looked up at him. "I seem to recall you saying you don't dance."

He nodded again. "True."

"Besides, I don't think I'm up to going back in. I'm still not even sure how I got out here.." He heard her sigh as she finished speaking.

"I can walk you to your car."

Her dark head shook once more. "No car," she sadly replied. "I took a cab here."

"Well, since you don't want to go back inside, we can't use the phone in there, and I don't think it's safe to use the pay phones out here. We could always go back to my room up the street and use the phone there to call you a cab.." Dalton neglected to mention the cell phone in his pocket, its ring tone set to vibrate..

She lifted her gaze to his. "Sounds like a plan. Only one problem."

A problem? What problem? Now she had him worried.

"I don't even know your name."

His name. Was that all? "Jonathan Dalton, ma'am. Though most either call me Eli or Dalton."

She raised a brow. "Eli?"

Heat crept into his cheeks. What in hell was wrong with him? "Middle name."

"Well, Dalton has a rather catchy ring to it. So, it's a pleasure meeting you, Dalton. I'm Alexis."

"And does Alexis have a last name?"

She pulled out from underneath his arm, moved a few steps ahead and turned around to walk backward while facing him. "Nope," she replied, making a slight popping sound with her lips as she emphasized the word.

A giggle filtered into the night as she spun back around, threw her head back and her arms out at her sides.

Dalton felt in his pocket for his room key only to find it missing. He patted over each and every pocket on his person.

"Lose something?" she whispered in his ear. He hadn't even realized she'd moved.

"Yeah, the room key."

It dangled before his eyes and she waggled her eyebrows. He snatched it from her fingers, grabbed her by the hand and led her away from the club's front.

The only thing he had left to figure out now was how to keep her from calling for a ride. He wanted that woman between the sheets, not the seats. The question was how to get her there.

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Alexis could practically see the wheels turning in Dalton's head. He was too easy, the poor, unsuspecting fool. He didn't have the faintest idea of what he was getting into, but then again, that was the whole point. She could have saved a lot of time and trouble by just writing him a letter, detailing the whole kit and caboodle about what was going on and mailing it to him. Instead, she laid out an elaborate plan with her good friend Melyn to lure him into town,

seduce him, and talk him into helping her destroy a monster. A fairly good plan if she did say so herself. Now, she only hoped he cooperated.

Alexis glanced over her shoulder at the big, hulking man. Damn, if he didn't make her mouth water with those sinful eyes and that super sexy, sensual mouth of his.. Oh, this seduction thing was such torture on her poor soul – not! There was absolutely no way in hell she was going to call a cab – not that she really needed one. It was the only thing she could come up with on the spur of the moment. Of course, running around in the chilly night was never a part of the plan. Damn, red-headed fledgling.

She turned back to face forward and clamped down on the anger that began to boil to the surface all over again. Her fangs just itched to spring forth but she wasn't having any part of it. Now wasn't the time to get all toothy.

"What's your room number?" she asked, feeling giddy all the sudden.

"It's written on the key."

She leaned her head back and glanced at him, giggling at how funny he looked upside down. "Which you now have," she pointed out.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I suppose I do. Room two-thirteen.."

There just had to be a thirteen in there somewhere, didn't it? Not that she was superstitious, but still...so went the way of her luck. At least it was a Mage-owned establishment. What could possibly happen with all the safeguards and protection spells they had going?

Alexis leaned against the side of the building as he slid the key into the lock. A shudder made its way through her as she pictured his cock sliding into her muff. She really needed to gain at least a semblance of control over herself. Staying in control was the only way she could be certain she didn't get all fangy on him or start sweating blood – neither of which would be a good thing.

The scent of soap mingled with his natural, masculine aroma wafted up to tease her nostrils. She wondered if he knew the soap he used to shower left such a tell-tale sign in his wake. Maybe she'd remember to mention it to him at a later date.

The door opened with a click and Dalton pushed it open then stood aside to allow her to enter first. The room was small, its carpet a funky mix of green and brown hues. Two full-sized beds took up the majority of the room's space, with a small beside table between them upon which a lamp, telephone and TV remote were placed. A very small round table and two chairs sat by the window with a bowl of fruit in the middle, and across from the door was a sink and mirrored wall behind it. The bathroom had to be through the door next to the sink.

The only other thing in the room was a mirror-less, multi-drawer dresser that the TV sat on opposite the beds. It looked cheap, but then again that was the whole point. A cheap place for those down on their luck to stay in, so as not to fall victim to the baddies that went bump in the night.

Alexis ran her tongue over her teeth, more out of habit than anything. Her fangs were safely retracted and out of way. The room smelled remarkably clean, surprising her. She'd have guessed it would smell like old sex. The Mages must use magick to clean the rooms; it was the only explanation that worked.

"The phone's over there if you'd like to call a cab," Dalton said, pointing toward the black device.

"Thanks." Now what? She had no intention of calling a cab. Positioning herself between him and the phone, she carefully and quietly removed the phone line from the back and dropped it behind the table. Alexis pressed in a series of numbers, frowned and held the phone out to him. "It doesn't seem to be working."

Dalton snatched it away and held it up to his ear as he jabbed at the button on the cradle. "That's odd. It was working earlier." He replaced it and turned to face her. "I guess we could walk down to the front desk and see if theirs is working."

Alexis shrugged one shoulder. "I'm not really in any hurry, unless you're trying to get rid of me, that is."

His dark head shook. "No hurry at all."

She smiled, grabbed a banana from beside the phone, and moved around the bed to stand before the mirror. Her golden skin seemed to glow as heat flooded her system. No one would ever guess she never saw the sun by looking at her. Humans were so easy. They had no idea how they helped her and her kind to blend in better amongst them by creating tans in a bottle. The sun was no longer required to 'fit' in. If only her eyes were still the brilliant green of her youth instead of the obsidian of her now unnatural life.

Dalton moved behind her, drawing her attention to his reflection in the mirror. She'd never been more glad a vampire myth was nothing more than bullshit. Where had the idea that Nosferatu could cast no reflection even originated? Light certainly didn't pass through her body rendering her invisible to mirrors. Only Wraiths were gifted with that talent.

Slowly, she turned away from the mirror and focused on the task at hand. How to seduce a slayer into sleeping with the enemy and then vowing to help her to destroy a monster and regain her humanity? Okay, so maybe she shouldn't mention the last part to him—yet.

Alexis removed her jacket and tossed it onto the bed. She leaned back against the vanity, levered herself up and slid her ass back onto the smooth, cool countertop. Slowly spreading her legs wide as Dalton stood watching, a smile spread across her lips at the look on his face. At least she knew she had his attention.

She ran her hands over her legs, dragging one beneath her short skirt as he watched with a rapt expression on his face. Her tongue darted out to moisten her dry lips and she swung her feet gently. With a tilt of her head, she watched him closely as she moved her hand between her legs to where she wore no panties and slid her fingers between the damp folds.

His intake of breath was audible as she pushed three fingers into her wet sheath and pumped them lightly, a soft moan escaping her lips. She pulled them out and rubbed them against her clit, then raised her fingers to her lips and sucked them inside her mouth with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

## Chapter Five

*Damn...* A huge grin spread across his lips. He had hoped for a good, hot fuck tonight, but he hadn't actually expected to get it! This woman was far more than he'd ever imagined.

Had she really just caressed her muff with her fingers and then licked them? Maybe there really had been something in the drinks at the club. Either that or he was the luckiest son-of-a-bitch ever – and he liked to think he was just *that* lucky.

He watched her long, leather clad legs swing beneath her as she sat there, spread open for him to see, on the countertop. Well, he'd thought of nothing but fucking her since he'd first spotted her in the crowd. Now was his chance. So what in hell was he waiting for?

Shrugging out of his jacket, he tossed it onto the bed farthest from the door. The only thought in his head was of getting a piece of that extremely fine, super-hot ass sitting by the sink. His feet propelled him forward before he realized it. It was like lust had reached out her invisible hands, grabbed him by the dick and dragged him toward the woman before him.

She held up her small hand, palm toward him and shook her head.

"But..." he began. He *so* wanted to argue. To hell with waiting, but something in her dark eyes made him pause.

She clucked her tongue at him. "Patience, my dear man," she murmured in a husky voice.

That's when he noticed what she held in her other hand – a large, ripe banana. She held it up before her, wiggling it between her thumb and forefinger before grasping it in her fingers. Alexis slid the nubby end of the fruit between her labia, which she now held open with her other hand. She pulled it out slowly then pushed it back in, over and over as he watched.

Her dark head fell back as the yellow fruit disappeared into her sheath. Dalton groaned. He'd been with many women over the years, and some would do damned near anything for attention, but this had to be a first.. She pumped the banana in and out of her muff while working at her clit with the fingers of her other hand. Harder and faster her hand holding the object moved, their jerky motions telling him as much. Her breathing changed, coming in quick little gasps as she worked her way toward an orgasm.

Dalton unbuttoned his fly and pulled the zipper undone before shoving the denim down his legs. He stooped over to quickly remove his shoes and step out of his jeans.

His hand moved to his stiff cock and slid up and down its length as he watched her perform her little show just for him. God how he wanted to bury himself to the hilt inside her.

Alexis moaned loudly, her entire body shuddering before his very eyes. She lifted her head and gazed at him through dark, misty eyes. With a wicked smile, she pulled the fruit from her body, rotated it and held the banana out to him. "Wanna try?"

Dalton was on his feet and standing in front of her before she'd even finished the question. His cock bobbed before him, aching to feel her wrapped around him. He moved in between her legs, gripping her knees in his hands. "Teasing?"

She shook her head and her hair danced around her face and shoulders. "Just playing a little and taste testing," she murmured in a husky voice. Her arm moved and then her fingers were at her lips, glistening in the light from overhead before she sucked them into her mouth.

“Mmm.”

He stuck the banana in his mouth and sucked her juices off its firm length. If the sweet, womanly flavor assaulting his taste buds was any indication, she was already wet and more than ready for him. He pushed his hands up higher on her legs, shoving her skirt further up on her thighs as her free hand gripped his shoulder and pressed down.

Dalton withdrew from the banana she still held and smiled as he dropped to his knees and buried his face in her warm, wet muff. Her thighs pressed against the sides of his head and her hands fisted in his hair. Her sweet moans and gasps for breath were music to his ears.

He thrust his tongue in and out of her channel as he wrapped his arms around her legs and pulled her tighter against him. Her hips arched up, opening her further to his exploring tongue.

Dalton pulled back for a quick breath and then dove back in. Her juices flowed around him, mingled with his own saliva. He flicked her clit with his tongue before nipping at it gently with his teeth.

“Harder,” she cried, pushing his head down against her wet folds.

Sucking the obviously sensitive nub into his mouth, he pressed his teeth down over it even harder as she demanded, enjoying the way she squirmed and wiggled against him.

“Bite me harder.”

He groaned at her request. *Damn, she's a wild one.* Dalton opened his mouth and bit at the plump lips of her pussy. He licked and sucked and tongue-fucked her until he had her mewling like a cat and kneading her fingers in his hair.

Alexis wrapped her hand around him, pumping his shaft as he leaned forward and captured her lips. She rubbed her finger over the swollen head, causing it to jerk in reaction. He shoved his tongue into the warm, moist cavern of her mouth, encountering a strange tangy taste.

He tried to analyze the flavor, but her other hand slid around his hip and grabbed his ass, pulling him closer. Her soft breasts pressed into his chest, reminding him of just how fragile looking she was.

Dalton trailed his kisses across the side of her face and down to her neck. He nipped at the smooth lines of her throat, swirled his tongue over her throbbing pulse and sucked against her skin.

“Bite me,” she huskily requested.

He clamped his teeth down at the base of her neck where the shoulder began.

“Harder.”

Dalton increased the pressure and thrust his cock into her wet channel. Her head fell back and she screamed as he pumped his hips against her. God she was hot and tight and felt so fucking good wrapped around him that he never wanted it to end—or to let her go. Maybe she'd slipped something into his drink, though that was ridiculous since she'd never even been close to his table. The woman was addictive in a major way—and he didn't like addictions.

He pulled his hips back and thrust them forward again, enjoying the jagged little cries the movement ripped from her throat. Dalton focused on the moment, shoving the questions and niggling voice at the back of his head from his mind. The only thing he wanted to think about was fucking her brains out and dealing with the consequences, whatever they may be,

later.

No matter how deep he thrust into her, how much of his cock she took into that sweet little muff of hers, it wasn't enough. He simply couldn't get close enough. One little taste of heaven, and he craved – no, needed more.

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Alexis felt the heat rising within her body. The familiar sting in her eyes warned they were glowing. The pinch in her gums signaled the sprouting of her fangs. *What the hell?* Sex with a human had never triggered the need to feed before, just as feeding from a human – what rare times she did – never triggered the need for sex.

She leaned back with a gasp to stare at the man straining to maintain control as he worked her up to an orgasm before allowing himself the pleasure. Reading minds wasn't a power she possessed, but the look on his handsome face spoke louder than any words could have. Was it possible he cared?

Thoughts and questions swirled in her mind, but she forced them aside and let the feeling of his hard cock ramming into her to overtake her. She dug her claws into his shoulders, refusing to lean against him for fear her primal urges would overtake her senses. She couldn't allow herself to feed from him. He couldn't know what she was yet – she needed his help.

The tension built within her until it shattered, wracking her body with wave after wave of mind-numbing pleasure. Her breath jerked in at the look in Dalton's eyes when he lifted his head to look at her.

A smile curved his wet lips and his grip tightened on her thighs. He withdrew from her, all but the head, and then surged forward, forcing the air from her lungs. His hips pounded against hers, hard and deep. She felt the tip of his cock brush against the opening to her womb and the way it jerked in reaction. Alexis ground her teeth together to control the urge to sink her fangs into the pulsing flesh at his throat.

"Damn, you're hot," he ground out.. Without another word, he jerked her against him – hard. His cock still buried deep within her, he lifted her and moved to the nearest bed.

She landed on the semi-soft mattress and bounced with the force of their bodies landing on the springy surface. Metal slid against metal. Alexis jerked as the light glinted off the silvery blade that he suddenly held in his hand.

"Now, to get this out of the way." He wedged one large hand between her skin and the corset then sliced the laces from the leather.

Alexis gasped. That was her favorite top! She furrowed her brow and then cool air washed across her warmed skin. All thoughts of being pissed over the corset long forgotten, she arched her back, enticing him with her breasts. Oh how she wanted his mouth on her. With the magick he'd created on her muff with them earlier, she couldn't imagine what he'd do to her breasts.

"So beautiful," he murmured, flicking a pert nipple with his fingertip. He smiled then sucked the sensitive, pebbly nub into his mouth. "What do you want, Alexis?" he asked around her breast.

What *didn't* she want? The man was driving her insane. Her entire body felt more alive than it had – well, ever. She wanted to experience him any and every way there was for a man and woman to be together.

"Fuck me, Dalton. Fuck me hard."

*Yeah, that sounded good.* Her mind refused to think at the moment when all her body wanted to do was feel him inside her, around her—his skin sliding against her own. It had been good so far, but nowhere near enough. A Nosferatu could be damned near insatiable during a cycle—and she still had another day or two to go before hers was over.

He slid the tip of the knife between her breasts and down her stomach. Her flesh quivered beneath the cool metal. Dalton tugged at the waistband of her skirt.

Alexis quickly grabbed him around the wrist. "Don't cut the skirt." She stared at him through unblinking eyes, silently pleading with him. Force wasn't an option here, but if he didn't stop, she just might rethink the situation. She was already topless and very thankful for her jacket, but she'd be damned if he forced her to leave without her skirt, too.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and tossed the knife onto the table by the phone. "Suits me," he replied, slowly pulling the zipper at her hip down. He unhooked the zipper at the bottom and peeled the fabric back. "Now that's what I like to see."

He traced his fingertips over the intricate little black dragon tattoo on her hip before leaning over to run his tongue over it. She shivered beneath him.

"What about the boots?" She rubbed her leather clad leg against his bare hip.

"Leave them on. They're sexy."

He pulled back to stare down at her as Alexis slowly slid her hand up to cover the cross beneath her breast without seeming too obvious about it. If he saw that, the fun and games were over. He'd know what it was and what it stood for in a heartbeat.

"Beautiful," he murmured. He stood with his hands on his lean hips and his cock bobbing before him with each beat of his heart.

Alexis licked her lips and sat up as she forced her fangs to retract—a rather difficult task. "My turn.."

She leaned forward and licked the length of his cock from base to tip. Her own essence was mingled with the musky, salty taste of his making for one rather tongue-pleasing flavor.

Dalton made a strange little noise when she began to move her mouth up and down his length, her hand wrapped around the lower part of the shaft applying and releasing pressure. She swirled her tongue around the tip, biting down on his hard length with just enough force to make his cock pulse against the inside of her mouth. If her fangs hadn't pulled back in, this was an act she wouldn't have been able to perform without tipping him off to her true nature. His cock was just too thick, too big around to have fit between the two needle-sharp canines.

She sucked and pulled, nipped and laved at his cock. His juices flowed into her and made her body crave more.. His salty taste and the feel of his hard flesh pumping in and out of her mouth made her vagina clench with need. She needed him back inside her, filling her to the breaking point.

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Oh god, the woman was heaven in his arms. She knew just how to please a man and wasn't the least bit hesitant to do it. How'd he ever get so lucky?

He wrapped the long length of her wavy black hair around his fist and pulled her mouth up to his. His own taste clung to her lips, overriding her tangy sweetness. Dalton thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, seeking out her own unique taste.

She made him think of spices and honey. Her musky, womanly scent wrapped around



him like a fist, squeezing the breath out of his body. No matter how tightly pressed against him she was, he simply couldn't get her close enough to sate the unnatural hunger thriving within him. No matter how much she gave, he needed – wanted – more of her.

This woman in his arms was a total stranger, yet he felt strangely connected to her. The very thought shook him to the soles of his feet and once again the niggling in the back of his mind warned him this was too good to be true. Something about the entire thing wasn't adding up, but at the moment he didn't care. He wanted to be buried deep inside that warm, wet muff of hers and stay there until she was begging for mercy.

With great effort, he pulled his mouth away from hers and trailed kisses down her neck to her beautifully-made breasts. So large and firm, with dark inviting areolas, the nipples stood erect, begging for his attention.

Her body was heaven – silk and magick. He loved the way she wrapped herself around him, so eager to please and be pleased. Dalton slid his hand down the valley between her breasts.

Slowly, he pushed her back down to the mattress. He wanted her under him, her arms and legs wrapped around him as she tried to pull him closer, then he'd pound the hell out of her.

The light in the room glinted off something on her chest. He narrowed his eyes, holding himself up over her with one hand as he traced a finger down the silver chain. Odd how he hadn't noticed the necklace before.

Dalton moved the silver chain wrapped beneath her breast out of his way then leaned back to enjoy the sight of her large, beautiful unbound breasts. "What the fuck?" he muttered, furrowing his brow. He glanced up at her face and the confused look in her incredibly dark eyes. Odd how he hadn't noticed how very dark they were before now. He picked the silver cross up to closer inspect it. The Cross of Ignatius. His hand reached for the knife he'd placed by the phone.

## Chapter Six

Alexis' skin tingled beneath his calloused fingers. Cool metal slid against her chest and realization struck. His murmured words registered with startling clarity.

The overhead light glinted off metal as his hand lifted, a knife in its steely grip. She bucked her hips, knocking him off her body onto the floor as she leapt from the bed. She stood there watching him climb to his feet, knife still in hand, as he took on a fighter's stance and glared at her with suspicious eyes.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, pointing toward her heaving chest.

"What? This old thing?" She picked up the silver chain and dangled the charm from her fingers. Dalton jerked as she reached for her jacket. Alexis rolled her eyes at him. "If we're going to converse instead of fuck, then I'd prefer to do so while dressed."

"Where'd you get the fucking cross?" he demanded through clenched teeth.

She heard the steady thump, thump, thump of his heart, his even breathing. The man had remarkable control over his body. A real pity she hadn't been able to better test that rather delicious form of his. She buttoned her jacket and reached for her skirt, wrapping it around her waist and fastening the zipper.

"From my father," she replied with a straight face. Not the whole truth, but not exactly a lie, either.

"Bullshit. I want the truth and I want it now."

A movie line quickly came to mind, but she resisted the urge to quote it. She raised both brows at him. "Or what? You'll cut me with your little toy?" She batted her eyelashes demurely at him then threw her head back and laughed at the confused look on his face.

"There is no way your father could have given you *that* cross. How'd you get it?"

She smiled wickedly at him. Her lashes lowered as she watched him. "How do you think I got it, Dalton? You're a smart man. Use your brain." She put her hands on her hips and stared intently at him. "How does one go about acquiring such a unique item?"

"Impossible. You can't be."

"Why not? Because I'm female?" What was it with men thinking they were the only ones capable of hunting down evil? Of course, he had no clue there was such a thing as a 'good' Nosferatu.

"What do you know about the cross?"

Alexis wanted to scream. "Has the Sanctum really sunk to such a level of disparity that they have to hire complete morons?" She prayed to the gods the Moirae had been wrong in insisting she needed the help of *this* man to defeat Diego.

"I'm not a moron, but I do know about the slayers. And there's no way you can be one. There are *no* women slayers."

Her wicked grin returned and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Shows how very little you know, Dalton. Perhaps you should ask your boss about the subject.. Do not for one second believe they've told you everything there is to know.. Just as you shouldn't believe everything they tell you."

"What are you implying?"

She shook her head. "I'm not implying a single thing." The need to shake some sense

into the man was damned near overwhelming. "I'm flat out telling you the Sanctum is a bunch of liars."

This was getting her nowhere except angry. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a business card for Olympus, then threw it onto the floor. It had a little message for him she'd prepared in advance for just such an occasion, though she hadn't really expected the night to end so—abruptly.

She took her eyes off him for a just a moment, but apparently he'd felt it enough to try and take advantage of. Dalton rushed her. Alexis fell back with the impact and used his body's momentum against it, kicking him up and over her head. The air rushed from his lungs as he landed hard against the dresser, knocking the small television set from its precarious perch and busting it with a loud pop.

Alexis rolled to her feet and gazed down at him. "Nice try."

His heart rate picked up a little speed. "What are you?" he rasped out.

She raised both brows. "I'd have thought that obvious by now." To emphasize her point, she smiled, revealing her fangs.

"Vampire." The word lingered in the air, hurled at her like the worst curse imaginable.

"Nosferatu," she corrected.

"How'd you get the cross?"

"How'd you get yours?" Her smile never wavered as she watched him.

Dalton's heart rate kicked up another notch. So, the mighty hunter could lose his temper—interesting. She glanced down at his crotch. Pity. He'd covered that massive cock of his, but the bulge was still there. Was he getting turned on even more by all this by play?

"Whaddya say we strip naked and fuck?" she asked, playing on a hunch.

Dalton flinched and she pouted. "Guess that's a no then, huh?"

"As if I'd ever," he spat at her.

Alexis clucked her tongue and shook her finger at him. "Oh, but darling, you already have."

He lunged at her. Alexis spun and kicked the knife from his hand. He turned, swinging his fists. She moved in, threw her hand up, and caught him by the neck. With a twist, she slammed him into the wall. Her eyes flashed as she stared up at him where he hung from her hand with his feet dangling inches above the floor.

"Now, you will listen to what I have to say.." She tilted her head to the side. "If I had wanted you dead, you'd be dead. No question about it. So, that said, I obviously don't want you six feet under."

"I won't join you," he rasped out.

Her eyes rolled. "Oh please. As if we'd want you to join our ranks." She whacked him upside the head with her free hand in hopes of knocking some sense into his thick skull. "But I do want your help."

"With what?"

"Killing Diego, the monster who stalks the night." She saw the glint in his eyes at the mention of the other man's name. Oh yes, he knew who Diego was. His hatred for the creature was tangible in the small room. "I don't know what he did to you, but I do know the look of the blood lust. You want him dead as badly as I do, don't you?"

She loosened her grip enough for him to breathe and speak a little more easily. "Why

do you want him dead? He's your kind."

A growl rumbled in her chest and bubbled up into her throat. "I am nothing like him. Never was, never will be. And if you ever intimate such a thing again, to hell with my vow. I will kill you where you stand."

"Then go ahead. What are you waiting for?" he taunted.

Dare she tell him? No. He wasn't yet ready for that bit of truth. Why give away more details than she had to?

She released her grip and watched him fall to the floor at her feet. "Because I don't kill humans—ever."

"I find that very hard to believe."

"Why?" He'd piqued her curiosity. She wanted to know exactly what it was he thought..

"Because you're a blood-sucker, why else?"

Heat burned her eyes, but she refused to blink.. She wanted him to see the demon he faced and the control she held over the beast within. "Shows how very little you know." Alexis circled around him, heading for the door. She jerked it open without bothering with the unfastening the locks. "Just so you know, I came to ask for your help. I need you to help me defeat Diego and put an end to his carnage. I know you hate him and though I don't know the full reason, I was sure it was bad enough to make you want to help me."

"Why didn't you just ask?"

"Would you have listened?" She left before he could answer the question. Of course he wouldn't have listened. Why would a slayer hear out a vampire when his job was to destroy such a creature?

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Dalton lowered himself and retrieved his knife from where she'd knocked it from his hand. A vampire. She was a fucking vampire and he hadn't even known. He must be losing his edge. His head shook and he ran a hand through his hair. Time to face the facts—he was getting old.

Would he have listened if she'd been straight forward to begin with? Hell no, and that made him angry. Angry she'd known that, angry she'd deceived him, and even angrier with himself for not realizing what she was.

He moved to the bed and flopped down, dropping his head between his knees. Something on the floor was out of place and caught his attention. Reaching down, he picked up the wire that lay next to his foot.

"Fucking bitch unplugged the phone."

The temptation to throw the wire across the room was strong, but he fought the urge and reconnected it to the phone instead. He'd need that later. Hell, he needed it now. There was only one way for someone to get the Cross of Ignatius, and you couldn't inherit it as she'd tried to imply.

Dalton jerked up the phone and asked to be connected to Santos' room. The man was a computer expert. If anyone could hack into the Sanctum's secret files and get some answers, Santos could.

"Yeah?" Santos' sleepy voice asked.

"Rise and shine, boy. Time to work."

"It's like four in the fucking morning, boss."

"And I needed this information ten minutes ago," Dalton growled. He was starting to lose what little patience he had.

"I have no idea what information you're talking about."

"Then wake your sorry ass up and pay attention. I need you to go for a stroll in the Sanctum's files and search for anything you can find on female slayers."

"Boss, I can already tell you there're no female slayers," Santos sleepily replied.

"Look it up anyhow. I think there was at least one — once."

"How would you know that?" At least the man sounded a little more awake now.

"I heard a rumor."

"Can't we just call base and ask them?"

It was a legit question but a bad idea. Even if a fraction of what she'd intimated was true, then they were in way over their heads. He shook his head, even though the other man couldn't see it. "No, we can't. I've heard some rumors about them not being truthful with us, either."

"I'll see what I can find."

"See that you look in every file, every hidden corner. I want answers, and Santos? Not a word to anyone about this."

"You got it, boss. Call you soon as I have anything."

Dalton hung up the phone and then surveyed the room. First things first, he'd gather his shit and go request a new room. She'd been invited in.. He wasn't about to take a chance on her coming back and offing him in his sleep.

Packing was easy. Most of the clothes he had on hand were still crammed into his duffle bag. He gathered up his snacks and drinks and shoved them back into their bag. Dalton turned to make one more sweep of the room. His eyes came to rest on the banana still lying on the counter near the sink.

Images of Alexis with the banana firmly in hand came to mind and his cock hardened. "She's a fucking vamp," he growled, closing his eyes and running a hand through his hair. Lust had definitely overridden common sense here and from the feel of things, it wasn't about to get any better any time soon.

Having gathered all his things, Dalton picked up his bags and headed out the door and toward the main office. An older gentleman with graying hair sat in a small room behind the front desk with a black and white TV playing some old game show. The television set was a bit archaic, but if that's what the guy liked — so be it.

Dalton slapped the small bell on the desktop and watched with some amusement as the man jumped out of his chair and fumbled, nearly falling to the floor. He quickly righted himself and came rushing into the room.

"I need to change rooms," Dalton said without preamble as he slapped the key down on the counter.

"Why? Is there something wrong with the room?"

Dalton smiled and with a straight face said, "The street lights are too bright."

The man got a funny look on his face, as if pondering what Dalton had said, then he shrugged and turned to pull a key off the pegboard behind him.

"Here you go. Room three-oh-seven. It's on the opposite side of the building."

Dalton nodded and picked up the key. "Thank you very much." Without another word, he walked out of the office and headed for his new accommodation for what little of the night remained.

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Alexis wanted to scream. She was wound up so tight she feared she'd break before she got the release she so desperately needed. Dalton had certainly done his job earlier. The orgasm he brought her to had curled her toes, but it hadn't been enough—nowhere near enough. She desperately needed more, but then he noticed the fucking cross and everything went to pot after that. She was still in need of a good, hard fuck.

She kicked a can lying on the sidewalk and sent it flying across the street, pinging off the side of a building. Everywhere she looked, she saw toned, male bodies. Even at this late hour—or early depending on one's perspective—the streets were alive with life. How many were mortal and how many weren't, she didn't know—or care at this point.

A tall, well-built blond man passed her and she spun around to watch his delectable ass walking away. "Now that's what I'm talking about," she murmured to herself. Her backside bumped a cold metal pole and she jumped, jerking around to peer behind her. Where the hell had that streetlamp come from?

She needed a place to go and hide so she could pleasure herself before she did harm to someone—or herself. Olympus was out of the question—too many people and Simon wouldn't approve. She spotted a manhole cover in the middle of the street—it was an idea, but not a good one. The murky, infested waters would ruin her boots and they were her favorites. She'd already lost one of her best tops. There was just no way she could further damage her outfit.

Unable to come up with an appropriate hiding place, she continued to walk down the street, hands shoved deep into her jacket pockets as she eyed every dark corner and shadow-laden alley along the way. Men seemed to spill from the darkness in droves, driving her into madness. Her body was already in a heated frenzy and every muscular, masculine form that passed by only fanned the flames.

She walked for what seemed an eternity, twisting and turning with the dark streets without paying attention to where she went. The buildings at her right suddenly disappeared to be replaced by a tall, metal fence.

*The graveyard.*

She followed the fence around to the gate. Locked! There had to be a way in. Alexis glanced around her. Too many people around to witness her actions. Making a quick leap over the barrier was out of the question. Why the hell were so many people out at this time of night? Didn't they have homes to go to?

Slipping further into the shadows, she hid herself from prying eyes, closed her own and concentrated hard. The ability to flash from one place to another was a talent she didn't possess—though she wished she did. She opened her eyes and watched in fascination as her body became transparent enough to slip through the bars of the fence surrounding the resting place of the dead.

Obscuradon was a dreadful place. The world between this one and the next, it was where the Wraiths thrived.. Normally, cemeteries were full of Wraiths but at the moment, at least, this one seemed eerily devoid of the creatures. Good thing. Wraiths and Nosferatu did

*not* get along.

As soon as she'd cleared the barrier, her body solidified once more as she slipped from Obscuradon. Alexis grimaced, though she was happy she hadn't solidified *in* the fence—that would have hurt. Perhaps if she'd paid more attention during her training, she could stay in non-corporeal form longer than a few seconds at a time. Oh, who was she kidding? She hadn't paid the least bit of attention during her training and she never practiced anything. No wonder she sucked at being a Nosferatu.

*Maybe I should just give up.*

The thought came unbidden into her mind. What would happen if she did give up? Was Diego really powerful enough to bring about the end of the world? And why would he want to, anyhow? Wouldn't destroying it defeat the purpose of wanting to rule it? One couldn't rule dust particles floating around in space. It just wasn't done.

Alexis jammed her hands into her pockets and made her way deeper into the darkened cemetery. She felt at peace here, though why she wasn't sure. Wraiths lurked everywhere in the place yet none attempted to pester her as she expected. In fact, it almost seemed as though they were avoiding her.

When she was sure she was far enough into the park, she ducked beneath an alcove on one of the numerous large mausoleums, though she could have knocked down the door had she really wanted. Alexis leaned back against the cool stone structure and slid down with her legs extended out in front of her. The things she did for a little relief.

Oh what she wouldn't give to go hunt Dalton down and fuck him senseless. What would the big, bad slayer think of that? Hell, he'd probably already changed rooms for fear she'd come busting in on him. The thought made her laugh out loud.

Alexis pulled up her skirt and slid her fingers between her warm, damp folds. The scent of sex and Dalton still lingered on her skin and filtered up to tease her nostrils. Damn that man for driving her to this. She rubbed her fingers over her clit with hard, circular motions, slowly building the tension even higher within her—but it was too slow. With a groan, she thrust her fingers into her wet sheath and pumped as hard as she could.

A sound caught her attention—like water dripping against stone. The noise hadn't been there just moments before.. She raised her misty eyes and blinked to be certain she was seeing things correctly. "Malachi?"

He hung in the opening, his shaggy hair hanging down all around him with his long tongue hanging out and drool slowly dripping onto the stone below. His ears perked up and he dropped to the ground. As he inched closer, he shifted from the bi-peddle form he'd been in to human, save for the tongue.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered, shocked and embarrassed yet oddly relieved he was here.

"I could smell you," he replied in a husky tone as he sniffed the air, drawing it into his lungs until his beautiful chest expanded, stretching the already taut muscles.

"You shouldn't be here."

He inched closer, dipping his head between her legs and inhaled again. His head shot up and his eyes narrowed, glowing a yellowish-gold color. "Who is he?"

She reached out and ran the fingers of her free hand through his hair. "You know the answer to that."

"Then why are you here?"

Alexis laughed. "I'd have thought that obvious."

He ran his tongue between her folds and over her fingers, causing her to gasp. "You need a real man, Lex. Not some human hunter." Malachi glanced back up at her. "I know what you need and can give it to you. Can he?"

Hell no, Dalton couldn't, but still...

Malachi pulled her fingers from her muff and moved closer until she felt his heat seep into her body, his wolfish scent wrapped around her. "Mal—"

"Shh, don't say a word. I've wanted you for so long."

He captured her lips with his before she could respond. His tongue thrust into her mouth and danced with her own, fanning the flames deep in her gut in the process. Her vagina constricted with need as ripples of pleasure moved through her.

"Tell me you don't want this and I'll leave."

Gods no. If he left, she'd be in an even tighter knot than she already was, but was it right? She gripped his shoulders with her hands, indecision playing in her eyes and reflecting in his own. Alexis chewed on her bottom lip, unsure of what to do.

Cool air washed over her breasts, causing her gaze to move down. She didn't know how he'd done it, but the buttons on her jacket were now undone.

"Such beautiful breasts," he murmured, dipping his head to lave first one nipple then the other with his tongue. "A feast I shall make of you."

He pulled her lower down and moved over her, nipping and licking his way from her breast to her thigh. Malachi spread her legs and positioned himself between them where he blew lightly across her muff. Alexis wanted to scream. She moved her hands down to reach for his head and pull him to her.

"You like that?"

Like it? Hell, she was dying and all he wanted to do was tease. She groaned in frustration.

Malachi laughed. He spread open her folds with his hand and blew again, causing her whole body to shudder.

"Mal," she gasped. If he didn't do something soon she'd die from the tension. She just knew she would.

As if he could read her mind, he thrust his tongue into her sheath, licking and sucking until he had her writhing beneath him. Malachi sucked her clit into his mouth and nipped at the sensitive nub, bringing tears of intense pleasure to her eyes.

Her entire body tightened and jerked as jolt after jolt of electrical need shot through her. He slid up her body, the friction causing her to shiver in anticipation. His blue eyes were wide with wonder and misted over with pleasure as he slid his impressive cock deep into her welcoming sheath. She dug her nails into his upper arms as he stretched her and filled her to overflowing.

Alexis felt her eyes begin to burn as Malachi stared into them. "Take what you need," he whispered as he bent his head to one side, exposing his neck.

Her fangs ached as she opened wide and bit down on his hard flesh. His power-laced blood flowed into her, adding to the excitement of the moment. The pumping of his blood into her matched the rhythm of his cock thrusting into her muff.



She felt his tongue swirl over her shoulder seconds before his teeth pierced her skin. Alexis moaned against him, moving her hips up to meet his. Even as entwined as they were, Malachi continued to thrust deep and hard into her, forcing the air from her lungs with each pound of his lean hips.

Withdrawing from his neck, she licked the wounds closed and dropped her head back, reveling in the fill of his power radiating through her as his hard length filled her over and over again.

"Oh gods, yes," she cried as he increased the strength of his movements.

She scraped her nails across his back, pulling him all the closer. He lifted his head and claimed her mouth, the metallic taste of her own blood lingering on his lips.

The tension within her coiled tighter and tighter until it exploded in wave after wave throughout her. The force of her orgasm shook her entire being straight through to her core, leaving her feeling weak and extremely sated.

Malachi pumped harder and faster, striving for his own orgasm. He thrust deep and hard into her spasming channel one last time as he stiffened above her with a groan and emptied his seed into her.

He collapsed on top of her still form and kissed her neck and cheek. "By the gods, I never dreamed it would be like this."

She lifted a hand and brushed his hair back from his eyes. "Malachi," she whispered.

Her skin itched, a sign she knew all too well.. She shoved at his shoulders until he rolled off her and quickly rearranged her clothing. "I have to go. The sun will rise before long."

He nodded but said nothing. However, the look in his eyes was one that caused her heart to ache. She hated knowing she'd hurt him, and all because she couldn't control her damned hormones.

## Chapter Seven

Diego slowly gained his feet, his eyes never leaving the pretty boy and bitch across the room from him. The boy had done him proud with the way he'd taken the girl and used her until there wasn't much left other than an empty shell.

"Enjoy her?" he asked as he neared the pair.

Renaldo wiped the blood from his mouth with his arm then licked his lips. "Very much."

Diego's gaze moved back over the woman.. Pity. She still lived, though barely. He heard the stutter of her heart as it tried to continue pumping what little blood remained in her drained system. How best to torment her in what little remained of her life? That was the question foremost in his mind.

Such a pitiful creature. The best thing for her would be to put her out of her misery. Ah, but that wasn't something he would give her the pleasure of. No, he would make her suffer even more before her life ended. Diego slipped a hand beneath her head and pulled her up with more force than necessary. With his free hand, he unbuttoned his shirt and used an elongated nail to slice his chest.

Bitch fought as much as her extremely weak condition would allow. She'd never been fully changed, though he had fed her his blood before. It wouldn't take much, especially in her drained state, to give her enough of his tainted blood to change her. Then, her death would be all the sweeter a treat for him.

He pressed her face against his chest, stiffening at the feel of her dry, cracked lips against his skin. Her half changed and starved body didn't take long to respond to the taste and smell of blood. She latched on, sucking his life's blood into her weak body to replenish her shriveled cells.

As soon as Diego felt she'd taken enough to complete the change, he thrust her away from him and laughed when she moaned and crawled back to hang onto his legs. He kicked her away, laughing all the harder as she tumbled across the dirty floor. The change would take hold of her soon.

"Grab her," he ordered Renaldo and then walked out the door, expecting the other man to follow him.

Renaldo carried the weakened woman in his arms out of the shack they occupied and into the night. A dead tree stood in the yard's center with a large metal ring protruding out of the gnarled trunk. He turned his fiery gaze on the other man. "You know what to do with her."

Diego watched with delight as Renaldo tied the weak woman to the iron ring. She stood on her toes to ease some of her weight off her wrists. He walked up to her and cupped her chin in his hand. "It was fun while it lasted," he cooed. "Pity you wore out so quickly." His grip loosened as quickly as it had fastened onto her face.

He spun in a slow circle before her. "Such a beautiful night... And I'm certain it will turn into an equally beautiful day." A sharp fingernail traced down her pale cheek leaving a thin red line in its wake. "Do you have any idea how painful death by sun is for a newly-turned vamp?"

She whimpered and sobbed and shook her head. Her fear was thick in the air, feeding him in a way blood could not. Diego laughed at the pitiful creature before him. "Rest assured, my child. Your suffering will be intense and before it's over, you will curse my name."

She tried to spit at him but only sputtered instead, causing Diego to laugh even harder. He snapped his fingers. "Come Renaldo. We shall watch from the safety of the house until the fires have consumed her flesh."

His evil laughter echoed in the night as he walked back into the house, never once looking back at the woman hanging from the tree or the man quietly following behind him.

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Alexis lifted her fist and pounded on Olympus' side door hidden in the alley. What the hell had she just done? Malachi was one of her best friends and she'd just —

A shudder ran through her body. No, she wouldn't think about it. The situation had got way out of hand and it was all *that* man's fault. Dalton was more trouble than he was worth. What the fuck had the Moirae been thinking? He wasn't going to help her.

The door jerked open and she glared at Simon. He had that look on his face like he could see into her mind, and quite frankly it gave her the creeps. The last thing she needed right now was him slinking around in her head.

"Let me guess, the kitchen is closed," Alexis grumbled as she spilled into the club.

"As a matter of fact, it is.." Simon closed the door and followed after her. "Why? What are you wanting? And why didn't you use your key?"

"Fries?" There was a hopeful look in her eyes as she stared at him. "And I lost it."

"Again? Alexis, that's the third one.. Guess I'll call the lock smith first thing in the morning and have the locks changed—again!" He sighed and turned toward the kitchen's large freezer. "The things I do for you."

She walked up beside him and planted a big, wet kiss on his cheek. "Thanks." She giggled when he blushed. "Why so red, Simon?"

He muttered something even her sensitive hearing couldn't pick out. "I'm only cooking a handful because you never eat many." He dropped a small handful of fries into the fryer's basket and turned it on to heat before lowering it in. "Care to put these back for me?"

Alexis took the bag he held out to her and replaced it in the freezer. "You're a doll to do this for me."

He just shook his head. "Make yet another mess over a handful of fries."

"You love me," she pertly replied.

"That must be it. The key to my insanity is love for you."

She laughed again, something she'd really needed to do. "You're in a mood tonight."

He raised a thick, golden brow. "I'm not the only one. Want to tell me what's wrong?"

Her smile vanished. "Things didn't exactly go well tonight." She ran her hand up over her neck and worked at rubbing away the tension there. "He knows."

"Already?" Simon lowered the fries into the roiling grease, set the timer and auto-lift then moved to stand in front of her.

Simon's large hands covered her shoulders as he leaned his head down to stare into her eyes with his glowing silver orbs. "How'd he find out, Alexis?"

She reached into the opening of her jacket and pulled out her necklace. "By this."

His gaze darted down to her fingers. He closed his eyes. "Damn it. I told you he'd

figure it out if you didn't keep that thing hidden."

"I did have it hidden. Inside my top," she whined, defending herself. Simon had a way of making her feel like a kid.

"Well, if it was inside your top, then how'd he—?" He turned away and groaned. "Tell me you didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Sleep with him."

"Wait right there, buster. It was you who told me to," she shot back at him, jabbing him in the shoulder blade with a finger to emphasize her point. "Besides, there was absolutely no sleeping involved."

Simon turned to face her. "I did not tell you to have sex with him."

"Yes, you did. I was all wound up in the club earlier and you told me to use it to my advantage.." She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot against the tiled floor as she glared at him.

"I said use it to your advantage. Seducing a man and fucking him are two totally different things."

Alexis shrugged. "Tonight was not a good night to depend on me to not cross a hair-thin line, Simon."

He narrowed those knowing eyes at her. "There's more you aren't telling me."

Uh-oh, he didn't know that—couldn't know that. Could he? "No, there's not."

He cupped her cheek. "Alexis—" The buzzer went off on the fryer.

Alexis sighed in relief. A moment's reprieve. Maybe she could get him onto another subject. "So...any suggestions on how to talk Dalton into helping me?"

"Do you have any idea where he'll be tomorrow night?"

She grinned. "Not for certain, but if things go well, he should be here." She snatched a fry off the plate he held and munched on it.

"Here?" He looked shocked. "In *my* club? I don't want a murder scene in the middle of my dance floor."

"I can't kill him, Simon," she reminded him, pointing a fry in his direction. "'Twould defeat the whole purpose."

Simon led her to the bar and slid her plate in front of her when she claimed a stool. He quickly added a bottle of ketchup and filled a glass for her from the special bottle beneath the bar.

"Thanks." Alexis grabbed up the bottle, poured a glob of the red goo onto her plate and dipped a fry.

"Why here?"

"Where else should I go? At least here I know you've got my back, and I'm sure Mal will be sniffing around somewhere." Certainly if earlier was anything to go by. What did she get herself into in a moment of animalistic lust?

Alexis sighed.

"What's wrong with you?" Simon shrewdly asked, his eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Nothing."

He tapped her on the forehead with a fingertip.. "Don't lie to me, Alexis. What was that sigh for?"

*Oh fuck!* She gnawed on the corner of her bottom lip. "Just wondering how I'm going to convince Dalton to help me, is all. He's going to be one tough nut to crack."

He looked about ready to argue but went on about his business. Alexis relaxed her taut muscles. *That was a close one.*

"Do you have any idea what Diego did to the Slayer? Maybe I could use that to my advantage." She dipped another fry and quickly devoured it. Her stomach quickly began to roil. Uh-oh, she'd reached her limit. She slowly pushed the plate away from her.

"Had enough, huh?"

"Oh yeah," she replied. "Anyhow, any ideas? I looked for what had happened but couldn't find anything."

"Maybe you were looking in the wrong places."

She raised a brow at him. "And you know where the right place would be?"

"I just might."

Alexis stretched on her stool and stifled a yawn. The sun was rising.

"You push yourself too hard. You're not old enough or strong enough to resist sleep come morning," Simon chastised, pointing a finger at her.

Alexis stuck her tongue out at him in response.. "I hadn't realized it was getting so late." She slid from the stool as she fought another yawn.

"Let's get you downstairs and tucked in for the day."

She giggled. "I'm not a child, Simon."

He brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "But you are."

A strange look crossed his face and was gone as quickly as it had appeared. The man was so odd at times. She slowly followed him across the room and down the stairs leading into the basement, her limbs growing heavier by the minute. Maybe she had cut this one too close. She'd blame Dalton—and why not? It was his fault for getting her so wound up and not finishing the job!

"Do you have enough strength to open the door, or do I have to do it for you?" Simon asked, breaking her out of her thoughts.

She glared at him, raised a hand and watched the door vibrate but fail to open. "Damn it."

Simon raised a brow but said nothing. He simply raised his hand and waved it before him, causing the door to open.

"Show off," she muttered, not even daring to wonder how he'd managed such a feat.

Simon stepped behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders and propelled her forward. He pushed her down onto the bed. "Are you going to take off your jacket first?"

She shook her head sleepily. "Can't. No shirt."

Alexis heard his exasperated sigh, but barely.. The sleep of her kind was taking a firm hold on her and she slowly began to drift into the darkness.

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Simon shook his head as he moved to the cabinets built into the wall. He opened one of the doors, grabbed a t-shirt for her and closed the door behind him before returning to her side.

Alexis sat on the bed, leaned back against the wall already asleep. He sighed again. Things were never easy where the fledgling was concerned, though he'd never call her that to

her face. She thought herself all grown up, but she had no clue. Her mortal days were long gone and she still refused to accept her place in the world of darkness. A world where she now thrived.

He unbuttoned her jacket and slid it off her shoulders before pulling the t-shirt over her head and pulling her arms through the sleeves. Leaning her over onto her side, he removed first one long, leather boot then the other and swung her legs up onto the bed. With a wave of his hand, a blanket appeared from the cabinet and spread itself over her prone body.

Simon leaned over and whispered, "Sleep well, little one." He kissed her on the forehead and was instantly struck by a wave of pain and agony.

He sucked in a deep breath and staggered back away from her as the feelings echoed through his body. Simon closed his eyes to clear his mind and then slowly reopened them to really look at Alexis.

His heart nearly stopped. The black aura of death surrounded her like a cloak. It couldn't be. The whole of her existence was boiling down to the most crucial of moments. They couldn't—wouldn't lose her now, but what could he do? He'd sworn only to advise and to *never* interfere. Besides, she was too close to him. Where he could see the aura of death, he had no clue as to what would unfold to bring it about. So again he was left powerless to do anything—or was he?

*Maximal.* He sent out the silent command as he exited the room and sealed it, then hid the entryway into the room. At least for the day she was safe, but come nightfall he had no way of knowing what would happen. Of course, when she woke he could always try and talk her out of meeting the slayer for another night. She hadn't been resting well or feeding properly. If she allowed herself to weaken, it was the only opportunity the Slayer or Diego needed to end her life.

Simon rushed up the stairs as the phone in his pocket vibrated to life. He delved into his pocket and pulled it out, flipping it open and pressing it to his ear in one smooth motion.

"This better be good," Maximal's sleepy voice growled into the phone.

"Death has wrapped itself around her. What are we to do?"

"Death has what? What can we do, Simon? You know the code."

Simon shook his head, though the other man couldn't see it. "No, the code only covers me directly, but you on the other hand—"

Maximal sighed. "Any idea what will happen?"

"No. You know she's too close. I can never foresee anything in her future, but I can read her aura. This time it's really bad. I fear we may lose her."

"What do we do?"

Simon knew what the old Nosferatu was thinking. "Maximal, I could stop this all if I wanted, but we have no idea what the repercussions of such an action would be. I could inadvertently destroy the whole world and where would that leave us?"

"Well, not to mention how much trouble you'd bring down on your own head," Maximal added in.

"I'm not worried about my hide, Max.. You know I'll bend the rules just as much as I can to help her, but even I have limits."

"Call for me if you need me, Simon. You're the one connected to her."

"You should be. You're her watcher," Simon pointed out as he headed into his rooms

located above the club.

"Rashad would not allow me to exchange any blood with her," Maximal groused.

"I wonder why." Simon rolled his eyes, a habit he'd picked up from Alexis. "If she were my daughter, I seriously doubt I'd want my best friend sleeping with her, either."

"It could have been done without the sex."

Simon scoffed. "As if. I know you all too well, Maximal. You'd have had her wrapped around your little finger in no time."

"I take offense to that, Simon. She is very special to me, make no mistake about that, but I would never wish to have her wrapped around my finger."

"No, but I bet you'd love to have her wrapped around elsewhere else," Simon shot back. He sat down on the edge of his bed and leaned back. "Have Rashad donate blood and keep it handy."

"You think we'll need it?"

A loud sigh escaped Simon's lips. "I hope not, but I fear we will."

"Then I will do as you ask. Keep me informed."

"Will do." Simon turned the phone off and placed it on the bedside table. He lifted a hand above him and swirled his finger around in an intricate pattern. "Give me some sign as to what we are about to face," he whispered.

Bright blue and green lights swirled above his head near the ceiling then faded as quickly as they'd come, but no signs were revealed to him. "Damn it," he muttered, disgusted with the spell's failure. At times, he really hated being who and what he was.

## Chapter Eight

Dalton jerked awake as the telephone rang. He cracked one eye open, noted the sunlight spilling in through the window and blindly reached for the phone, nearly knocking it from the table. "Yeah?" he sleepily asked.

"What the hell are you doing in a different room?" Santos' voice was unusually loud to Dalton's groggy mind.

"Lumpy mattress. Get my info?"

He swallowed to clear his throat as he sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. For a brief moment he wondered where in hell he was. The room was the exact opposite of the one he'd been in before. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear the fog as he remembered switching rooms as a precaution.

"Do what?" he asked, having not heard what Santos had said.

"I said, yeah, I got your info. Want it now or in person?"

"In person." It would be so much easier to explain all this face-to-face with the other man instead of over the phone where gestures and facial expressions meant nil. "I'll be there in five."

"Okay boss, and by the way, I'm still in the same room."

"Go to hell," he gruffly replied before slamming the phone back down. Dalton stood and rifled through his bag in search of a clean shirt and pants, which he quickly donned, then shoved his feet into his boots.

He jerked open the door, wincing as the bright morning light spilled across his face. He threw up his arm, squinting as he stepped out into the bright day and closed the door behind him. Jogging to the room a few doors down, he impatiently knocked on the door and waited for Santos to open up.

A quick survey of the room showed it to be in a state of total chaos. The only clean thing in the room was the small table on which Santos' beloved laptop sat.

"Wearing that particular shirt for a reason?" Santos pointed at Dalton's shirt with 'Shit Happens' scrawled across the front.

Dalton glanced down at it and shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't even realize which one I'd put on."

"Have a seat, boss." Santos pointed at the chair across from his.

Dalton sat and Santos turned the laptop to where he could see it. He then stood and leaned over, pressing a key. "Okay, female slayer number one is Edwina. According to everything I can find, she was initiated into the Sanctum some time in the sixteen hundreds and was hanged for suspected witchcraft and murder.

"Second lady slayer is Trina. She was initiated in the seventeen hundreds. She worked for the Sanctum for two years when she was found by a search party at the bottom of a cliff; her body broken, bruised, and well, cut up pretty badly."

Dalton lifted his gaze from the sketches of the women on the screen to look at Santos. "And what of the third?"

Santos furrowed his brow. "How'd you know there were three?"

"Lucky guess." Dalton smiled at the confused look on the other man's face. "What



about the third?"

Santos held up a finger and pressed another key. "I'm getting there. It seems our third was initiated sometime in the eighteen hundreds, but here's the real kicker. She disappeared and was never found."

"What else do you know about her?" Dalton knew where she'd gone, but he wasn't ready to reveal that tidbit just yet.

Santos shook his head. "Not a whole lot. Couldn't even find a picture of her. She was roughly thirty-three when she vanished. Mother was a poor woman in New York—an immigrant. Father unknown."

Dalton ran a hand over his face. "You couldn't find anything else on her? A name?"

"Alexis Chantal, according to Sanctum records. There was no pic, but they did jot down a brief description of her. Five-ten, long black hair and green eyes."

It was definitely his Alexis. *No, damn it. She's not yours, but it is her even if her eyes are no longer green.* "I know what happened to her."

"What?" Santos furrowed his brow. "I searched every database the Sanctum had and couldn't find any more information."

"She's one of them."

Santos froze in the process of pressing keys. "One of who?"

"A fucking vamp, Santos," he said on a huff. "Remember the woman from last night?"

"Oh fuck no." Santos straightened, staring through wide-eyes. "You two didn't?"

Dalton leaned his head into his hand and rubbed his forehead. This was all giving him one hell of a headache. "Yeah, we did, but that was before I knew."

"She didn't bite you, did she?" The man jumped to his feet and took a hasty step back. "I'd hate to have to stake you, man, but I will in a heartbeat if you've been bitten."

"No, she didn't bite me. Want me to strip so you can check for marks?" Dalton sarcastically replied.

"No thanks, boss. I believe you." He tugged at his collar. "Just out of curiosity, how'd you know?"

He reached under the collar of his shirt and pulled out his cross. "Because she wore one of these."

Santos whistled. "You mean a vamp was wearing a cross? I thought that'd cause them to burst into flames or something?"

Dalton shook his head. "That's what I'd been led to believe, too, but she didn't seem the least bit uncomfortable because of it. There were no marks on her from it, either." He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. Images of her creamy breasts came to mind and he nearly groaned from the sweet agony of it all. "Either the rules are changing, or we never had the full story to begin with."

"Do we need to inform the Sanctum of this?"

"No!" Dalton nearly yelled as he quickly straightened himself in his chair. "No," he repeated more calmly after he noticed the surprised look on Santos' face. "Let's sit on this for a while until we know more about what's going on. There's no point in causing the shit to hit the fan unless we have to."

Santos closed the laptop and lowered himself down onto the bed's edge. "So, boss...what's the plan?"

"We do what we always do." Dalton sat forward. "Only with a twist this time."

The other man lifted a brow at him. "What type of twist?"

"We interrogate her first."

"Her? You mean your vamp fuck," Santos nastily replied, then changed his tune when Dalton glared at him. "Okay, interrogate her over what? And how do you propose we go about it?"

Dalton exhaled deeply and leaned forward. "Very carefully." He pointed toward the phone. "Call the others. We have a plan to make."

He watched Santos call the rest of the group as he fought with his conscience over what he was about to do. Regardless of what she was, she hadn't made a single move to harm him, other than slamming him against the wall. Which he'd provoked. He'd been at his most vulnerable while she was in the room with him, and she hadn't moved to take advantage of it. Not even once.

What if she'd been telling the truth? What if the only way to kill Diego was for him to work with her toward that common goal? If he killed her, would he be able to defeat the monster on his own?

So many questions and so few answers. His life had suddenly become very complicated and he hated complications. A knock on the door broke his concentration. There was still time to figure out what to do. Best to make plans now and decide later whether or not to follow them through.

Dalton glanced at Santos and hoped the man could figure out what the glare meant. If he uttered one word about what had happened last night, he'd take great pleasure in cutting the tongue from the other man's mouth. Santos nodded and Dalton relaxed. Maybe his computer boy had more common sense than he'd originally thought.

Collier rubbed his sleepy eyes. "What's up, boss? Ain't it a bit late for a meeting?"

"We've got a trap to set," Dalton replied as he tossed the business card for Olympus Alexis had left in his room.

Riggs picked up the card and looked at the words scrawled on the back. "What is this?" He shrugged. "Looks like you got lucky and got a date."

Dalton shook his head. "She's a vampire."

Jamison whistled. "Damn if you ain't lucky, boss. What do you want us to do?"

"I'm going to meet her and talk her into leaving the club with me. We don't want innocents hurt in this. I'll take her outside of town into the desert where we'll meet up with you five." Dalton ran a hand through his hair. This was underhanded, but she was a vamp and he'd sworn to kill every vamp he came across. They'd taken so much from him—he had to do this. He ignored the twinge of guilt playing at the back of his mind.

"How do you plan to do that?" Riggs asked.

"Tell her I know where someone she's looking for is."

"And that'll work?" Collier sounded less sleepy but very cynical.

"Oh, I know it will." Dalton stood and stared at his men. "Here's what we're going to do." He snapped his fingers and Santos pulled out a map of the area, spreading it out on the table top. "Y'all will wait here for me and the vamp to arrive, then Riggs will do what he does best."

Riggs grinned. "Silver arrows." He nodded. "I'll be ready, boss."

Good. Dalton only hoped he would be by then.

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Lord Maximal Ashanti strode down the long, cobblestone path leading up to the stairs into the palace. Men flanked the walkway on either side, still as statues, shields at the ready, spears held tightly in their right hands. Not a single man acknowledged their commander's presence, but he knew they were aware of him.

He stalked up the steps, taking two at a time, and burst through the large, ornate double doors into the great hall. The long, red carpet leading up to the throne at the room's far end cushioned his footfalls, quieting them as he moved closer to the man with whom he needed to speak.

Max dropped to one knee, arm crossed over his chest with his head bowed. "My lord."

Lord Rashad Blackspell sighed loudly, causing Max to quickly glance up at him. "Would you get up already, Max?"

He wasted no time in gaining his feet and nodded respectfully to his leader—his long time friend.

Rashad shook his dark head. "How many times I have asked you not to do that?"

Maximal raised a brow. "More than I can count."

"Then why don't you listen?"

"You are the ruler, my lord and master. I was just trying to be respectful."

The other man rolled his eyes, a rather un-ruler like gesture. "Have you brought me news?" He leaned forward in his seat.

"You act as though you're expecting something."

"I am. I want to know what that summons was you received earlier."

Max pursed his lips. Damn, he should have known it wouldn't slip passed Rashad's knowledge. "It was Simon."

If at all possible, the Nosferatu leader paled even further than his natural light tone. "Why does that make me feel so very uneasy?"

"Because he never calls with good news?" he quipped. It was true enough. Simon only contacted him if something was up with his charge, and her life being in danger was certainly a cause for concern. So much rode on her young shoulders at the moment.

"You are not making me feel better." Rashad leaned back and sighed, looking every minute of his nearly three-thousand years for just the briefest of moments. "What has that child of mine done now?"

"Nothing yet, but Simon fears she's in danger. This task asked of her shouldn't be on her shoulders. She's too young and inexperienced."

"Is what I do wrong?" Rashad closed his eyes and shifted his position in the large, black marble throne once more. "I do the best I can."

"What has happened isn't your fault."

"Isn't it? I pit my children against one another. One doesn't even know I am her father, and yet this could have all been avoided had I had the courage to destroy my only son myself."

"You aren't to blame for Diego's faults, Rashad. You had no way of knowing the power would corrupt him, just as it had his—" He wisely cut off the last of his statement as he realized what he was saying. It wasn't his place to bring up the past.

"Just as it had his mother," Rashad finished for him. "And what of young Alexis? Will it corrupt her as well once she embraces her powers? *If* she ever embraces her powers."

"She must embrace them if she is to complete her task."

"But I ask her to destroy her own blood."

Maximal shook his head. "No. The Moirae ask this of her and it is why she is not told the full truth, though I feel she has a right to know."

Rashad shoved himself up out of his chair and paced the great hall. "Do you think this easy on me? Not only have I lost my son, but my daughter remains unknown to me. I am forced to watch her from afar, relying on others to raise her, train her and take care of her. She has absolutely no idea of who or what she truly is, and I cannot tell her because to do so would be her destruction."

Maximal reached out and placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. "None of this is your doing. The Moirae play a cruel game on us all. You are merely a pawn in the moment's entertainment, but it shall all be over soon."

"At what cost?"

He shrugged. "That, I cannot say."

"Guard her well, old friend."

Maximal nodded. "As I have since before she was even born, my lord—my friend. I have come in seek of your aid."

Rashad raised a thick brow at him. "What aid would that be?"

Max snapped his fingers and an urn appeared in his hand. "We are in need, though only as a precaution. Simon says the aura of death has wrapped itself around her." He noted the shock and fear reflected in Rashad's deep emerald eyes. Unlike a Nosferatu who had been created, those born into this life had pigment in their eyes. "She will not die, Rashad. I will not allow it—Simon won't allow it. But we must be prepared for anything. If something does happen to her, your blood would be best to aid her healing."

Rashad shook his head. "It's not if, old friend. It's when." He held out his arm to Maximal. "Take as much as needed. I would give the last drop of my life's blood to save my children."

"I wish Diego could have been saved, Rashad.. I truly do. If there is any way to avoid this—"

"Everything happens for a reason, Maximal, even if we don't always know what that reason is."

Rashad flinched when Max cut his wrist, but he didn't try to pull away as his blood began to flow into the urn. "I swore to give my life for her protection, Rashad, and I will keep my vow, no matter the cost."

His leader's eyes sparkled with moisture. "Thank you, my friend."

## Chapter Nine

Alexis turned at the sound of the large metal door opening behind her. Simon stood just outside it with a grim look on his face.

"What's wrong with you? Get up on the wrong side of the bed?" She flashed him a stellar smile.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Alexis."

She raised a brow at him. "What's not a good idea?"

"You meeting with Dalton. He knows what you are. This could be a trap for all you know."

Alexis shook her head and sighed. "He may not even show, especially after I slammed him against the wall last night."

Simon stared at her with those silvery eyes of his wide open in shock. "You did what?"

She sighed. "I didn't hurt him. He charged me and I showed him who was boss. That's all there was to it. Honest."

He pointed a finger at her. "You tempt fate entirely too much, young lady.. Haven't you anything more decent to wear in there?"

She glanced down at the burgundy leather outfit she wore. "What's wrong with red? I swear, you complain because I wear all black, so I switch to red and you still bitch. Not everyone likes to wear khaki pants, Simon."

"I didn't say you had to wear khaki, but couldn't you find something a little more lady-like to wear?"

Alexis reached out and caressed his cheek. "Not everyone can be as classy as you when dressing, and I'm no lady. You should know that by now."

"I don't think you give yourself enough credit, Alexis."

She shrugged. "What's not to like about my outfit? I worked so hard to make it." She turned a few circles in front of the mirror, admiring her work.

"It shows too much skin."

Alexis raised a brow at him. "They're pants. The whole of my legs are covered."

"But your back and belly are bare and your boobs are hanging out."

"My boobs?" She couldn't quite believe he'd said that. "Everything that needs to be covered is covered, Simon."

"Anyone could walk up and untie the straps at your back and then you'd be left hanging out for all to see."

She flashed him a grin. "Simon, love, they'd have to get close enough to touch me first. How many people can sneak up on me?"

"Malachi."

Her grin faded and she worried her bottom lip.. He had a point there. "He wouldn't dare."

"I wouldn't put it past him."

Alexis started to speak but quickly closed her mouth. "Come to think of it, neither would I." She sighed. "Oh well, makes it more fun," she said, flashing Simon another dazzling smile.

"What does?"

"The thought that with the flick of a wrist I could be exposed for all to see. It's rather exciting, don't you think?" She shuddered intentionally for effect.

Simon shook his head. "One of these days you're going to go too far."

Alexis tilted her head and glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. "Oh, you're way too late for that lecture.." She reached back into the closet and pulled out her favorite long, black coat and slipped into it. "Anyhow, I need to get out onto the floor in case he shows."

She started past him, but his steely hand wrapped around her upper arm stopped her in her tracks. "Don't do this. Not this night. I have a very bad feeling deep within," he said in a very low, deep tone as he tapped his chest with his other fist.

"But I have to," she whispered in response. She shook her head. "Simon"—she reached up to caress his cheek—"so much depends on my alliance with this man. I cannot turn back now."

"I'm not asking you to give it up, just wait a few days."

Alexis closed her eyes and let out a slow breath, which nearly whistled as it made its way through her slightly pursed lips. "I fear we do not have a few days to wait. I can't explain it, Simon, but a sense of urgency grows within me. Even when the sleep of my kind is upon me, I can't rest in peace. The enemy moves ever closer to his goal. We have to stop him."

She heard his sudden release of breath. His grip loosened then his hand fell to his side. "If ever you are in need, just call to me, Alexis.." He lifted his eyes to her, his silver gaze boring into her very soul. "Remember this, if you remember nothing else. Call and I shall come. Promise me."

Alexis nodded, feeling as though she was caught in a trance. "You have my word."

He gave her a weak smile. "Go wait for your man." He turned away.

"Simon?" She felt an overwhelming need to comfort him, reassure him that nothing bad would happen, but even she couldn't deny the sense of dread welling up inside her. She knew her enemy, her savior, well. Dalton would try something. Something that would—could—cost her her life at his first available moment.

He slowly turned his head to look at her over his shoulder. "We all have to deal with things we dislike in these difficult times. I am no different than anyone else. Just remember what I said."

Before she could say another word, he headed up the staircase and disappeared. Alexis shook her head. She'd never figure him out.

With a sigh, she moved up the staircase following in Simon's wake. She had a slayer to meet, regardless of Simon's bad feeling. She gave the outfit she wore one more appreciative look then followed in Simon's footsteps up the stairs. Loud music met her at the basement door and she welcomed the escape the rhythmic tune gave her, even if only temporarily.

*Feed.* Simon's whispered word filtered through the club to her. She closed her eyes and focused on him, seeing him standing in his usual spot behind the bar, then shook her head.

*Can't. He's here.* Alexis opened her eyes and scanned the crowd, though she already knew where he stood. She slipped through the crowd, making sure to keep herself hidden in shadow, just another faceless body in the throng of writhing bodies.

"Have a thing for shadows do you?" she whispered next to his ear.

"I prefer to see, not be seen," he quietly replied.

"I wasn't sure you'd come.." She circled around to face him.

"I'm here, aren't I?" His gruff voice sounded anything but inviting.

He was here alright, but he wasn't happy about it. In fact, he seemed very uneasy. Too uneasy. Simon was right. Something was very wrong here tonight, but her fate depended on her actions and it was too late to balk now.

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Dalton clenched his hands into tight fists at his sides as he willed himself to calm down. Being a complete ass toward her would only blow his cover. Though if he were honest with himself, showing up to see her tonight wasn't the whole problem. That outfit she wore...did she have any idea what she was doing to his insides? The deep red leather clung to her body like a second skin and if he didn't know better, he'd swear it had been painted onto her, or she'd been poured into it. He was amazed she could even move it fit her so tightly, but as he watched her when she moved, he had to admire the smooth motion of her body.

His hormones were in overdrive. He felt more like a teenager than his forty years just being near her. The plan he'd devised with his team slowly faded from his mind as the need to feel her skin against his grew within him. She'd been so soft to the touch, so warm and feminine.. Her lithe body writhing beneath him had been the closest to heaven he'd ever been. Would it be so bad to taste that sweetness just one more time before doing his job?

His cock grew harder with each heartbeat. It'd be so simple to pull her into his arms and taste those luscious lips of hers just one more time. Dalton mentally shook himself. He wasn't here for a fuck. He was here on a mission—a mission of death.

His gaze roamed over her from the top of her dark head, down her athletically-fit body, to her dainty little feet. God, she looked good enough to eat. Dalton shuddered. The thought brought back images of the night before in vivid detail and caused his mouth to water.

Again, he got the feeling he knew her from somewhere other than the night before, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Will you help me?" she asked, breaking into his thoughts.

He forced his gaze off her and looked out over the crowd of dancers below. "Why should I?"

"Because if he's not stopped the world will pay. He grows stronger and bolder as the years go by. We have to end his reign of terror."

He almost laughed at the way her words sounded like some corny carnival spiel. "I thought your kind stuck together."

Dalton glanced back at her in time to see the momentary burn in her eyes. Apparently he'd hit a sore spot.

"I am nothing like him and I want to see him dead even more than you do."

"How do you know I want him dead?"

The smile that curved her lips was cruel and he nearly shivered in fear as he briefly glimpsed her fangs. "Because I know what he did to you...or rather, to your family."

A jolt of pain and sorrow shot through the length of his body. That was something he didn't talk about—ever. "Leave me and my past out of this."

She moved closer and leaned into him. "I'm afraid I can't do that. I may not know all the details, but I do know Diego stole your family away from you. Wouldn't you like to see

him pay for his sins?"

More than she could know, yet her question brought back the guilt he felt over what he was about to do. It wasn't too late to call the whole thing off. He could just tell the guys he couldn't get her to leave with him... On the other hand, if he didn't do this, what did that say about his future? He was a slayer—a *vampire* slayer. It was his job to rid the world of those who preyed on mankind.

The phone in his pocket began to ring. He pulled it out and held it up to his ear, plugging the other ear with his finger.. "Yeah?"

"We're ready."

He nodded, though Santos couldn't see it. "We'll be there."

Dalton flipped the phone closed and slid it back into his pocket, noticing the odd look Alexis gave him. "My men. They think they've found Diego." The lie rolled so easily off his tongue, but it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Then they're in grave danger."

He didn't like the sound of that.

She breezed past him, stopping at the top of the stairs leading to the lower floor. "Are you coming?"

Well, this was what he wanted—wasn't it? He followed her out of the club and led her around to the parking lot where he'd left his car. Dalton opened the door for her and waited until she was in to close it before going around to the other side, sliding under the wheel.

"Where are we going?"

"Out into the desert. They gave me the directions." Okay, so that was a lie. He knew beforehand where to go, but no need to tell her that. He glanced over at her. "You look so familiar," he said without meaning to.

A brief flash of what he would guess was panic reflected in her eyes before she quickly masked it. Something weird was definitely going on here.

They rode out of town in silence. "You said I looked familiar to you," she quietly said as she stared out the window.

"You do. I noticed it the first time I saw you."

She glanced around at him. "I know why."

His stomach knotted. "Why?"

"Your first kill," she whispered in a voice laced with pain. "I was there."

He shook his head. "No, that's impossible. Only vampires—" He stopped himself before finishing the sentence. *She's a vampire.* His mind drifted back to the day he learned to hunt the night creatures.

*A cold, shiny metal stake was pressed into his equally cold hand as he stared at the snarling, hissing creature on the ground at his feet. He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat as a firm hand gripped his shoulder and squeezed.*

*"Remember what they did to your family, son," the older man said.*

*Images of his young wife's mutilated body cradled in his arms as the life faded from her eyes haunted him. The way the sparkling blue he loved to gaze into turned into a dark, emotionless black moments before she attacked him—their child still nestled in her womb. Anger welled up within his young body and before he realized it, he was sitting atop the thing, plunging the silver stake into its*



*heart over and over until the man behind him pulled him away.*

*"That's enough, son."*

*Dalton kicked at the beast before stepping away. He lifted his gaze to the house silhouetted by the rising sun. A woman stood just inside the doorway, safely tucked away from the sun's rays. She moved to step forward but arms wrapped around her and just as quickly as she was there, she was gone.*

Dalton blinked. "You disappeared."

"Maximal," she growled. "Swooping in to save the day when he knew I wanted nothing more than to rip your heart out."

"Why?" He sounded shocked even to his own ears.

"Because he was mine. Paul never hurt a living soul. I fed him nightly for all of his short existence."

"Did you love him?" He didn't know why, but her answer was important.

She sighed and looked away. "No. I felt only regret where he was concerned, and all you did was make that emotion grow."

"Why regret?"

"Because I made him," she whispered.

Alarm raced through him. "I thought you said you never killed anyone."

"I haven't. I merely helped him to be reborn. It was Diego who did the killing, though it was because of me. Death seems to be my shadow."

"Explain to me again why you need me."

She made a noise he assumed was a scoff. "Because the Moirae have decreed it and once they say it, it is so. Regardless of what those involved think," she angrily replied.

This still wasn't making any sense to him, but it didn't really matter. They were almost at the rendezvous point. However, a niggling in the back of his mind made him doubt what he was about to do. He wanted to see Diego dead as much as the next person, so was he about to toss his only chance at reaching that goal to the winds?

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Alexis focused her gaze forward and narrowed her eyes as she saw the vehicles waiting in the darkness. "Your team is waiting, but for what?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Huh?" He sounded innocent—too innocent.

"The van, two trucks and five people standing around them up ahead." She turned to focus her gaze on him. "I can see in the dark, remember?" She tapped her temple with a fingernail.

He looked uncomfortable and every instinct told her this was wrong. "They're only here to help us. I told you we were meeting up with them, remember?"

"They cannot be involved. Unless you wish to see them dead." It wasn't a question. Diego would take great pleasure in killing them.

"No," he quickly replied. "Why would you say that?"

"Because Diego will kill them one by one as you watch and bathe in their blood before mixing yours along with it."

Dalton shook his head. "But he's not here."

She turned her dark eyes on him and stared without blinking. "He's much closer than you realize, but he's not the only monster stalking the night. Beware the choices you make,

Dalton, for they could affect more than you realize.”

Alexis looked back out the window waging a silent war against her instincts. She knew what was going on, but what could she do to stop it? No matter how much the thought displeased her, she needed this man. All she could do was hope it would all work out.

Dalton parked the car a few minutes later and Alexis let herself out without a word. She moved away from the group of men as dread wrapped around her like a living, breathing thing. There was still time to leave, to flee, but she was no coward. She would stand and meet her fate head-on, regardless of the outcome.

“Boss,” she heard a voice say.

Alexis took several more steps away from the men and tried to ignore the chill bumps on her arms, the hairs standing on end at the back of her neck. She peered out across the desert as a coyote cried out in warning, an owl hooted as it swooped down from the top of a tall cactus to catch its meal, and a gentle breeze blew. The warning signs were all there, but she refused to believe the man she needed so desperately would turn on her.

“What are you doing?” Dalton asked from behind her.

“Listening to the voices of the night.” She wrapped her arms around herself, though the cool air didn’t really bother her. Something much deeper chilled her blood this night. A wolf growled in the distance—Malachi.

*Stay away*, she warned in silence, not wanting to see her friend hurt in any way.

*Danger*, he responded, his voice growing stronger as he neared.

*Nothing I can’t handle. Go my friend, make sure your territory is safe.*

Malachi growled in response but already the link between them weakened as he moved further away. Alexis let out the breath she’d been holding. At least he would remain safe—she glanced over her shoulder—as would Dalton. Malachi wouldn’t think twice of ripping Dalton’s heart out if he thought the other man meant her harm, regardless of what any prophecy said.

Dalton moved away—toward the others. “You know what to do,” he whispered.

She heard the faint sound of a crossbow bolt clicking into place and turned to face the men who watched her. Her eyes locked with Dalton’s as stinging pain ripped through her left shoulder.. Alexis reached up and jerked the silver-tipped shaft from her flesh as another hit its mark, but she never took her eyes off Dalton. She wanted him to see just exactly what he was doing, that she wasn’t some unfeeling monster as he thought her to be, but a living, breathing being.

Alexis growled low in her throat and hissed in pain as another arrow hit, tearing into her left side followed by yet another in her right. When the fifth arrow struck very close to her heart, Alexis stumbled back and fell to her knees before collapsing onto her back.

She lay there, gasping for air as pain flooded her system. “Simon,” she whispered as a blood-red tear trailed down her face. “I should have listened to you.” But it was too late for regrets. What she should have done and what she did were two completely different things and of little consequence anymore. Hindsight was a wonderful thing, but it wouldn’t—couldn’t—save her now as the cold of the night crept in. Millions of tiny stars winked overhead and slowly faded from her sight as the darkness enveloped her in its pitch black shroud.

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Simon doubled over, claspng a hand against his chest as unbearable pain seized his heart in its unrelenting grasp. His breath hissed out between clenched teeth.

"Fuck!" he swore, forcing his taut muscles to relax.

He straightened, tossed his rag aside and stalked out of the club into the dark alleyway behind the building. *Alexis is in need, Maximal*. He sent the command clear and sharp along the mental path he'd used just that morning. There was no time to waste with modern telephones.

Simon flashed himself from the alley to Alexis' side in the blink of an eye and dropped to his knees in the sand beside her. "Don't you dare die on me, kid," he muttered, jerking the remaining arrows from her torn body.

"What the hell?" a strange, male voice barely broke through his consciousness along with the sounds of rushing feet.

Simon raised his hand, erecting a shield around himself and Alexis without ever lifting his gaze from her small form. He then set to work on stemming the flow of blood from her wounds as Maximal appeared beside them with an orange-brown urn in his hand.

"This should aid her healing. He would have sent more had I allowed it," Maximal said, not wasting time with hellos.

"He worries too much. If he would just tell her the truth—"

"He won't do that and you know it. You also know why." Max poured the contents of the urn into a cup that materialized in his free hand.

Simon pulled her into a sitting position. "I fear she won't accept it. She's given up on us."

"Then what are we to do?"

Simon looked into Max's eyes. "I will do what needs to be done and face the consequences of my actions later."

"She'll be pissed if you do that, not to mention the Powers. You take a lot onto yourself by pissing them off."

"What choice do we have but to remove hers? And don't worry about the Powers. I can deal with them." Simon took her face into his hands and forced her to look him in the face. "Open your eyes, Alexis," he ordered.

Her dark eyes cracked open, though just barely.

Simon took the opportunity offered him and seized control over her mind. "You will take that which is offered so you may heal yourself." She tried to pull away and he tightened his hold on her. "Do not disobey me in this, Alexis. Drink." He glanced at Max. "Feed her while I work on healing her wounds."

Max took Simon's place in holding her upright and lifted the cup to her lips. "You shouldn't be doing this. You aren't supposed to be using your powers."

"Yeah, and he" —he pointed over his shoulder at the men—"wasn't supposed to attack her, either. If they couldn't foresee this happening, then they'll just have to deal with my helping."

Simon set to work on healing the horrific wounds in Alexis' body. He spread one hand out on her back and the other between her breasts. Heat formed in his chest then moved down his arms and through his fingers into her body, sealing and repairing her wounds in the process. Once finished, Simon pulled back and wiped his sweaty brow.

"Take her back to the motel, Max, and see to it she feeds properly. I'll be there to join you shortly."

"You can't give her blood, Simon."

"I know, but at least I can command her to drink if she refuses." He rose to his feet and watched as Maximal picked up Alexis' seemingly lifeless form and cradled it to his chest. He could feel the other man's love for her, but it wasn't meant to be. He shifted his gaze to the men on the other side of the force-field, to the man who was her destiny. How could he do such a thing to her of all people?

"Don't forget what Dalton means to us, and I can handle her." Max glanced toward the slayer. "What will you do about him?"

"I'll enlighten him." He paused and inhaled deeply. "Go. Malachi approaches and the last thing we need is for him to see her in such a shape."

"Don't hurt the boy too badly."

Simon rolled his eyes. "And have to face Alexis' wrath? The pup is hardly worth it."

"I wasn't talking about the wolf."

"I already told you I won't hurt him, now go," Simon ordered, turning his back as Maximal vanished from sight with his burden.

A tall, dark-haired man stepped from the darkness. "Now's not the time, Malachi," Simon said before the youngster could speak.

"I smell blood," Malachi responded as if that would excuse anything. "More precisely, Alexis' blood. I told her she was in danger but she sent me away. I came as soon as I felt her pain."

Simon waved his hand over the desert sand, wiping away all traces of Alexis' blood. "There's no more blood; your services aren't needed here."

"What'd they do to her?" the wolf growled as he took a menacing step forward.

Simon turned the full force of his gaze on the young Lycan. "It is none of your concern. Go home."

"I swear" —the wolf pouted as he kicked up a cloud of sand—"I never get to have any fun around here. Tell Alexis I was looking for her." He glared at Dalton and pointed. "And I'll deal with you later."

"Malachi!"

Mal's brow furrowed. "I'm going." He sulked off into the darkness.

Once he was certain the boy was truly leaving, he turned his attention back to the slayer and his band of men. With a wave of his hand, the shield fell and he slowly made his way toward the group.

"I suggest you leave this place, never to return. If you know what is good for you, you'll forget all you knew about Alexis and what happened this night," he suggested in a deceptively calm and quiet voice. "If our paths ever cross again...I won't be so lenient the next time."

He watched them move to their vehicles and disappear into the night, then he turned his attention to the Master Slayer. "Why?"

## Chapter Ten

Dalton took a step back. He recognized the man as the barkeep from the club Olympus, but he looked...different. His eyes were an odd swirling-silver that caused chills to chase down his spine.

"What are you?" Dalton asked.

"You're not ready for the answer to that." The silver-eyed man stepped closer. "Now, answer my question. Why did you do that to her?"

"It's my job!" He found himself yelling at the other man, though now he'd said it out loud, it sounded a rather weak excuse.

"If that's the best you can do, then you don't deserve her."

As if he didn't already know that. He'd never asked for any of this to happen, yet it did.. How long could he deny what he felt for her? The relief he'd felt when the other men appeared to help her went beyond words—and relief should have been the last thing he'd felt at that moment.

He hated to admit fault, but in this case he was definitely at fault. "They weren't supposed to kill her. We just wanted to talk to her."

"You fool. She would have told you anything you wanted to know."

Dalton lowered his gaze. "How do I fix this?"

"You help her. Do the one thing she asked of you. Everything else will fall into place when the time is right."

"She'll never trust me again."

"Can you blame her?" Simon asked as he took another step closer. "You can't understand why she needs your help and that clouds your judgment. So I will enlighten you...but this is to remain between us."

Dalton nodded. "Anything it takes."

Dalton flinched as the other man reached out and grasped his cheeks in his hands.. His eyelids fluttered closed as images assaulted his mind. He saw everything Diego had done to Alexis, the things the monster had done to his own family, and worst of all, what would be done to him.

Pain gripped Dalton's heart as he watched his own death. "Enough," he whispered as Simon released him.. "I won't survive this, will I?"

Simon shook his head. "Not as you are." He stepped back. "It is how things must be if she is to win."

"And if she loses?"

"Let us all pray that doesn't happen."

Dalton ran a hand through his hair. "That bad, huh?"

Simon lifted his hand and reached forward. "I could show you."

He jumped backward. "That's okay. I don't really want to know."

The other man gave him a serious look. "You can't tell anyone what I just showed you, especially not Alexis. It could change the way everything plays out."

"Then why'd you show me?"

"Because I saw no other way. Would you have helped her otherwise?"

Dalton thought about it. Would he have? He honestly didn't know. "She'll never trust me again."

Simon laughed. "You'd be surprised what she'll do. Even if she doesn't trust you, her sense of right and wrong will force her to work with you. But I don't think it will be an issue. Whether she admits it or not, she's already in too deep."

"You're not making any sense. In what too deep?"

"Why would any woman forgive such a thing?" Simon asked pointedly.

"Are you telling me she—" He couldn't even finish the question.

"Yes, though she's not willing to admit it yet. She's still hung up on the past."

Dalton narrowed his eyes on the other man. "And before I forget, what happened to my men? Won't they come back looking for me?"

Simon flashed him a grin that sent chills down his spine. "No, they won't be back. They think you're dead."

"Great," Dalton murmured.

Simon shook his head. "It's for the better, really. Now come, Maximal will need our help, whether he wants to admit it or not."

One minute they were in the desert, the next he was standing outside a motel room. "How the hell...? Where's my car?"

Simon shook his head. "It's in the club parking lot and don't ask things you don't really want the answers to." He turned to walk away.

"Wait, aren't you coming in?"

Simon smiled. "I'm not needed for this. You'll do fine, just knock on the door." He pointed to the room door.

Dalton glanced at the door and back to the man who was now gone. That was one seriously creepy dude. He returned his attention to the door and knocked.

The door jerked open to reveal one seriously pissed off vampire. He swallowed hard.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the angry vampire asked.

"I'm here to help."

The vampire sneered. "Haven't you helped enough?" But he left the door open and walked back to Alexis' side.

Rage built in Dalton as he watched the man he assumed was this Maximal person Simon had mentioned begin to undress Alexis. He slammed the door shut and strode up to the end of the bed. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Saving the life you nearly took," Maximal shot back as his eyes began to glow red.

"What's her being naked got to do with it?"

The other man sighed and closed his eyes. "When one Nosferatu feeds from another, it's a highly sexual experience. Getting the clothes out of the way to begin with just makes it that much easier."

Now his blood was really pumping. "I don't think so." *No one is sleeping with her but me. She is mine..*

Dalton paused. Where the hell had that thought come from? He was confused and his emotions were running high, making it even harder to think.

The other man began to undress himself once he'd removed all of Alexis' clothes. "I suggest you shuck yours, too, unless you want them ripped and torn apart later," he said,

looking pointedly at Dalton.

Maximal climbed into the bed with Alexis and positioned himself behind her. "Stay over there, human, until I tell you it's safe to approach."

Dalton bristled at the other man's authoritative tone. "Look, I don't know you from Jack and I sure as hell ain't taking orders from you."

"You will if you value your life. She will rip you to shreds in this state." The man's words were growled and his eyes glowed red. "She'd kill me if I let anything happen to you," he added almost reluctantly and in a much quieter tone.

Dalton really wanted to say something else but thought better of it. He turned away and slowly began to undress. Once finished, he swallowed his nerves then turned back toward the bed in time to see Maximal sink his fangs into Alexis' neck.

"Hey, I thought you were supposed to be feeding *her*," Dalton shouted.

Maximal withdrew, swiping his tongue over the puncture marks in her throat. "I have to build the need within her first or force her to comply. Which would you prefer I do?"

The thought of forcing Alexis to do anything was unacceptable. She was so strong-willed and he didn't want to see her spirit broken, not even to save her life. "Do what you have to," Dalton conceded, running a hand through his hair. He didn't really trust the other man and if he had to guess, he'd say Max wasn't too trusting of him either. For her sake they'd just have to get along. His guilt was eating him alive over what he'd done to her, even if he hadn't been the one to pull the trigger.

Alexis turned her head toward Max's throat, her fangs glistening in the dim lights. A shudder ran through Dalton's body as he watched her teeth pierce the other man's neck. He was trained to stop this sort of thing and here he was, offering himself up like some sort of human sacrifice. He really needed his head examined.

The way her mouth moved over Max's throat was intoxicating and very arousing. The muscles in her throat worked as she drew his blood into her body. His mind drifted from the reality of what she was doing to images of her mouth moving over his cock like that. Dalton felt himself harden; an act that surprised him.

"Enough, Alexis," Maximal's deep voice whispered as he caressed her cheek. The man's gaze moved to look at Dalton. "Get the bottle and pour some into a glass."

Dalton nodded. Tearing his eyes away from the show the two were putting on, he moved to the table between the two double beds in the room and uncorked the bottle. He flipped over a glass and filled it with the red fluid before replacing the cork and moving to the bedside.

Maximal grabbed the glass Dalton held out and downed the contents. "More," he said as Alexis' mouth continued to work against his throat.

Dalton didn't ask questions, though a million different ones flooded his mind. He quickly refilled the glass and turned back to the bed, holding it out to the other man. Alexis' hand clamped down around his wrist and she turned to look up at him, blood running down her chin.

He watched in fascination as she licked her lips and rose up onto her knees before him. "Eli," she whispered in a throaty tone, running her finger over his chest and along the base of his neck. The feel of her fingernail scraping against his skin sent chills racing through him. The sound of his given name on her lips made his heart turn flips in his chest.

"Alexis," he whispered back, forgetting all about Maximal as he gazed into the dark depths of her eyes.

Her mouth collided with his, her tongue forced its way between his lips. He'd never been with a forceful woman before. Dalton slid his hands up her sides as she pulled her lips from his and trailed kisses along his jaw and down his throat.

A sharp, burning pain seared his skin as she sank her fangs into his flesh. He felt blood trickling down his chest, her lips and tongue working against his throat, her hands gripping him by the arm and shoulder tightly. His head began to swim, his mind to numb, and the room grew dark.

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"Alexis, that is enough," Maximal said.

She ignored him, enjoying the taste of fresh human blood along her tongue. She hadn't fed like this in so, so long – a lifetime.

"Alexis!" Maximal shouted, breaking through her hunger-induced haze.

"Oh gods," she breathed, shoving herself away from Dalton who fell limply backward onto the bed. His large form bounced on the mattress before coming to rest.

Alexis worried her bottom lip and looked to Maximal for help. "Did I kill him?"

Maximal crawled toward Dalton on the bed and slid his arm beneath the other man's head. He sank his fangs into Dalton's neck, only taking enough for a bond before closing the wounds. Biting his own wrist open, Maximal pressed the wound to the other man's lips and compelled him to drink.

"Don't turn him, Max. I can't allow it."

Maximal nodded his dark head. After a moment, he pulled his arm back and closed the wound. "I gave him only enough to keep his heart beating. Can you manage to get him a glass of water? He needs fluids."

Alexis scrambled from the bed and hurried to the sink to fill a glass sitting on the counter. She rushed back to the bed, sloshing water all over herself and handed it to Maximal with a shaky hand.

"Are you sure he's okay?" If she'd killed him, she'd never forgive herself. What was he even doing here?

"I'm certain he's fine, Alexis. I tried to talk him out of it but he insisted. I think he regrets his actions."

Unless she missed her guess, she'd have to say Maximal didn't sound the least bit pleased by Dalton's remorseful ways. She sat down on the bed and stroked Dalton's hair.

"You called him Eli," Maximal pointed out.

She blinked up at him. "I did?"

Max nodded. "Is Dalton not his name?"

"Last name, though he said everyone calls him by it. His name is Jonathan Eli Dalton." She gazed down at the man she'd harmed – the last person she'd ever want to harm.. "Eli is a good name."

"By the gods, Simon was right. You do love him."

She started to deny it, but what was the point? Max could read minds after all. "So? Is that so bad?" She leaned down and kissed Dalton on the forehead. "How long do you think he'll be out?"



Before her words had died away, Dalton's hand lifted up to cup her cheek. "I'm okay."

"You don't look it," she said on a relieved laugh. "You're so pale." Alexis helped him to sit up as Maximal retrieved another glass of water.

She watched him down the contents of the glass and hand it back. "I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you." Alexis rubbed her hand across his back, enjoying the feel of his muscles beneath her palm.

He shook his head. "I pretty much asked for it by putting you in this position." His gaze bore into hers. "How are *you* doing?"

"Better," she confessed as Maximal pressed a glass into her hand.

"Drink every drop of that," the ancient Nosferatu ordered.

Alexis had to fight the urge to salute him. To keep herself from making some wise crack, she put the glass to her lips and downed the contents. "Happy?"

"I will be when your color comes back. The two of you look like the pale twins."

Alexis burst out laughing. "We may both be a little pale, but I seriously doubt we could pass for twins." She ran her hands down her sides to emphasize the difference in her form from Dalton's. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine." Dalton scratched his head. "He gave me blood, didn't he?"

"I had no choice, slayer, or I wouldn't have bothered."

"It won't...change me, will it?" Dalton asked, his voice catching.

Alexis shook her head and slid her hand under his chin to make him look at her. "No, it won't change you. It was just enough to keep you alive. Drinking the water helped and I think Maximal is using the link the two of you now have to keep you going."

"Keep me going?"

"You should be passed out from that much blood loss," Maximal informed the other man.

Alexis' stomach grumbled and she quickly slapped her hands over it, blushing in embarrassment. "I guess I didn't get enough yet." She reached out and caressed the side of Dalton's face.

"You can't take anymore from him," Maximal pointed out in a stern tone.

Alexis pouted. "I know that. I wasn't trying to, but what's in the bottle is cold."

"That may be, but it's good for you.. It came from a very powerful Nos and will aid your healing more quickly." Maximal stared at her without blinking, effectively giving her the creeps.

"I know how to handle this," Dalton said, climbing uneasily to his feet and grabbing the bottle as he headed for the sink.

"What are you doing?" Max asked as Dalton turned on the faucet and placed the bottle in the sink.

"Hot water. It'll warm up the bottle and the contents inside without overdoing it," he explained.

Max's eyebrows shot up. "That's actually a pretty good idea."

Dalton flashed a grin back at the other man.

"I'm hungry and horny and all you two can do is stand there, grinning at each other," Alexis grumbled, flopping back on the bed to stare up at the ceiling. She fingered the cross between her breasts; a cross identical to the one Dalton wore around his neck.

Dalton was back at her side, kneeling on the floor and leaning against the bed to nibble at her ear much faster than a man in his current condition should have been able to move. Chills raced along her skin as he sucked, licked and nibbled her ear lobe.

"Alexis, sit up and drink this," Maximal ordered, holding yet another glass out to her.

"Not now," she moaned, closing her eyes and losing herself in the sensations bombarding her body.

"Yes now, or I make him leave. We can't have you accidentally killing him."

She pouted but pulled away from Dalton and took the glass. "You're no fun, Max."

"Well, your going homicidal on us isn't fun either. Drink up, get your strength back—both of you, then we'll have a little fun." He watched Alexis like a hawk as she drank her blood and Dalton drank his water.

"You mean you're staying?" Dalton asked between drinks.

Maximal raised a brow. "You think I can leave like this and be comfortable?" He motioned toward his erection.

"You could always—" Dalton slid his hand over his own erection "—and relieve yourself."

"What's the matter pretty boy? Not man enough to take me?" Maximal taunted.

Alexis felt Dalton bristle at Max's jibe. "Boys, this isn't a pissing contest. Let's just try to get along."

Max pointed at Dalton. "Why? It's his fault we're even here."

## Chapter Eleven

Dalton scrambled off the bed and stood toe-to-toe with the older man. He narrowed his eyes and glared at the vampire. "I made a mistake," he growled between clenched teeth.

"A mistake that almost killed her," Max replied, jabbing Dalton in the chest.

"Come on, guys. This isn't really necessary."

"Yes it is," Max replied. "He needs to learn his place in the food chain."

Alexis groaned and dropped her head into her hand. Dalton turned back to the vampire. "I am not food."

"Oh really? What do you think humans exist for? It sure isn't for the benefit of the world. All you do is destroy it and each other." Max ran a hand through his hair as he vented his anger.

Dalton tilted his head to one side. "At least I can walk in the sun without turning into burnt toast."

He smirked at the look of disbelief on the vampire's face. There, let him chew on that one for a while. It's about time someone showed Mr. High-and-Mighty he wasn't such a big shot just because he had supernatural powers.

Dalton's smirk lasted all of two seconds before the other man's lips crashed down against his. He sucked in a breath through his nose, his eyes widened in disbelief and his heart threatened to beat him to death. Behind him, Alexis let out an excited whoop.

Placing his hands on the other man's chest, Dalton shoved to push him away from him. He sucked in a breath when Max's mouth pulled free of his own. His arms dragged over his mouth, wiping the man's slobber off him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he nearly shouted.

"What does it feel like?" Max retorted, moving in to clamp his mouth against Dalton's once more.

The man's large hand slid down Dalton's side to grasp his cock firmly in hand. Dalton squirmed, trying to get away, and the vampire tightened his grasp.

"Don't fight it," Maximal murmured against Dalton's lips, pumping his hand up and down the shaft of Dalton's hard cock.

He stood there with his hands against Max's chest debating what to do next. Push the man away or pull him closer? He'd never been so torn in his life. Alexis' hand slid along his back and over his ass as she moved up behind him and nipped at his shoulder. Her tongue swirled over the skin of his shoulder blade as Max's tongue slid between his lips.

A hand grabbed his and pulled it down to Max's hard length. Hesitantly, Dalton wrapped his fingers around the rigid flesh. He felt funny holding another man's dick in his hand, yet had to admit it didn't feel much different from his own.

"Pump your hand like this," Maximal murmured, demonstrating the hard, firm strokes he craved—leading by example.

Alexis kissed all over his back, grasped his hips and walked him back toward the bed. She licked his jaw line and nipped at his ear. "Relax, Eli. You'll enjoy it. I promise." Her warm breath washed over his ear, sending electrical darts to race out over his skin.

Slowly, he lowered himself down to the bed, gasping as the other man pushed him back

into a prone position and levered himself above him. Dalton stared up into the man's hazel eyes, noting for the first time how his eyes weren't what he referred to as 'vampire' black.

"Your eyes..." he began as Max's mouth moved across his chest in a series of nips and licks, devouring his flesh in the process.

Alexis appeared over him, a smile on her beautiful face. She licked his lips, soft teasing little motions that had his cock hardening even further. He reached up, tangled his hand in her long hair and held her to him. His tongue broke the line of her luscious lips and tangoed with her own. She moaned and he sucked the sweet sound into his mouth, swallowing it into his body as he felt a tongue swirl around the sensitive head of his cock.

Dalton's entire body stiffened and jerked at the unexpected sensation. "What's he—?" he began, trying to lift himself up off the bed.

Alexis pushed against his chest, holding him down as she slid her tongue between his lips. "Don't think about it, Dalton," she murmured against his skin. "Just feel."

Oh, he felt alright! Felt as though the top of his head was going to blow off at any given moment as the pressure built within his body. Oh God, he was going to come because a guy was giving him head. He'd never survive the shock of it.

Dalton refused to be afraid. He wasn't afraid of anything and he was a big enough man to admit he found another man attractive. As much as his mind wanted to believe he was under some sort of vampiric compulsion to partake of this threesome, his body knew otherwise.

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Alexis turned her head and watched the way Maximal's mouth moved over the hard length of Dalton's cock. Her vaginal walls clenched as a jolt of pure electrical need ripped through her. She'd never thought the sight of two guys going at it could be so hot, but damn! Dalton didn't even act as if he was under the thrall of the Nosferatu, though she wouldn't totally discount it.

She kissed a trail down his chest, over his stomach and then lifted herself up to push Maximal back. "Max."

He raised his head and stared at her through his hazel eyes questioningly.. She stared at him without speaking until he moved to claim the spot she'd vacated on the bed. Alexis slid onto the floor and took Dalton's cock into her mouth. She wanted to be the one to taste his seed, to feel the strength of the stream pumping into her throat.

Her tongue circled around the bulbous head and she smiled at the way it jerked and bobbed in reaction. Keeping her eyes open, she sucked and licked his taut flesh, tasting Max's lingering flavor along the thick shaft. She watched as Maximal kissed Dalton, their tongues tangling between them before Max closed the distance between them.

Oh gods, she was turned on—really turned on. All she wanted was to step back and watch them play, but she didn't dare for fear Dalton would put a halt to the whole thing. Pulling back, she sucked on her finger, getting it good and wet then circled her fingertip around his anus. He tensed and she sucked harder on his cock, continuously circling the puckered flesh behind his scrotum.

When he relaxed, she slowly pushed and slid her finger in and out, testing his reaction. Rising to her feet, she let his very hard cock slide from her mouth but kept her finger inserted in his body. She kissed his inner thigh and felt his hand tangle in her hair.

Pulling her hand up, she slid up along side him across from Max. Alexis nipped Dalton's jaw and swirled her tongue along the fine line. "I want to watch," she whispered huskily in his ear. "Will you let me?"

His mouth nipped at hers. "Anything – anything for you."

It sounded promising. She lifted her gaze to Maximal.

"He can say stop at any time and I will," the older man replied.

Alexis nodded and looked back down at Eli. How she'd get so attached to him so quickly, she didn't know. She caressed the side of his face and leaned in for another quick, deeply-passionate kiss. "If at any moment you become uncomfortable with this, just say stop."

He followed her mouth with his lips parted as if trying to catch her. Alexis couldn't help but smile and kissed him again. "Did you hear me?" she asked.

Dalton nodded. "Yeah, I heard. Kiss me again," he rasped.

Alexis chuckled as her lips pressed against his. He felt so damned good, all hard muscle and sinew. It made her shudder just to think about that super fine body sliding over hers in passion again.

Reluctantly, she withdrew and climbed from the bed. Grabbing one of the chairs from the table, she pulled it over in front of the dresser and sat down on it, legs spread wide. Maximal snapped his fingers and a vibrator instantly appeared in her hand. She winked at him and blew him a kiss as she turned it on and started to pleasure herself as she watched the men experience each other.

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If he was completely honest with himself and all those involved, he'd admit he was nervous as hell. His stomach tied in knots as butterflies danced against the delicate lining. He had no idea what was about to happen, or if he even wanted it to, but then he looked over at the rapt stare on Alexis' face, the sparkle in her dark eyes as she watched and he knew in that moment he would do anything for her – absolutely anything. It was the least he could do after what he'd nearly cost them all.

Dalton swallowed the lump in his throat and slid a hand over his stomach in the hope of gaining a little control over himself. The vampire – Maximal – stood at the edge of the bed staring down at him as if waiting for something. He licked his lips.

"What would you like me to do?" he asked in a throaty tone. Was that really his voice? He didn't even sound like himself.

Max held his hand out to him. "Sit up."

Dalton slid his hand into the other man's and allowed himself to be pulled into a sitting position that put Max's cock right in his face. The masculine, musky scent of sex and cock assaulted his senses. He licked his lips again.

"Now, what would you like to do?" Maximal asked.

That was the question of the hour. What did he want to do? He stared at the man's rather sizeable cock. Taking a deep breath, he reached out and touched it lightly with his fingers, his heart pounding in his chest painfully hard.

"Don't tease me, boy. If you're going to touch it –" Max placed his hand around Dalton's and helped him to take a firm hold " – then do it right."

Okay, he could do this. He released his hold on the other man and drew in a deep breath. Closing his eyes – running on instinct alone – he leaned forward and took Max's large

cock into his mouth. It felt strange at first, having a dick in his mouth, but as he slid his tongue over the salty flesh, he slowly warmed to the idea.

The thought of Alexis watching them should have made him even more nervous than he already was, but it didn't. It heightened the experience, made his arousal even stronger. Dalton kept his eyes closed and lost himself in the moment. Hands slid into his hair and helped to guide his motions, pulling and pushing on him with increasing speed.

The sweet taste of pre-come assaulted his taste buds, spurring him on. His hands slid over Max's hair roughened thighs, gripped his ass and then massaged the strong muscles. One of the hands in his hair slid away and captured one of his, drawing it to the man's balls which hung down, heavy with sperm.

"Massage them like you would your own," Max ordered, returning the stray hand to Dalton's hair.

He rolled them between his fingers, gently squeezing them in his palm and releasing them in a rhythmic pattern that matched the suction he placed on the man's cock. Max's fingers tightened in his hair.

"Harder," the man ordered.

Dalton scraped his teeth along the length of the hard shaft, licked and sucked for all he was worth while applying more pressure to the man's tightening balls. Max's hips moved, thrusting his hard length deeper into Dalton's throat, nearly gagging him with the sheer size and force of it.

"Oh gods, I'm going to come," Max groaned.

Those words gave him strength and confidence. Dalton pressed his tongue hard against the underside of the rigid shaft in his mouth, sliding it back and forth to match the rhythm of the suction he applied. He squeezed and rolled the man's balls in their sac, enjoying the way they tightened in his palm.

The first jet of hot come caught him by surprise as it hit the back of his throat and slid down. The thick, salty fluid filled his mouth, washing over his tongue and taste buds in a surprisingly tasty assault on the senses.

Maximal groaned, tightening his grip on Dalton's head to the point of pain before relaxing. The vampire's hand slid down his cheek and under his chin to raise his gaze. He bent at the waist and fastened his mouth to Dalton's, sliding his tongue between his parted lips.

The butterflies danced in the pit of his stomach once more as Max's tongue laved at the inside of his mouth. He moaned and wrapped his arm up around the man's neck.

"I love the taste of my come and cock on your lips," Max murmured. "I want to fuck you."

A jolt of panic shot through Dalton at the man's words. Was he really willing to go that far? The pop of a bottle cap caused him to jerk his gaze around to Max's right hand in which he held a bottle of lube. Without thinking, he reached out and took the bottle and poured a glob on his fingers. He flipped the cap closed and tossed it onto the pillows then rubbed it between his hands and smoothed it over the still taut flesh of Max's cock.

He darted his gaze over to Alexis where she sat between the beds in her chair, pumping the pink vibrator in and out of that sweet little muff of hers. Her mouth was slightly open as she moaned in pleasure. She bit her bottom lip and nodded her approval of what was about to

take place between the two men.

"I—" he began.

Max's finger pressed to his lips and his dark head shook. "You don't have to."

Dalton swallowed. He knew he didn't have to, but he was going to.. As nervous as he was about it, he wanted it. It may only be a one time thing, no one but the people in this room would know. He couldn't deny the curiosity he felt swirling around in the back of his mind.

"Will it hurt?" That was his biggest fear.

"Not as much as you might think. I can touch your mind now that we've exchanged blood. I can mask any pain there might be."

Maximal's tone sounded sincere enough. Any other time, the thought of a vampire messing around in his head would have been unnerving; right now, it was strangely comforting. He nodded and slowly turned on the bed. His knees rested on the carpeted floor, while his upper body leaned against the semi-hard mattress.

He flinched when he felt Max's fingers circle around the opening of his ass. The bottle of lube opened again moments before something cold touched his skin.

"Relax, Eli," Maximal cooed, rubbing a hand over his lower back.

Dalton bit his lip and closed his eyes as he concentrated on the sensations rubbing the lube around his ass stirred to life in his body. His cock was painfully hard and a bit uncomfortable pressing against the rough coverlet of the bed.

"Do it already," he ground out.

Max rewarded him with a smack on the ass. He jerked and looked over his shoulder at the man. "Not yet. Don't rush me." Maximal smacked Dalton's ass again when he continued to glare at him. "Alexis, love, please come over here and help the Slayer to relax."

The gentle hum of the vibrator ceased and the mattress moved under her soft weight. She crawled in front of him and lay down, rolling onto her back with her breasts in his face. Alexis massaged the soft mounds, pinching her nipples between her finger and thumb.

Dalton pushed her hand out of the way and placed his palm over her skin. Damn if she wasn't the softest thing he'd ever felt. She rolled toward him and he opened his mouth to taste the mound of flesh. He moaned as her fingers moved into his hair, holding him to her.

He laved at her nipple with his tongue, clamped it gently between his teeth, making her moan and writhe before him. God how he loved the reactions she gave to each and every move he made.

The pressure against the opening of his ass barely registered as Maximal pushed his cock into his body. Fingers bit into his hips, pulling him backward away from the sweet taste of Alexis.. She scooted forward as he pulled back.

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Maximal groaned. The man had one tight ass. The hot, moist confines enveloped him like a well made glove, gripping his hard cock in the most exquisite way. Tendrils of electricity shot through his body and his blood burned as it rushed through his veins. He hadn't intended for things to get this involved, but once Dalton's clothes had been discarded, he'd discovered the man had one fine body for a human.

He'd always thought of himself as a highly sexual creature. Man or woman, it made no difference to him. He enjoyed the human body in any size, shape or form. There were ways only a woman could please a man, and there were ways only another man could please a man.

He liked to enjoy the best of both worlds, and initiating Dalton was no hardship.

Slowly, he pushed his hard shaft into Eli, all the way to the hilt. He paused to give the man's body time to adjust to the newness of the situation before pulling back until only the tip remained. The condom he wore detracted some of the sensations, but he had no idea what human diseases the man carried—though he hadn't detected any with his super-human senses. Eli seemed healthy in every way, but he intended to have a little fun with Alexis before the night was through and this would make that transition easier.

His gaze moved up the length of Eli's strong back to where Alexis lay before him like a sacrifice, thrusting her pretty little breasts into the other man's face. All he had intended to do was get her to feed in order to save her, but he wasn't about to complain about the turn of events. He briefly wondered if Alexis and Eli even realized that what was being done was a completely conscious decision on the Slayer's part? He hadn't bewitched him or altered the man's train of thoughts at all to get his way.

Eli pushed backward into his hips, demanding more in an unconscious way. Max tightened his grip on the man's hips and thrust his cock deep. He pulled Dalton's hips back far enough so he could lean forward and reach around to grasp his hard cock. He pumped his hand and his hips in unison, striving for fulfillment as quickly as possible. If he was anywhere near as good at giving as he was taking, Max was in for one hell of a treat when their positions were reversed.

He pumped his hips harder and faster, pounding Eli's ass. Their bodies collided with a loud thwack that added to Max's arousal. His ass cheeks clenched and his balls tightened. The orgasm hit him full force, spewing his seed into the condom as his breath whooshed out of his lungs.

Maximal leaned forward, breathing hard and nipped at Eli's shoulder. Damn, if that hadn't been good. Slowly, so as not to cause him any further discomfort, Maximal pulled out and dropped down on his ass to lean against the other bed as he fought to catch his breath.



## Chapter Twelve

Dalton rolled onto his back and threw his arm over his eyes as his chest heaved. He felt really damned good and about ready to explode. He needed to come in the worst of ways. The real question was: how would he go about reaching orgasm? His arm slid off his eyes and he darted his gaze between Alexis and Maximal.

The vampire on the floor looked very sated, if the grin on his face was any indication. He looked back at Alexis and reached for her. Her mouth collided with his as she climbed on top of him, straddling his hips.

"Your turn," he murmured, running his hands along her curvy sides.

"Definitely my turn." She lifted herself up then pushed back down, impaling herself on his rigid cock. Nipping at his ear, she said, "And Maximal is watching."

"Let him." Dalton grabbed her hips, guiding her into a faster rhythm. Her pelvis collided with his, building the pressure within him even higher. His muscle strained, eager for release. Gritting his teeth, he rolled with her to pin her small body beneath him.

"Put it in," he whispered against her lips. "I want to feel your fingers around me." He pushed himself up enough to allow her hand to slide between them. His eyes closed and a sigh shuddered out of him as her fingers wrapped around him and stroked his taut flesh.

Her wet heat sent an electrical jolt shooting through his cock into his body. The tip slid against her wet folds to the edge of her opening, and he thrust his hips down, pushing himself in all the way up to his balls.

"Share," Maximal growled from behind them. His hand slid along Dalton's hip, pushing him back over onto his back.

"Can you take us both?" Dalton asked Alexis. He didn't want her hurt in all this.

She flashed him a wicked, sultry grin. "I can take anything you boys have to offer." Wiggling against him, she sent his blood to pumping even faster through his veins. He still regretted his earlier actions that had caused her to get hurt, but if it hadn't been for that, he might have missed out on this wonderful, mind blowing experience.

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Alexis gasped when Maximal smacked her across the ass with his flattened hand. She bared her fangs and glared at him over her shoulder as she continued to move her hips over Dalton's, sliding his wonderfully hard cock in and out of her muff.

A cold, liquidy drop hit her skin and slid down the crack of her ass, causing her to jerk. She glared at Maximal again, raising a brow when he shrugged. His calloused finger rubbed the gel into her skin, circling it around the opening of her ass before sliding his finger in and out as he rotated it slowly.

She moaned and pushed back against his finger and Dalton's cock at the same time, enjoying the duality of the situation. Dalton's hands at her hips pulled her forward and slammed her back against him once more. She reveled in the feel of his hard body beneath her, his thick shaft filling her, and Maximal's hands teasing her into a heated flurry of excited and supersensitive nerve endings.

Max removed his finger, leaving her feeling oddly empty. She moaned in frustration, riding Dalton as if there were no tomorrow. Alexis lost herself completely in the moment, not

wanting to think, wanting only to feel.

The tip of Max's cock pressed against her anus, pushing against the sensitive flesh to gain entrance into her body. She slid forward on Dalton and then slowly pushed back, impaling herself on both their hard lengths. His hands at her hips along with Dalton's slowed her movement, angering her. She didn't want to wait. She wanted to be filled, filled to overflowing and she wanted it now.

Gripping the covers on either side of Dalton's head, she gritted her teeth and shoved backward as hard as she could. A strangled cry of satiation ripped from her throat and she sucked in a breath to ease her burning lungs.

"Fuck me," she moaned, wanting—no, craving the sensory assault created by their cocks working in and out of her body. Her skin heated, stretched and pulled with their movements, intensifying the tendrils of sensation whipping through her.

Her orgasm caught her by surprise, pulsing through her in a rapid, frantic series of convulsions that shook her entire body. Each tiny movement from the men sent aftershocks racing through her.

"Stop," she gasped, pushing against Dalton's chest. She shook her head. "Stop, it's too much." Her body was so sensitized she couldn't take it anymore. The line between pleasure and pain merged until she couldn't tell one from the other.

Max withdrew and backed away so she could slide off Dalton. She rolled over onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling as her entire body continued to throb.

Dalton rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow to look at her worriedly. "You're not hurt, are you?"

She smiled at the concern in his voice. Reaching out, she caressed his cheek. "No, I'm not hurt, but I am one giant nerve." She laughed, unable to contain herself. "Every little movement sends me to quivering all over again."

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"Good to know I did my job," Dalton murmured. She was so beautiful when she laughed.

"You weren't the only one working here," Maximal pointed out.

Dalton glanced over at him. "What's a matter, big boy? Feeling left out?" He had no idea where that had come from, but he didn't care. What was the man going to do?

"That's funny, I'd have thought *you* were the one feeling left out," the man shot back.

Oh, that was such a low blow. "Well, why don't *you* do something about it?" Let him chew on that one. Instead of the come back Dalton expected, the man dropped to his knees and pushed Dalton's legs apart.

Rough fingers slid over his scrotum to cup his balls and roll them around. Max's other hand moved over Dalton's cock, sliding up and down over the taut flesh.

Dalton moaned softly at the expert way the man caressed him. He bent his head back and lifted his hips, enticing Max to do more.

"What do you want, Eli?" Maximal asked.

"For you to suck my cock," Dalton replied without hesitation. He didn't care if this wasn't something he'd have ever thought about before. He didn't care a man was touching him, bringing him exquisite pleasure. Sliding his hand across the bed, he massaged Alexis' breast and she giggled. At least she was happy and satisfied—and alive.

Max's mouth closed over his cock. Hot breath, the warm feel of his saliva enveloped him, causing him to shudder. The man's tongue swirled around the head of his penis, teasing it as it laved the head. Just the right amount of suction had him tensing from head to toe.

"Oh God, I'm going to come."

Maximal pulled back the instant the words passed Dalton's lips.

"What are you doing?" Dalton gasped, lifting his head to look at the man.

Maximal climbed to his feet and grabbed the bottle of lube and a condom off the table between the beds. He unwrapped the condom and rolled it down the length of Dalton's shaft, then squirted a glob of the lube into his hand. He smoothed the gel over Dalton's cock, slowly, teasing it as he covered every inch of the hard length.

He extended a hand to Dalton then pulled him up into a sitting position. "Time to return the favor," Maximal murmured, handing the bottle of lube over.

Dalton took the bottle and stared up at the man. Arrogance and a sense of authority radiated off him in waves, and yet he was telling Dalton to fuck him in the ass? Maximal nodded as if he'd been reading Dalton's mind, then turned to move to the other bed.

Eli watched the vampire lean against the bed, much the same way he had earlier. His firm, muscular legs spread wide, giving him an exceptional view of Max's large cock and balls hanging down against the pale green coverlet of the bed.

Swallowing, he slid from the bed and dropped to his knees behind Max. There was no need to be nervous. The man had offered himself up for this.. *It's not like you're doing anything he didn't ask for.* It was no different than fucking a woman in the ass—other than the hair, but that also depended on the woman.

Dalton nearly cracked up at his stray thoughts, but managed to contain himself. He squeezed some of the cold lube into his hand and tossed the bottle aside. Sparing a glance for Alexis, who was still sprawled out on the bed with a grin on her face, he reached out to touch Max.

The man looked over his shoulder at him with a scowl. "Surely you can do better than that."

Dalton was offended. He pushed down the rest of his inhibitions and smeared the lube around the opening of Max's ass before pushing his finger in.

"That's more like it," Max said, turning back around.

He'd never...which was the whole problem. Certain the man was well lubed up, he pulled his finger out and scooted forward on his knees.. He swallowed again.

Max wiggled his ass. "Come on, slayer. Ride it."

Dalton cracked up. "Ah, come on man. Cut that out." He slapped Max on the ass.

"Oh, do that again," the man moaned.

Raising a brow, Dalton smacked him again, enjoying the way his skin pinked when his hand made contact.

"Now slide it in."

Fuck that. He was driving this train and he'd do what he damned well pleased. Instead of following Max's growled demand, he rubbed the head of his cock along the crack of the vampire's ass and smacked him again for good measure. Dalton rubbed the bulbous head in a circle over the puckered flesh before him, enjoying the little moans filtering into the air.

"Stop teasing and do it already," Max growled.

Oh, but this was fun. He reached down to stroke the man's cock, cup his balls and roll them around in the palm of his hand. Max pushed backward as if trying to impale himself.. Dalton jerked back and smacked his ass again. "Not yet, Mr. Impatient."

"Dalton, I'm warning you."

Well, if he was so eager to get it... Dalton positioned the tip of his cock against the opening and pushed, sliding into the tight, hot confines. He heard Max's intake of breath and closed his eyes as muscles gripped his shaft like hundreds of tiny, caressing fingers.

He pushed until every rigid inch was embedded within Max's body, his balls hung heavy and aching with his need for release. Time slowly ticked by as he waited, pausing to give the man time to adjust to his invasion. Pulling back, he thrust his hips, burying his cock balls-deep once more. His fingers bit into Max's hips until they turned white, pulling and pushing to match the rhythm of his hips.

"Harder," Max demanded, shoving back to meet him thrust for thrust.

His hips pounded into Max's ass with hard, steady strokes that had them both panting for breath. Muscles ached and strained as he strove for fulfillment, which was just out of reach. Arching his back, he thrust his hips forward one final time, a loud groan of satisfaction rumbling from his throat as his seed spewed forth in a tidal wave as his orgasm shook him. He pulled back and collapsed onto the floor in a limp heap of sweaty muscle.

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Max rolled over and slid onto the floor facing Dalton. He gripped his cock and pumped it as he watched the other man watching him. The Slayer had surprised him, going at it with far more gusto than he'd credited him for. The man's arrival after he'd hurt Alexis had angered Max, but in light of the evening's events, he was glad he'd allowed the Slayer to stay.

He slid his hand up and down his hard shaft while he played with his balls with the other hand. Closing his eyes, he let his head fall back onto the bed. The night replayed before his eyes in exquisite details, bringing him to orgasm more rapidly than he had expected.

Hot, creamy jets spurted against his chest and abdomen. His breath sighed out in jagged little gasps as he pumped every last drop from his body.. Releasing his hold, he sagged back against the bed, breathing deeply.

"Not bad, slayer," he murmured, not bothering to lift his head.

"You either, vampire," Dalton replied. "I think I could sleep a week."

Maximal laughed. "Sleep does sound good." He vaguely registered Alexis' rhythmic breathing before succumbing to the sleep his body so desperately demanded.

## Chapter Thirteen

Dalton sat straight up in bed and furrowed his brow as memories from the night before came crashing to the forefront. "That son-of-a-bitch fucked me!" He darted his glance around the room, noting Maximal was nowhere in sight.

Alexis rolled over and peered up at him through sleep-filled eyes. "He didn't do anything you didn't ask for," she murmured. "And you gave as good as you got."

He gave her a shocked look. "I never," he denied.

She shook her dark head. "You most certainly did, though you were probably picking up on our emotions. Feeding between Nosferatu is highly sexual."

"I'm not a blood sucker."

She shrugged and shifted her body. "Doesn't matter. I am and so is he. You just got caught up in it."

"That is so unfair."

She chuckled and pushed herself up. "You weren't complaining about the fairness of it last night.." She leaned over and nipped his jaw then kissed his cheek. "It was very sexy. Turned me on so much to watch the two of you." She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch, refusing to comment on what she'd said. "Not yet dark, though there's no light coming through the windows."

Alexis waved a dismissive hand. "Special glass. This is a Mage-owned establishment. They cater to all walks of life."

"Mage? All walks of life? Just how many non-human creatures are there?"

A groan escaped her lips as she pushed herself up into a sitting position. She crossed her legs in front of her and stared at him. "Mages as in the magicks – witches. The major clans are Lycans, Mages, Mystwalkers and, of course, Nosferatu. There are also Wraiths and I've heard tale of Demons and Angels as well. I'm sure there are others out there that even I don't know about."

"Lycans? You mean werewolves?"

She laughed and reached to the floor for a shirt, which she pulled on. "Wolves, yes. Some change at will, others are at the mercy of the moon. The Mystwalkers are shifters, guardians of nature, and Wraiths are ghosts. Specters. Those who are not completely of this world."

He made a face.

"Now, surely you did not think that humans and Nosferatu were all there were on this world, did you? You arrogant fool." Her accent began to slip through her carefully enunciated words..

"Wait a minute. You've got an accent."

"Only when aggravated or really upset or super tired, like now. A gift from me Irish mother," she replied, letting the accent she'd spent so long hiding shine through.

"What about your father?"

She shrugged. "Never knew him. Just another passing shadow in me life. There long enough to make me then disappeared without a trace. Though in the seventeen-hundreds,

that was very easily done."

"Just exactly how old are you?" He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them.

"Two-hundred and thirty-three. I've been the creature I am for all of two centuries."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

She lowered her gaze and picked at the sheets.. "Would you be, if it happened to you? I was a slayer on the hunt.. A storm blew up quick as a heartbeat minutes before dusk. It was enough cover for Diego to surprise me and change me.. I fought.. Oh, how I fought, but we both see what good it did me."

She took a deep breath. "He buried me in the desert sand and left me there to fend for meself. Survive or die," she said on a humorless laugh. "What he didn't anticipate was Maximal finding me and taking me back to Nazryne to teach and train me."

"Nazryne?"

"I should not be telling you this, you being the Slayer and all, but Nazryne is the capital city of the Nosferatu. There I was kept safe from all that would harm me, including meself."

"Why would you have hurt yourself?"

She slid from the bed. "Because I had become the very thing I could not stand." Grasping the drapes, she stared outside. "They feared for me sanity, but they needn't have worried. Anger and the need for revenge was what kept me going all that time." Alexis glanced at him over her shoulder, a sad look on her face. "And that search for revenge is what brought me to you.."

"See, that's what I don't get.. Why do you need a human to help you? Surely you have powerful friends who'd be willing to go against him."

She shook her head. "It's been decreed by the Moirae—Fates. And once they say something, it cannot be changed. So, we have little choice but to follow the path they have set us upon." She moved to sit beside him on the bed. "Will you help or not?"

He nodded and reached up to caress her cheek. "I'll help you."

His answer brought a smile to her lips that lit up her whole face. "Now, if only we knew where he was."

"Aren't you connected to him in some way?"

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She narrowed her eyes at him.

"He did make you, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but I cannot sense him.. Mayhap he blocks me in some way." She stood and paced the room. Something niggled at the back of her mind.. As if she knew something and it desperately wanted her to realize it. Realization hit like a ton of bricks. She snapped her fingers. "The kid at the club."

"What?"

She swirled her finger around in front of her agitatedly. "The show of power at the club that first night. The kid was newly turned." She rubbed her finger below her nose across her top lip in thought. "He said he was...three days old. He reeked, horribly so. I had thought it the smell of the grave, but now that I think about it, it was worse—familiar."

She turned to stare at Dalton through wide eyes. "By the gods, Diego made him."

Laughter filled her head. She clutched her head in her hands and fell to her knees,

doubling over in pain.

*About time you figured that out. I was beginning to wonder if you had any sense in you at all,* Diego taunted.

Alexis grunted and groaned under the pressure he exerted on her mind. A familiar hand touched her on the back.

"Fight him girl. Use his link against him," a voice she couldn't place demanded at her ear.

She squeezed her eyes shut and ground her teeth together. "He's never used the damned link before." But she did as instructed. While focusing to keep him out of her head with one section of her mind, she used another part to backtrack down the path leading from her to him. Shadows surrounded her, dark and gloomy, sending a shiver down her spine. Mayhem and chaos reigned in his sick and twisted mind.

Just ahead a golden light shone, so out of place in the darkness that was his consciousness she was drawn to it. A book, ancient in appearance and bound in golden leather, rotated before her. She reached out to touch the image and was quickly jerked out of his mind and back into her own.

*Bitch,* he spat at her before fading completely from her mind.

She slowly peaked her eye open to find Dalton and Maximal both staring down at her.

"Find anything useful in there?" Max asked.

She shuddered. "Dark.." She swallowed. "Shadowy. Evil." She glanced at him. "What are you doing back here?"

"I felt your pain," Maximal replied. "Came the minute I felt you in distress. Was afraid lover boy over here had done a repeat of last night."

Dalton glared at Maximal as he helped Alexis off the floor.

"There was a golden book," she whispered.

"Are you sure?"

She gazed up at Maximal. "Positive.. The only light in his entire mind I could see. What is it that you know?"

"I've heard rumors of a golden book, but don't know anything for sure. I'll have to look into it."

She raised a brow at him. "And you will be letting me know, right?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'll let you know." Max gave her a quick smile. "I love it when you let your accent shine."

Dalton inched his way in between the two, his stance stiff and on edge. Alexis reached up to place her hand on his shoulder.. "I'm tired of hiding who I am, Max."

"Good," he replied. He darted an uneasy gaze at Dalton. "Take care of her. No more repeats of last night."

"Definitely no repeats of last night," Dalton replied, rubbing his ass.

Alexis nearly died laughing.

Maximal winked at Dalton and blew him a kiss. "What's the matter, lover boy? Having regrets?"

Dalton pointed at the other man. "You stay away from me."

Alexis stepped between the two. "That's enough." She looked from one to the other. "What's done is done. Get over it already."

"Tell him to keep his damned hands to himself then," Dalton returned, sounding like a petulant child.

Alexis rolled her eyes.

"What's the matter, sweetheart, too much of a man for you?" Maximal piped in. "Oh, and it wasn't my hands."

"Enough," Alexis growled, putting a hand on each man's chest. She jabbed Max with a finger. "You are not helping matters any."

"He started it," Max pointed out.

"Shush," Alexis replied, pushing him toward the door. She paused long enough to pull on her shorts then turned to look at Dalton. "I'll contend with you in a moment."

She followed Maximal out the door. "You should not be goading him like that, Maximal. He could no more help what happened last night than we could."

"It was his fault, Alexis. He nearly cost you your life. I think I'm entitled to harass him a little."

She rubbed her forehead and then narrowed her eyes up at him. "Tell me what you know about Simon, Max. I know I was not so far gone as to be imagining things. He was there before even you. How'd he be doing that? Empaths cannot teleport."

"Sorry, love, but that is one secret I cannot share, even with you."

She stomped her foot and growled in frustration. "Too many secrets and not enough truth."

"And with that, I'm going to see what information I can find about your golden book," he said, leaning forward to kiss her on the forehead. "Stay safe, little one." He was gone in the blink of an eye.

Alexis let out a slow breath before going back inside to face one very angry man.

"What was that all about?" Dalton demanded.

She shook her head.

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Dalton wanted to yell, to shout out his frustration. He felt violated, though deep down inside he knew he wasn't nearly as upset over the whole ordeal as he should be. Staring at her, he took note of something he hadn't noticed before.

"You're breathing."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Yes, Dalton, I breathe."

"Have you always done that?" He moved closer and put his hand on her chest. "Your heart is beating, too."

She placed her hand over his and looked into his eyes. "I'm not dead, Eli. I am very much alive, just no longer like you."

"The Sanctum doesn't know anything, does it?"

"I think they know more than they let on..." She shook her head. "Though I cannot figure out why they didn't tell the truth to begin with."

"Max's eyes aren't black," he said, suddenly remembering that little detail.

She shook her head. "No, they're hazel. He was born a Nosferatu, not created."

"And there's a difference between the two?"

"Very big difference, Dalton. Just about as different as night and day."

He laughed. He couldn't help himself. "That accent of yours is sexy as hell."



She raised a brow at him. "Are you getting frisky on me now?"

He jerked her into his arms and held her close.. "What do you think?" His deep, husky voice very nearly purred as he lowered his mouth to hers and tugged up the hem of his shirt she wore.

Dalton cupped the soft weight of her breasts, massaging the flesh in his palms. "You taste so good, feel so good."

She worked at the fastenings of his jeans. "And you're wearing too many clothes."

"I can take care of that," he replied, quickly doing away with the offending items.

Alexis inhaled deeply and wrinkled her nose. "You smell of old sex."

"Gee, that really helps to maintain the mood."

"Oh, no worries," she said, taking him by the hand and leading him to the bathroom. "We just clean you up."

Dalton followed her to the bathroom where she pushed the door open. He watched in fascination as she snapped her fingers and the shower began to run. "How'd you do that?"

Alexis shrugged one small shoulder. "Magick." She released his hand and grabbed a wash cloth and bar of soap from a shelf on the wall.

Dalton pulled back the shower curtain and stepped into the stinging, hot spray. The water pelted his back and shoulders, working some of the tension and soreness out of his muscles. Alexis climbed in beside him, grinning wickedly as she pulled the shower curtain closed.

He watched her rub the soap against the wash cloth then drop the soap. "Oops, I dropped it."

"Then I guess you'll just have to pick it up."

She clucked her tongue and shook her finger at him. "Not yet. We have to get you all washed up first."

Her warm hands wrapped around his rigid shaft, sliding up and down the length. The soap on her hands made her skin glide across his, making a sucking noise as she pulled the round head between her palms. She grinned up at him and he grinned back.

"If you keep this up, I'm afraid I won't last long enough to get to you." And oh how he wanted to get to her. He wanted nothing more than to fill her full of his sperm after riding her hard and fast.

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?"

He shook his head. "Maybe you should pick up that soap you dropped."

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Alexis turned around with her back to him and then bent at the waist to pick up the lost soap. She braced a hand on the edge of the tub and fished around in the shallow water for the small bar of motel-issue soap. Her hand brushed against the slippery thing and she quickly fisted her fingers around it.

"I got it!" she chuckled, holding it up at her side.

"Good." Dalton grabbed it away from her.

She tried to peer over her shoulder at what he was doing, but he was being sneaky and holding his hands where she couldn't see them. Leaning further over, she attempted to peek between her legs to catch a glimpse of what he was doing.

His cock slid between her ass cheeks, startling her with the unexpectedness of the

touch. One strong, calloused hand slid over her lower back, rubbing in circles as he continued to tease her flesh with his penis. Alexis moaned. He felt so damned good.

Dalton's hand slid down her body to cup her sex, rubbing her clit with the hard heel of his hand. His teeth nipped at her back and his tongue swirled over her in hot, wet little trails.

"I'm going to fuck you, Alexis."

"Oh gods, please do," she cried, rocking back against him.

His hand moved to be replaced by his hard cock.. He thrust forward as she shoved back, colliding in a loud thwack of flesh against flesh. She felt his hands slide over her skin, grip her hips and jerk her back to meet the pounding of his hips.

She loved this man. Loved him in ways she'd never dreamed possible. Enemy turned lover, and her destiny and the stupid prophecy no longer mattered other than it had brought them together.

Keeping one hand on the edge of the tub to help steady herself, she raised her other hand up to pinch and pull on her clit. Her entire body tingled and her head grew fuzzy from hanging upside down as her muscles tensed. The pressure built within in her until it exploded, sending her womb into spasms.

Her body milked his, begging his cock to spill its come into her. Alexis shoved back against him, riding the waves of her orgasm and seeking to make him join her in the blissful aftermath.

He gripped her hips harder, his fingers biting into her flesh. His hips pounded her with more force behind each thrust. The loud groan accompanying his release echoed in the small room, vying for dominance over the loud thump of her heart in her ears.

Dalton pulled out and Alexis dropped to her knees, unable to support her own weight in the aftermath. She leaned her head against the cold tub, sucking air into her burning lungs as her head continued to spin.

"You are so hot," Dalton breathed, rubbing a hand over her back.

Alexis laughed. "I am so dizzy."

He chuckled. "Get up, baby. We'll get you cleaned up and then we'll get out of here for a while."

She nodded in agreement and let him help her to her feet. They'd go to Olympus when done here. She hadn't mentioned it earlier, but she was starving. He probably needed to eat as well—too bad their menus were completely different. At the moment, he couldn't feed her without placing himself in danger and she wouldn't hurt him for the world. She had no idea when things had changed for her so drastically where the slayer was concerned.

## Chapter Fourteen

Rashad sat on his black marble throne with his back against one arm and his feet hanging over the other as he braided copper, gold and silver threads together. He was bored, but that was nothing new. He was also worried. Maximal had left in a hurry and hadn't yet come back.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the doors to the chamber flew open and Maximal marched in, pausing at the foot of the steps leading up to the throne.

Rashad straightened. Maximal looked pissed—royally pissed. "What's got you so pissed off?"

Max cocked his head to one side and stared up at him. "You."

"Me? What did I do?"

"This is all your fault," Maximal growled.

"Not this again, Max. Haven't we been over this enough? I can't tell her the truth, no matter how badly I want to. Do you think I like being separated from my own flesh and blood?"

Max ran both hands through his hair, his eyes glowing red. This was something more than just fury over not telling Alexis everything. He leaned forward in his seat. "What happened?"

"Her slayer nearly killed her, that's what happened."

Rage built in him so quickly steam was probably coming out of his ears. He leapt to his feet and rushed forward. "He what!"

"Rashad, what did you really expect him to do? In his shoes, she'd have done the exact same thing."

"The Moirae assured me she wouldn't be harmed." He turned accusing eyes on Maximal. "You were supposed to be protecting her."

"I can only do so much, Rashad. She's high strung, just like you once were at that age."

"What about Simon? Couldn't he have prevented this?"

Max shrugged. "Probably, but you know him and his damned code. There's a line that even he won't cross—not even for her."

Rashad breathed heavily as he tried to regain control over his emotions. His brow furrowed and he inhaled deeply. "What is that?" he murmured, stepping closer to Max. "Damn it all to hell, Maximal. You're drowning in her scent. What the fuck did you do?"

"I did what was necessary to save your daughter's life. She wouldn't feed. I had to force her. Even I can't deny the call of our instincts when feeding from another of our kind."

He ran his hands up through his short dark hair and let out a loud sigh. "Then I am indebted to you," he said between clenched teeth. He was thankful his commander had saved Alexis' life, though he wished the man had found another way to do so. "There is more you aren't telling me."

Max nodded. "Diego used his link with Alexis to taunt her."

Rashad's eyes widened. "He's never done that before. Why now?"

The other man shrugged. "She managed to trace the link back and saw something very disturbing in his mind."

"What did she see?"

"The Book of Antilles," Max replied.

"You are certain?"

"Golden leather-bound ancient book. Sounds like it to me, for I know of no other by that description."

"How would he even know of it?"

"Because he is your son, Rashad. That book should have been destroyed centuries ago."

"You know why it was created, Max, and you know Diego can't use the book."

"But he doesn't know that, and if the power corrupts her—"

"She is stronger than that," Rashad said.

"How can you be certain? We thought Diego would be, too, and look where he is now."

"Because she has to be." Rashad's expulsion of air was audible. "We knew it was to happen."

Maximal nodded.

"So the prophecy is finally fulfilling itself. I only hope she survives this."

"You and me both," Maximal readily agreed. "But the least you could do is tell her the truth."

Rashad shook his head and moved toward his throne. He slowly lowered himself back onto the stone seat and hung his head. "I cannot do that, Maximal. As much as it pains me to be separated from my own flesh and blood, I do not see how it would benefit any of us for her to know the truth at this time."

"I have watched over that child since the day she was born, Rashad. I've seen the way she mourned the father she never knew. If she is destined to die, at least let her die knowing who you are."

Rashad's head snapped up, his eyes burned. "She will not die," he rasped in a voice that was more growl than anything.

"For all our sakes, I hope you're right."

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"Dalton, I have to go to the club," Alexis said for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Why? Who's there that's so important you need to see? The bartender?"

"Are you jealous or just stupid?" she asked, hands on her hips. "I'm hungry and unless you care to offer up a vein, we really need to go. I'm still making up for everything I lost last night. Plus, even if you were willing, I can't take anything else from you." She shoved his shoulder. "I could have killed you."

"I felt...guilty about what I'd done. If it took my life to save yours, I was willing to give it."

She shook her head. "And y'all say us women are confusing," she muttered. Her stomach growled again. "We really need to go."

"I don't know why you didn't just say you were hungry to begin with."

She tried not to roll her eyes and failed miserably. "I will never figure out men," she muttered, grabbing her jacket and heading for the door as her stomach rumbled audibly.

The cool night air wrapped around her in welcome, whispering to her the news of her

city. She wrapped her arms around herself and walked down the sidewalk toward the club.. "Will your men be there tonight?"

"I honestly don't know. I've not heard a word from them since your bartender friend told them to shove off last night."

She paused and turned to look up at him. "He did what?"

"He just appeared out of nowhere last night after you fell and built some kind of invisible shield unlike anything I've ever seen before around you. Adams shot an arrow at him and it shattered in midair.. All the bastard did was raise his hand up in front of him."

"Unbelievable," she muttered, lowering her gaze to the uneven concrete at her feet. Alexis jerked her gaze back up to his. "What else did he do?"

"Pretty much just ordered my men to hightail it, and then..." He paused and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. He shook his head. "I can't tell you what else happened, Alexis. I want to, but something's keeping me from it."

"Bloody hell. Has that man ever got some explaining to do." With a new purpose in mind, she stalked toward the club and jerked the door open.

"There you are, kiddo. Missed you last night," Andre's deep voice filtered through the air to her sensitive ears.

She flashed him a grin. "Missed you, too, big guy."

"What happened to you? It's not like you to miss a night."

Alexis placed a hand over her stomach. "Wasn't feeling too well," she lied.

"Sorry to hear it, kiddo." He nodded toward Dalton behind her. "Who's the fellow?"

She glanced over her shoulder at Dalton. "This is Dalton, Andre, a very good friend of mine." Okay, so not the full truth, but the best she could do on such short notice.

Andre nodded. "Be good to her or you'll have me to deal with."

Alexis let the big man stamp her hand then sauntered into the club, leaving Dalton to follow. "Was he serious?" Dalton asked at her ear moments later.

"Deadly." She turned to look at him. "He has no clue. To him I'm just a kid he's taken a liking to and feels protective over." She shrugged.. "What's the harm in letting him?"

"You really are something else."

She smiled. "I have to talk to Simon. He's got a lot of explaining to do. I want answers, and he's going to give them this time."

Simon slid a glass onto the bar and poised a dark green bottle over it. "The usual?" he asked, glancing up at her.

"Yes please, with a side order of answers," she replied.

He let out a long sigh. "Grab your drink and follow me."

She did as instructed, turning to Dalton before doing so. "I'll be back shortly." He nodded as she turned away and followed Simon out of the main room into his small office in the back.

Alexis closed the door behind her with an audible thud. "Care to tell me how in hell you did the things I've heard you've done last night?" She raised both brows at him and crossed her arms over her chest as best she could while holding a glass of blood in one hand. "I know for a fact you just popped in out of nowhere when I called you."

He sat down in the big, brown leather chair behind his desk and shook his head. "There are many things I wish I could tell you, Alexis, but I can't."

"Why? And why can't Dalton tell me what you did to him?"

He let out a huff of air. "Damn it, Alexis, I'm trying to protect you here."

"Then tell me the truth. I'm tired of all the lies and secrets."

"Have you ever heard of Stalvos?" he asked.

"The demon realm? We're in—" she snapped her fingers "—Pleythos, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're a *demon*?"

"Not exactly, but I'm also more than just an empath."

"I kinda figure that one out, Simon. If you're not exactly a demon, then what exactly *are* you?" She moved to perch herself on the edge of the desk.

Simon took her hand in his larger one and stared up into her eyes. "I'm afraid this world isn't ready to know that, honey, but I promise you as soon as it's safe for me to tell you, I will."

"The other night when you said there are worse things out there than me, you were talking about yourself, weren't you?"

He nodded. "But this isn't about me, it's about you. Drink up. I can feel your weakness beating at me." Simon rose to his feet. "If that man's life wasn't so important to yours, I'd have killed him last night."

"I think you'd have had to get in line. Max wasn't too thrilled, either." She turned away.

Simon grabbed her arm. "Alexis, about Maximal."

"I already know, Simon. It's hard not to." She sighed. "He's a great guy. For years I felt guilty because I couldn't love him back, but I now know why."

"You love the Slayer," he said.

She nodded. "Yeah, I think I do. Ironic, huh?"

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. "All will work out as it should."

Alexis leaned back to gaze up at him. "You remind me of the Moirae when you speak like that." She narrowed her eyes at him as a thought came to mind. "You're a—"

He quickly put his dark finger over her lips. "Do not utter the word, Alexis. It could be dangerous."

She nodded, a rapt stare on her face as she watched him through unblinking eyes. "It's true then."

Simon kissed her forehead again. "I should make you forget."

"No," she rasped, recoiling from him.

"I won't, though I know I should. You must lock the knowledge away in a part of your mind no one can reach, and I mean no one." His eyes did that swirling silver thing that always gave her the creeps.

"You have my word."

His head snapped up. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh, what?"

His nostrils flared. "I think you better go to your slayer. Malachi just walked in the door. He was there last night, too."

Alexis turned and rushed out the door back into the bar just as Malachi stalked up to where Dalton sat unsuspectingly.

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One minute Dalton sat at the bar, minding his own business while sipping a drink, the next the barstool he sat on spun around of its own accord and he found himself staring into the wildest pair of eyes he'd ever seen. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as the man's hot breath washed over his face. He lifted both brows. "Can I help you with something?"

"You nearly killed her," the man growled.

Oh hell. Not another one. "That's a long story. She's fine, though, and all that is water under the bridge."

The man caged him against the bar with his large arms as he gripped the bar with his large hands—large *clawed* hands. He should be worried and deep down he was just a little, but it was a public place and he was a slayer after all.

"Look, vampire," he said in a low voice through his teeth.

The man threw his dark, shaggy head of brown hair back and laughed. "Vampire? You've got to be kidding me."

That's when Dalton noticed the other man's eyes. They were green with a yellowish glow. No vampire he'd ever seen had eyes like that. *Oh shit!* "Okay, if not a vamp, then what?"

The man smiled, showing off a row of perfect, extremely white and extra-sharp teeth.. "I'm wolf," he growled.

Every 'B' horror flick he ever saw revolving around werewolves came to mind. *Silver!* Silver bullets always worked. *Damn, no gun, but I do have a silver stake.* He slid his hand to his back pocket and gripped the cold metal in his hand.

"That'll be enough of that, boys," Alexis said as she placed a hand on the wolf's shoulder. "You don't want Simon throw you out, do you?"

The wolf looked over Dalton's shoulder and nodded. Dalton chanced a glance behind him to see the bartender standing there with an impassive look on his bronzed face.

"Come on, flea bag, give me a reason to toss your ass out," Simon goaded.

"Simon, really," Alexis chastised. She spun the wolf around. "Malachi, what do you think you're doing?"

"Protecting you," he responded.

She crossed her arms over her chest and raised her brows at him. "A little late, aren't you?"

"He did it once, he'll do it again," he said through clenched teeth.

"I will not," Dalton jumped in.

"See, he won't. He just said so." Alexis waved her hand dismissively at Malachi.

"And like the little fool you are, you believe him," Malachi spat out.

"Hey furball," Simon called. "If you can't control your temper, take it outside."

Malachi flipped the bartender off. "Mind your own damned business, baldy."

"Mal, I would not do that if I were you," Alexis piped in. She noted the silver swirl of Simon's eyes. She pushed the wolf toward the door. "Dalton, let's go."

"Slayer, wait," the bartender said behind him. "Take this for her. She never finished her drink." He handed him a small dark glass container that looked like a beer bottle. "Not really beer I take it."

The man just smiled. "You'd better hurry. They won't wait for you."

## Chapter Fifteen

"Malachi, what did you think you were doing in there?" Alexis shook her head and finger at him.

"Protecting you."

"No, you were creating a scene in the middle of a bunch of humans. Get a grip, Mal. You're not using your brain."

"That accent of yours—" he began, moving closer.

"Is going back into hiding if'n y'all don't stop saying that," she nearly screamed.. She reached up to caress his cheek. "I know how you think you feel, lad, but it ain't real. You do know that, don'tcha?"

He ran his finger over her shoulder. "A man can dream, can't he?"

She shook her head as sadness consumed her. "Not if it's gonna affect your thinking."

He dropped his hand. "I've wanted you for so long. The other night was—"

She held her hand up to stay his words. "The other night should not have happened. You took advantage of the situation and don't you dare go denying it, either."

He flashed her one of his infamous wolfish grins. "A man's gotta have something to dream about." He instantly sobered. "I had so hoped we could have more than just friendship."

"I know you have, Mal, but it 'twasn't meant to be." She dropped her gaze to the pavement before looking back up at him. "I'm sorry. I dunno what to tell you that'll help make it feel better."

He pushed a strand of her hair back out of her face and tucked it behind her ear. "The only thing that would make it better is the one thing you can't say. You love him, don't you?"

"Yeah, that I do, but you cannot go telling him that." She smiled sadly up at him. "We are from two different worlds, he and I, and I cannot see how it'll work."

"Where there's a will, there's a way. I do believe you're the one who taught me that," he replied.

"I have me moments," she said with a smile as the club door opened behind them. She turned her smile on Dalton and extended her hand to him. "Malachi Pelion, this is Eli Dalton." She turned to Dalton. "Dalton, this is Malachi, an old friend."

"He's a wolf," Dalton whispered in her ear. He handed her the bottle he held. "Your friend inside sent this for you."

She took the bottle and popped the top before taking a big swig of the thick liquid, then answered, "Yes, I know. Maybe if you're good, he'll change for us and let you pet him."

Dalton's large form shuddered. "Think I'll pass."

"Yeah. Me too," Mal agreed.

"I don't think I want to hear bones popping and snapping as he changes," Dalton said with a shudder.

Alexis laughed. "It's nothing like in the movies. Don't you know it's all made up?"

"Well, I thought I did and then you go and tell me there are werewolves and witches. So I had to rethink the whole thing."

"I'm not a were," Malachi pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest and widening



his stance.

Alexis glanced at Dalton. "True. He can change at will. I often wished I could shift."

"You never said that," Malachi replied, wagging his eyebrows at her.

She lifted her hand. "Don't you even dare suggest it."

He shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Lex, you're already a vamp."

She gave him a cross look.

"Nos," he corrected.

"What's the difference?" Dalton asked.

"Nothing," Malachi replied. "Some wouldn't care which term you use, but she was trained by the pompous ass, so she prefers Nosferatu."

Dalton looked at Alexis.. "Does he mean the son-of-a-bitch from last night?"

"So you *do* know him?" Malachi laughed.

"Maximal isn't so bad. You two behave," Alexis said, walking away. "Is there a reason you're here, Malachi, besides causing trouble?"

"Aw, Lex, where'd your accent go?" The wolf pouted as he jogged to catch up with her.

"It's hiding. Answer please."

"Yeah, pompous said you needed some info on a book. He's got feelers out everywhere." He walked alongside her, hands shoved in his pockets, drawing her gaze to the long, trim line of his body.. Her fangs descended and she ran her tongue along the back of her teeth. Good friend he may be, but damn if the boy wasn't built like a god.

"Find out anything?" She drew her gaze and her mind away from the well-sculpted lines of his body – and with Dalton standing right there!

"I may know of a human who might have some info on it," he replied, pausing at the street corner.

"A human knows of this book?" The more this went on, the more confusing it got.

"Yeah and you know him. Father Malone."

Alexis smiled. "Yes, I know him." She turned to Dalton to include him in the conversation. "Father Malone has helped me many a time when I've doubted myself the most." She looked back at Malachi. "Let's go speak to him."

Malachi shook his head and pointed to the sky.. "You forget the time, Lex. The sun would be up before we get there and back. Tomorrow night."

Something inside told her tomorrow night would be too late, but she couldn't argue with the time. Better to wait than to end up a crispy critter and no good to anyone. She nodded her head. "Okay, but only because I'm not a big fan of barbeque."

"Get my information," Maximal's voice drifted out from the shadows. His footfalls never made a sound as he emerged from the darkness and joined them at the curb.

Dalton eased behind Alexis and it was all she could do not to laugh at him.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Sort of.. I was just telling Alexis what I knew," Malachi responded, running a hand through his hair.

Maximal turned his dark piercing gaze on Alexis. "We need to talk."

She shrugged. "Then talk."

He shook his head. "Not here."

Alexis pointed a finger at Malachi. "Behave. If you so much as lay one finger on him," she warned.

Malachi threw both hands up in the air. "I'll be good. I promise. Not a single finger," he promised.

"No fangs, either."

"Oh, now come on. Where's the fun in that?"

Alexis turned her gaze to Dalton who was looking more nervous by the minute. "He's kidding," she assured him.

"Who says?" Malachi continued, unabashed by the cross look she gave him.

She went up on tiptoe and kissed Dalton's cheek. "You're safe with him. He's a good friend and won't do anything to piss me off."

"That's not as reassuring as you think it is," Dalton whispered in her ear, sending thrills of pleasure racing along her skin.

"It'll have to do." She playfully nipped his jaw line.

"Alexis," Maximal prodded in his stern tone.

She stepped back. "Okay, I'm coming." Reluctantly, she let go of Dalton's hand and followed Max back into the shadows. "This had better be good."

He pinned her with his dark gaze. "There are so many things I wish I could tell you, but unfortunately, it's not my place."

"This sounds really foreboding, Max. Lovely way to start a conversation and nothing I haven't heard before. In fact, I'm getting quite tired of hearing those words."

"This is serious, Alexis. That being said, I'm going to tell you everything I know about the book you saw when you connected with Diego."

She nodded. The more information she had, the more ammo she had to face Diego with.

"It's called the Book of Antilles and it's nearly as old as the Nosferatu are," he began, pacing silently before her. "Bound in golden leather made from the skin of the mythical griffin. It's rumored all the knowledge of the Nosferatu are confined within those pages. Secrets that were never meant to be shared are in it, and if it falls into the wrong hands..."

"Bad things will happen," she guessed.

"Worse than that. The damage this book can do is unimaginable."

"Then who would write such a thing?" This world she'd been tossed into unwittingly made absolutely no sense to her at times—like now.

Max laughed. "It was written with all the right intentions in mind but he had no idea of the power that seeped into the pages, or how dangerous the magickal binding would make it."

"The magickal qualities of the griffin seeped through, didn't it? Damn. Can it be destroyed then?"

Max nodded. "In the hands of the right person, it can be."

She didn't like the look he was giving her. "Me? How'd I get pulled into this?"

He pulled her close and hugged her. "You were—"

"Born to it. Yeah, I've heard that a time or two." She drew back and jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "I never asked for any of this."

Maximal reached out and caressed her cheek. The affection in his eyes nearly broke her heart. "Nevertheless, it is your task to take in hand. Besides, you do not have the noblest of intentions. Do you?"

Panic shot through her like a knife. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I heard your heart skip a beat, Alexis. You plan to regain your humanity in this."

"So? Is that so bad? He stole my life and I want it back!"

"You spend so much time despising what you have become when you should have been embracing it. Is it really so bad to be long lived? To wield untold powers?" He shook his head. "Stop hating yourself, Alexis. Live for today, not yesterday."

"You were born into this life, Maximal. It was forced upon me. I'm sorry if I can't see things the way you see them," she said as she fought back the tears that wouldn't be contained. The salty, red-tinged drop slid down her cheek. "I just want to be normal again."

Maximal wiped the tear away with his thumb. "What is normal anymore? You are not of this time and you cannot go back. What will you do if this quest of yours works?"

Alexis shook her head. She didn't want to think in what-ifs. He was making her think of the things she'd been trying to avoid. "Any idea where I'll find this book, or Diego for that matter?" She refused to talk to him about this stuff, so she did what she did best – changed the subject.

"You can find him any time you want, and you know you can."

She couldn't contain the shudder that wracked her body. "I can't," she whispered.

"Only you can."

She closed her eyes as more tears spilled from beneath her lids. "It's so dark and cold there."

"No one else can do this for you, Alexis. Let the Slayer help you. He can anchor you while you do it."

Alexis nodded and swiped her eyes. "Okay. As soon as I talk to Father Malone, I'll try it."

"Don't try it, Alexis. Do it."

"Alright." She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. "Anything else?"

He shook his dark head. "No. I'll leave you be, but if you are in need –"

"I'll holler."

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Maximal watched her rejoin the others with a heavy heart. He'd just lied to her. Oh, he told her more about the book than he probably should have, but he didn't tell her everything he knew. He'd been forbidden to divulge too much information, and not even he, commander of the royal armies, could go against that decree.

How can he be away from his own flesh and blood? Max had watched over her since the day she was conceived – a life without her in it seemed barren. How had Rashad survived the last two centuries? He couldn't fault her for her bitterness and anger. She was confused and didn't understand much of what was going on around her. Hell, he was in the middle of everything with lots more information than she had, and he was confused by it all. His only hope was for her to survive this ordeal. He prayed to the gods above to keep her safe.

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"I know you don't like me," Dalton said as he eyed the large wolf walking down the sidewalk beside him.

"I don't have to like you. The only reason I haven't ripped your head off is because Alexis asked me not to." Malachi bared his teeth at him.

Dalton laughed. "Sounded more like she ordered you not to."

He could have sworn the big man was getting ready to pounce, but he just shrugged his large shoulders instead and chuckled.

"What can I say? I'm whipped when it comes to her." Malachi turned the full force of his green eyes on Dalton. "Just don't dare hurt her again, because then I'll be forced to hurt her by hurting you. Got that?"

Dalton nodded. "I can handle that deal. Shake on it?"

Mal shook his head. "Nah, man. I'd prefer not to get human germs. I just washed the fur and all."

"What fur?"

Dalton's mouth fell open as fur rippled along the other man's arm. "You people are so strange."

Malachi laughed as Alexis rejoined them. "Showing off again, Mal?"

He shrugged. "It's keeping me from hurting him, as you warned me not to do."

"Well, aren't you the good boy?" she sarcastically replied. "Shall I find you a bone for a reward?"

"I've got your bone right here," Mal responded, cupping his crotch.

Alexis rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose at him. "Jeez, Mal, where'd you come up with that one? Got anything original in that brain of yours?"

Dalton snickered. "As much fun as this has been, I'm all for heading back to the room and ordering a pizza. I'm starved," he held his hand out to Alexis. "Coming?"

She slid her small hand into his and smiled. "Yeah, let's go."

"Count me in, too," Malachi responded, crossing the street with them.

"Who said you were invited?" Dalton asked.

Mal pouted. "Alexis will let me. Won't you?"

She threaded her arm around the wolf's and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Come on, Mal. I bet he'll even let you have a slice."

"Doubt that. He looks like he could eat a whole pizza by himself," Dalton scoffed.

"Tell you what, slayer. Order two and I'll pay."

Dalton raised a brow. "You've got money?"

"Do I look destitute? Wolves have needs too."

Alexis dropped her head and walked away.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Dalton called out.

She spun around, walking backward as she continued to move away from them. "As far away from you two as I can get," she responded, disappearing into the shadows, her laughter echoing in the night behind her.

## Chapter Sixteen

Alexis stopped abruptly outside the large Catholic Church with its beautiful stained glass windows. She grabbed Dalton by the shoulder to stop his forward movements. "Something's wrong."

"What?" Dalton darted his gaze from her face to the building before him. "I don't sense anything."

She blinked and looked at him. "That's the problem. It's blank, like something is masking itself, but the blood. Whatever it is couldn't mask the scent of blood—lots of blood."

She took a cautious step forward and tilted her head to the side as she focused on her senses. "He beat us here." She snapped her eyes open and rushed to the front door.

The large double doors banged against the walls as she shoved them open and raced up the aisle. Adrenaline pumped through her veins and she leapt up over the pulpit and table sitting at the church front, landing in a crouched position over the prone body of Father Malone. She placed her hand on his chest, feeling for even the slightest sign of life.

Alexis closed her eyes and concentrated on the priest. Very faint and almost inaudible even to her sensitive ears was his heartbeat. Weak, fading—dying. "Damn," she rasped out.

The tiniest of ripples moved through the air. Alexis jerked her head up as the shadows before her moved. She flipped over backward, kicking her feet out and throwing him over her head as Diego sprang on her. In less time than it took for her heart to beat, she rolled to her feet and glared at him. Fangs bared, she hissed at the vile creature before her.

Diego tsked. "I'd have figured you'd have known I was there before now. You're slipping, Alexis."

She answered with a growl.

Diego waved dismissively. "He was inconsequential. Age does have a way of dulling the flavor."

Anger welled up within her. How could he kill someone and be so callous, so unfeeling? Nosferatu were not without hearts. What had happened to taint him so, to remove his humanity?

Diego tilted his head to one side to study her.. "I was never human." He slowly circled around her and snuck in a kick to Father Malone. "Be proud, child. He served his purpose in life."

He straightened to his full height, arms extended at his sides. "He was the vessel for the knowledge I craved, and now that I have it, his life is no longer of importance."

Alexis lunged but he was already gone in less time than it took to blink an eye. His laughter echoed through the building, sending ripples of anger, annoyance and a tinge of fear washing over her.

She ran for the doors. "Dalton, save him if you can," she shouted as she zipped past her companion in pursuit of the demon who haunted her.

Fueled by anger, she ran harder and faster than she ever had before. She leapt forward, catching Diego around the waist and slammed to the ground. With a quick roll, she moved with lightning speed and sat on his chest, pinning him on the ground.

"You can't defeat me, Alexis." He leaned his head forward. "I'm in your head."

Remember?"

Before she could comprehend what he was saying, the sand around them started to move. A hissing sound filled her ears. Alexis jerked her gaze from one area of the moving sand to another as serpents began to boil up from beneath the gritty substance.

Alexis' body involuntarily jerked at the sight. She hated snakes. Hated them!

Diego bucked her off and vanished from sight.

Alexis closed her eyes and withdrew into herself. Rocking back and forth, she chanted, "They're not real. They're not real. They're not real."

\*\*\*\*\*

Dalton didn't waste a moment. He ran into the church, shoving his worry for Alexis to the back of his mind. She asked him to do something and he intended to follow it through.

The elderly priest lay on his back at the front of the building. Blood covered his clothes, the floor and splattered along the walls. The monster responsible for this had been cruel and animalistic in his treatment of the old man.

He felt for a pulse, for breath—any sign of life. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed for help.

"What seems to be your emergency?" a woman's voice asked.

"I'm at St. Agatha's Church. There's been a—" Dalton paused. What was he supposed to say? That a vampire had attacked the man? "A robbery. I've got a man down and in need of immediate medical attention."

"I've dispatched an ambulance, sir. I need you to stay on the line. Do you know how to do CPR?"

The priest was past the point of CPR and he couldn't afford to stick around and wait for the cops. He hit the off button as the woman continued to rattle out information.

"There's nothing you could have done to save him, Dalton," a familiar voice said from the shadows.

Dalton looked around for the source.

"Over here," Simon said as he stepped into view.

"What are you doing here?"

"I could feel Alexis' pain." Simon paused next to the priest's body. "He was a good man."

"Can't you help him?"

The other man shook his bald head. "I can't mess with the hand the Fates have dealt. It's forbidden."

"She won't be happy about this."

Simon shrugged. "She'll understand, though." A strange look came over Simon's face. "She's in trouble," he whispered.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Dalton nodded at Simon and with one last glance at the priest, headed off in the direction he'd seen Alexis go.

He found her several hundred feet from the church. Her knees were pulled up to her chest with her head leaned against them as she rocked back and forth. The entire scene unsettled him. He inched closer and placed a hand on her shoulder.

Alexis nearly came unglued. Her entire body jerked beneath his touch and he heard her breath suck in. He crouched down beside her and for the first time, realized she spoke.

"They're not real," she whispered as she picked her rocking back up.

"What's not real, honey?" Apparently, whatever it was really wasn't there, because he didn't see a damned thing.

"The snakes."

He placed his hands on her head and made her look at him. "Open your eyes, Alexis. There are no snakes here."

Her dark eyes opened and she looked around almost frantically. "They were everywhere. So many. So, so many."

"There's nothing here now."

She looked around then jerked her gaze back to him. "Father Malone."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do." There was no point in telling her her bartender friend had shown up. It would only cause her more pain and distress.

"Come on," he said, pulling her to her feet. "We need to get out of here. The cops are on their way and I don't feel up to explaining your fangs to them."

"Huh?"

He ran his finger over her top lip. "Your teeth are showing, sweetie."

The way her hand flew up to cover her mouth made him laugh. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her to the car where he opened the door for her. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Dalton ran around to his side of the vehicle and climbed in, slamming the door in his haste. Starting the car, he floored it as he pulled out onto the highway, going the opposite direction from where the cops were coming with the lights off. He wasn't taking any chances.

Alexis sat in the seat beside him with her arms wrapped around herself. "Where are we going?"

"Some place safe."

\*\*\*\*\*

Alexis watched the scenery fly by as Dalton turned this way and that down the various back roads. She reached for the bottle of water sitting between the seats, screwed off the lid and took a big swig.

"Alexis, no!" Dalton yelled, lunging for the bottle.

Holy water!

Alexis dropped the bottle, put her hands at her throat, gagged and sputtered. The car swerved all over the road until it left the pavement and jumped a ditch. Alexis let go of her throat and grabbed onto the door and seat to keep herself steady. She glared at Dalton.

"Why don't you kill us while you're at it?"

"I was worried. That's holy water you just chugged."

Alexis smiled and shook her head. "You are so gullible. I thought we covered this already." She reached into the neck of her shirt and pulled out her cross. "Religious relics and icons have no effect on my kind."

His face turned an interesting shade of red. "We were taught by the Sanctum—"

"The Sanctum lied, Dalton. I told you that." She shook her head and turned her gaze out the window. "I don't know why, but they lie."

When he failed to say anything, she turned to look at him. "Can we just go now?"

He threw the car in reverse, but it would only rock back and forth. "I think we're stuck."

Alexis laughed. "Would you like a little help?" She opened the door and got out. Going around to the front of the car, she lifted and pushed, rolling it back away from the ditch until the front tires were clear. She dusted off her hands and got back in the car.

Dalton raised a brow at her. "I had no idea."

She grinned. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Dalton threw it in gear and took off back down the road. Several long minutes passed by before he pulled into the driveway of a small, dark house. She turned to look at him.

"Where are we?"

"My house." He turned off the ignition and got out of the car, then walked around to open her door for her. "We should be safe here."

Alexis wanted to laugh. "We should go back to the motel," she said, not knowing how to break it to him that his house was anything but safe.

He shook his head. "We'll be fine here. He can't—" She put her finger over his lips, staying his words.

"Let me show you something, Dalton." She moved away from him, dashed up the steps and touched the door knob. The lock clicked as it released and the door slowly creaked open. Alexis pushed it open further and stepped inside, then turned around and poked her head back out.

"How the hell did you do that? I didn't invite you in."

Alexis rolled her eyes as she stepped back out on the porch. "You don't have to. Just how much about the Nosferatu do you know?"

"Apparently not as much as I thought," he grumbled as he joined her outside the door.

"Then come on in and let me enlighten you.." She followed him back inside, though she hesitated at the threshold. Alexis looked around her. Something in this house was off—not quite right.

She shook off the uneasy feeling and stepped inside before closing the door. Stepping into the living room, she paced the floor while Dalton sat on the sofa and watched her.

"What exactly is true about your kind?" he asked.

Alexis laughed. "What isn't? We cast reflections, sunlight is deadly and we need blood to survive.. We live extremely long lives but we're not immortal—not really anyhow. There are only three ways to kill a Nosferatu. Direct sunlight, decapitation, or by removing the heart, though the last is a bit tricky. You must first pierce the heart and incapacitate the creature before daring to remove it."

He held his hand out to her. Alexis took it and climbed onto his lap. "You forgot to mention you have a heartbeat," he said, sliding his hand over her heart, "and that you breathe. Before you, I'd never realized that."

"Because you never cared to look."

Dalton ran his hand up her cheek and into her hair. Alexis leaned into his palm.

"True, but can you blame me? I lost my wife and unborn child to a monster."

"I lost my mother and my life," she softly replied. "Each of us has been hurt, but only by the hands of one vampire. We can't make an entire species suffer because of one's actions."

"What else do I need to know? Besides the fact you can enter without being invited."



"We should have gone back into town. You're protected at the motel." She traced a circular pattern on his chest as she spoke.

"How can we be safe in a motel and not safe here in my own home?"

She smiled and chuckled. "Because the Neon Light is Mage-owned, remember? They have safeguards and protection spells to watch over their patrons."

Dalton sat up straighter. "Yeah, I remember you saying something about that, but I think I was distracted by a rather lovely naked body at the time."

She raised a brow at him. "Do you remember anything I told you?"

"Something about Mages." He shook his head and shrugged. "Not real clear on anything else other than how soft your skin feels against mine."

Alexis sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Well, you've met Malachi; he's a wolf. There are Mages and Mystwalkers and Wraiths..." Alexis let her words trail off. *That* was what she'd felt when she entered the house. She looked around her almost frantically, searching for their unseen companion.

"What? What are you looking for?"

Alexis turned her gaze on him. "You have a ghost in your house."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I'd know it if there were a ghost in this house."

She leaned closer and whispered in his ear, "I can feel it, Dalton. It watches us." Alexis withdrew, slowly cutting her eyes to the right where she felt a strong presence.

Dalton cupped her face in his hands and forced her to face him. "There's nothing here, Alexis. Just us." He pulled her closer and captured her lips with his own.

Alexis' hair was tugged hard, jerking her backward off Dalton's lap. She landed in the floor in a heap, right on her ass as Dalton stared down at her in surprise.

She scrambled to her feet. "I told you we had company," she growled as she looked around her. Where was the damned thing hiding? Alexis looked at Dalton, who was now sitting up straight. "Don't freak out over what I'm about to do."

"What – ?" he began as Alexis vanished from sight.

Alexis shifted from one plane to another and found herself staring into the face of a dark-haired woman. Without a word, she pulled back her fist and punched the woman right in the nose. "Take that, bitch." She shifted back to where Dalton looked around frantically for her.

She smiled smugly at him.

"Where'd you go?"

"Just to take care of some business." No sooner were her words out than she went flying backward into a table. "Damn it," she growled and shifted into Obscuradon again.

"You know –" she pulled herself up off the floor "– this is really starting to get old.." She straightened her clothes as she stared at the strange woman. "Who the hell are you and *what* is your problem?"

"Get out of my house," the woman raged, flying at her.

Alexis sidestepped and tripped the running woman. "I don't want to hurt you, lady, but you need to get a grip and move on with yourself. In case you haven't noticed, you're kinda dead."

The woman responded by screaming, an ear piercing sound. "Murdered! By one of your kind."

Uh-oh, that wasn't good. Realization dawned. "Oh shit. You're Dalton's wife." And she shifted back before the answer came. "Damn it all to hell!" she raged. "Stupid, unpredictable powers."

"What is going on here?" Dalton asked, jumping to his feet.

"Your wife." An invisible hand twisted in her hair once more and dragged her toward the door. Summoning her powers once more, she shifted and elbowed the woman in the ribs. "Look, I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

The woman raked her claws out at Alexis' face. She ducked out of the way just in the nick of time, straightened and rolled her shoulders. "Ok, bitch, that did it. No more playing nice."

Dalton's wife spun and ran at Alexis again. Alexis drew back her fist and punched the woman in the face, then danced around her. She prepared herself for the woman's next move.

"Alexis," a voice she recognized called out, distracting her.

Dalton's wife hit her hard, knocking her backward out the door and off the porch as she shifted realms again.. Alexis lay there on the ground, breathing hard to try and catch the breath that was knocked out of her.

She knew that voice, though she hadn't heard it in...what seemed like forever. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she climbed to her feet and shifted once more—and there he stood, looking just as he had the last day she'd seen him.

*Paul.*

"Hello, Alexis."

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. Hell, she didn't know what to do. Seeing him again was something she'd never dared dream would happen. "How?" Vampire's weren't supposed to be able to turn into Wraiths.

He shrugged and pushed a stray lock of curling blond hair from his eyes. "Beats me. I woke up floating on a cloud and the next thing I knew, I was back here watching you fight some crazy woman."

Alexis laughed. She didn't know where the sound came from, but it felt good and was better than crying. "So what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help you." He looked over his shoulder to where the woman stood in the doorway watching them.. Turning, he moved up the steps and over to stand just in front of Dalton's wife. "But I can't go in until she invites me, and she can't come out until she lets go of what she was in her human life."

Paul held his hand out to the woman. "I'm Paul and you are?"

"Isabel," her soft, slightly accented voice replied.

Hesitantly, she lifted her hand and took Paul's. He pulled her from the house and onto the porch. She glanced over her shoulder but followed him out into the yard.

"You have to let go of what was," Paul whispered.

Alexis wasn't sure who he was talking to, her or Isabel, but for the first time, she realized the importance of the words. She shifted out of Obscuradon to find Dalton standing in the doorway watching her.

"Care to explain what's going on?" he asked.

"Would you believe me if I did?"

"Probably not. Your world is just plain weird." He closed the door behind him and

locked it.

"Yeah, well, yours ain't that great, either." She peered over his shoulder at the closed door. "We going somewhere?"

He pointed at the door. "You can ask me that after what just happened in there? Which, by the way, I'm still not sure what went on just now."

She took him by the hand and led him toward the car. "Then let me try to explain. I can shift between this world and Obscuradon."

"Obscura-what?"

"The Wraith world.." He still looked confused. "Where the ghosts are."

"Oh, and you did that because—?"

"Your dead wife was kicking my ass," she provided for him.

All emotion left his face at her words. "You saw Isabel?" He looked around as if hoping to see the woman.

Alexis touched his cheek, making him look at her. "She's gone now and before you ask, no, I didn't hurt her. Paul came for her." She furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Though I'm still not sure why."

"Was she okay?" The tender emotion in his voice nearly broke her heart.

"She was very angry, but I think she finally accepted what happened to her and moved on." She shrugged.. "At least I hope she has," she said, rubbing the back of her head. "She's one tough chick."

Dalton chuckled. "Isabel always was a firecracker when mad." He caressed Alexis' face. "At least you weren't hurt."

"Just wounded my pride a little. Ready to go? I don't want to be caught out in the sun." Alexis wrinkled her nose. "Would hate to leave a big, black, charred spot on your nice leather seats."

"You have one seriously warped sense of humor," he pointed out.

Alexis shrugged and climbed into the car as she laughed. He was so easy.

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Dalton shook his head as he moved around the car to climb in behind the wheel. What in the world did he get himself into? Then he looked at her and none of it mattered. She was beautiful and she stirred a part of his heart to life that he'd thought long dead. He'd had no idea just how little he knew about the paranormal world. So, what did that mean for him? Had the majority of his life been wasted on a bunch of lies?

"Stop torturing yourself," Alexis' soft voice said, breaking into his thoughts.

"What makes you think I was torturing myself?" He started the car and turned it around, heading back toward the highway and Guarda del Sino.

She moved her hand in front of her face in a circular pattern. "You've got that look on your face. Wondering if you've done anything worthwhile with your life?"

Dalton shuddered. "Are you reading my mind?"

"No, just your body language. I don't have the gift of minding reading. That's Max's talent."

Well *that* was reassuring. "Care to tell me what happened back there?"

"I was attacked by your late and very jealous wife. She was very possessive of you, but she couldn't leave the house for some reason. Then out of nowhere, Paul showed up and she

went off with him. That's all I know."

"And Paul is —?"

"The only person I've ever turned. He's been with me all this time and I never knew." She picked at a button on her coat.

Dalton reached over and placed his hand over hers. "If it makes you feel any better, I had no idea Isabel was with me."

Alexis laughed. "Yes, but you can't go into Obscuradon; I can. Okay, so not for very long at a time, but at least I *can* do it."

"What else can you do?" He was curious about her, and now seemed as good a time as any to learn all he could about the woman his future was intertwined with.

Dalton glanced over at her when she didn't answer. Her face was a pretty shade of pink. "Why the blush?"

She shook her head and looked away. "Because I don't know exactly what I can do. I never cared enough to learn."

He slammed on the brakes, stopping in the middle of the road and turned to look at her. "You *what*? We're going into battle with a badass vampire and you don't even know what all your powers are?"

Reluctantly, she looked back at him. "I'm a screw up." She shrugged her shoulders. "What can I say? I was a human trained to hunt down and destroy such creatures and then suddenly I'm one of them. I rebelled against what I had become."

Dalton glared at her. "Alexis —"

"Don't lecture me, Dalton. I've heard it all already. You don't know how bad I wish I had cared enough to learn it now." She rolled her eyes. "I just got my ass kicked by a ghost because I couldn't control my powers enough to stay in one plane long enough to do anything about it."

He laughed. Lord help him, he couldn't stop himself. "I think you better get a crash course in those powers from someone ASAP."

"That's the problem, though. No one knows what I can do. How can they teach me powers that haven't yet shown themselves?"

Dalton pursed his lips. Now that was a problem. He thought back over everything Simon had shown him out in the desert the other night. Turning back toward her, he looked at her through new eyes. "Don't worry about it, Alexis." He reached out to caress her cheek. "Just do the best you can."

He had faith in her, even if she didn't have any in herself. All he could do was hope what Simon had shown him was true. If not, they were all in big trouble.

"We need to go before the sun rises," Alexis whispered.

Dalton nodded and threw the car back into gear as he straightened in his seat. As they neared the turn off toward the church, he was careful to watch his speed. Flashing red and blue lights were still visible outside the large building and he didn't want to draw any unwanted attention to them. They couldn't afford anymore delays in getting Alexis back to the safety of the motel before sunrise.

"Stop!" Alexis yelled as they passed the turn off to the church.

He slammed on the brakes, throwing them forward in their seats. "What? What am I stopping for?"

"We have to go back," she whispered.

"Why?"

Alexis' eyes took on a faraway, misty look as she stared up at him. "Diego."

"Where?" His heart thundered in his chest at just the mention of the monster's name.

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"Back the other way. There's a small house—a woman," she rasped, squeezing her eyes shut. "A crying child—red and blue swing set in the yard." The images were hazy and flashed so quickly she could barely make them out. "Hurry."

"I know where you're talking about. We'll be there as fast as I can get us there." Dalton shut off the lights and whipped the car around.

Alexis tried to distance herself from Diego. She didn't want him to know they were coming to stop him. "Hurry, Dalton," she whispered as the woman's fear washed over her.

She felt the car accelerate more. Several long minutes later, he skidded to a halt at the road side. Alexis pulled back from Diego's mind and opened her eyes.

Dalton pointed to a barely visible house a few hundred feet from where they parked. "That it?"

Alexis nodded and opened the car door. She didn't even bother closing it as she ran for the house, fangs bared. Slamming her shoulder into the door, she burst through it and ran straight at Diego, who stood taunting the poor woman huddled in the corner.

She caught him around the middle, tackling him to the floor and pounded him with her fists. Behind her, she heard Dalton rushing in to grab the child and woman.

Diego kicked her off. She rolled across the floor and rose to her feet. Before he could move toward the others, she stepped into his path. "I don't think so."

He bared his fangs at her and hissed. "Out of my way, Alexis. This is none of your concern."

"When you hurt innocent lives it is," she snapped. "Maximal!"

Max materialized in the room. "What the hell," he growled, crouching down as he spotted Diego.

"Maximal Ashanti, how nice to see you again.. Still working for my fool of a father?" Diego asked, inching his way toward the woman and child Dalton was ushering out of the house.

"That's enough, Diego. Leave these people alone," Max said, striding across the room to cut off Diego's movement.

Diego's lip curled back. "Stay out of this, army man. You have no right to order me around. You've forgotten your place; I'm your better.. It's none of your concern."

"The sun will be up before too much longer, Diego. Is it really worth roasting over?" Alexis taunted.

He hissed and vanished from sight. Alexis rushed toward the door to make sure Dalton, the woman and child were all safe. They all stood near Dalton's car.

"I'll take care of them, Alexis. You and Dalton get out of here before you're caught in the sun," Maximal said, moving up beside her.

"Who's his father?" She needed to know what Max did.

"It's not my place to tell, Alexis."

"If you work for his father, he must be a very important man. Because you work for

only one person. He's the prince, isn't he?" She looked up to him for confirmation.

"You can't let that affect what you have to do, Alexis. The emperor knows what must be done and he is behind you one hundred percent." Max touched her arm then dropped his hand. "You need to go. Don't worry about who Diego is; just remember the monster he is."

She shuddered. "As if I could ever forget." Alexis descended the steps as Maximal disappeared with the woman and her child, leaving her alone with Dalton..

## Chapter Seventeen

Time slowly ticked by as they rode back into the city in silence. Dalton pulled into a parking spot and Alexis opened her door before he had even fully stopped when she spotted Malachi pacing in front of the room door.

"Malachi!" Alexis jumped from the car and left Dalton to follow.. "What's going on, Mal? Why are you here?" she asked, worry in her voice.

"Slayer," the man gruffly said with a slight incline of his head at Dalton.

"Wolf," Dalton shot back. "Going to answer her questions?"

She shoved Mal's shoulder. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

The wolf turned his attention back to Alexis. "I've got a message for you, but you aren't gonna like it."

Alexis blew out a huff of air between clenched teeth. "What?" He was really starting to annoy her.

"The Moirae want to see you," came Mal's gruff reply.

Her eyes widened. "They what?" She shoved a hand through her hair and began to pace. "There is no way in hell I'm going halfway around the world to climb a fucking mountain just to talk to those three again. They can forget it or bring their enigmatic asses here."

Mal's eyes widened at that. "I can't tell them that."

"I didn't ask you to, did I?" she shot back. "I cannot believe this. Diego is in the area and getting close to what he's looking for and they want me to *leave*? I'm not going. I will not do it."

"Who or what are the Moirae?" Dalton asked.

"The Fates," Alexis replied with disgust and a curl of her lip. "They're the ones who said I needed your help, so you can blame them for getting you involved in the mess I call my life."

He raised both his brows. "I wouldn't necessarily call that a bad thing," Dalton replied. "I mean, I admit I took it badly at first, but I'm not complaining now." His hand rubbed across her back.

Malachi shook his head. "You sure tangle with some strange ones, Lex."

"Oh, like you have room to talk," she replied. "Where are they?"

"I was getting to that before you jumped the gun," Malachi told her.

Her skin began to itch. "Can we continue this inside? The sun is about to peak over the horizon and I don't care much for getting sunburned."

She touched the doorknob and the door creaked open. Leaving the men to follow, Alexis fell back onto the bed. "Hurry up and tell me what I need to know so I can get some sleep. It's been a long night."

Malachi narrowed his eyes at her. "Come to think of it, you do look like you've been in a fight."

She shook her head. "You have no idea."

"My wife attacked her," Dalton offered in explanation.

Malachi turned on Dalton with fire in his eyes.. "You're married?"

"Late wife, Mal." Alexis pushed herself up on her elbows to watch the two men. She didn't trust Malachi not to do something stupid – which was his calling card.

The wolf's eyes widened. "You fought a Wraith and lived to tell the tale?"

She gave him a sheepish grin. "I think I was a bit more than she bargained for."

"How so?" Mal narrowed his eyes at her.

"She popped back and forth between realms. Didn't you?" Dalton piped in.

Alexis smiled at him. He was trying. "Yes, I have a talent for traversing the boundaries between the realms."

Malachi placed one large hand over his heart. "Wow, Alexis. I had no idea." His dark head shook. "I've never known anyone who could do that."

She stifled a yawn and shrugged. "Anyhow, as you were saying about the Moirae?"

The wolf moved to sit on the bed farthest from the door. "Oh yeah. They're hiding deep in a cavern in Miner's Haven Park. Said for you to meet them there ASAP after dark tomorrow night."

"They came this far and yet couldn't just meet me here – tonight?" She closed her eyes and tried to rein in her temper. "I hate those women."

"Who doesn't?" Malachi replied.

"I don't want to know, do I?" Dalton asked.

Alexis curled her lip and shook her head. "Not really. Just be glad they didn't demand you go with me." Her eyes widened. "Damn, that will leave you unprotected."

"I can handle myself." Dalton stood up straighter and pushed out his chest.

Alexis ignored his strutting and turned to Malachi. "Can I depend on you to keep him safe? With Diego in the area, I don't want him left alone."

"I thought you said we were safe in here," Dalton pointed out.

She sighed. "Safer, but not completely safe. Diego's powerful. If he wanted in badly enough, I fear no Mage spell would keep him out. At this point, he'll use anything he can against me, because he knows I'm out to stop him."

"I'll keep your human safe, Alexis.. You just do what you've gotta do."

She nodded and lay back on the bed. "Good, because right now all I need to do is sleep."

Malachi rose and moved to the door. "I'll be here just before the sun goes down tonight and then ride with y'all to the park."

"I don't need a guard dog," Dalton grumbled.

Malachi blew him a kiss. "Love you, too."

Dalton glared.

"Enough already. Jeez, you'd think you were a couple of kids instead of grown men." She furrowed her brow and covered her eyes. "Never mind, I'm too tired for this. Go, Mal. See you later."

Dalton walked over to her and sat down beside her as Malachi let himself out. "Too tired for what?"

"He's not really a grown man. In Lycan years he's still just a pup, but I wouldn't dare tell him that to his face. For all his bravado, he's very sensitive."

"Yeah and I'm the tooth fairy." Dalton ran a hand through his hair and grinned down at her.



"I bet you look lovely in a tutu, too."

"Ha ha. You're not funny."

Alexis closed her eyes and sighed. "No, I'm not. I'm just really, really sleepy."

Her eyelids felt like lead, as did her arms and legs. The familiar itch that marked the rising of the sun washed over her body and her breathing slowed, as did her heart rate. She smiled weakly up at Dalton. "You are so handsome." Her eyelids drooped.

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"And you can barely keep your eyes open." He helped her to sit up long enough to get her out of her jacket and shirt and then lowered her back onto the bed. "If you were more awake, I'd show you just how beautiful I think you are—how much you turn me on."

"I...wish...we...could," she slowly replied without opening her eyes.

Dalton unzipped her pants and peeled them back off her incredibly long legs, exposing every inch of her creamy skin. He paused long enough to pull off her boots, then removed her pants and stood back to look at her.

Alexis lay on the bed, slow, shallow breaths raising her bare breasts and drawing his eyes to their perfect shape. The only thing on her luscious body was the small, black thong he hadn't yet removed. Her long, dark hair fanned out around her angelic face, relaxed in sleep. He could spend all day in bed, worshiping her body, savoring each and every delicious inch.

His cock hardened and throbbed with need, demanded that he take what was rightfully his, but he couldn't. There was no way he could willingly, knowingly take advantage of her in her weakened condition, not that he thought she'd turn him down if given the choice.

With a sigh, Dalton pulled the thong from her body and tossed it aside before maneuvering her underneath the covers.. He quickly undressed himself before lowering his large frame down onto the bed next to her. Propping himself up on his side with his elbow, he gazed down at her sleeping face. Long, black lashes fanned out against her pale cheeks. Her perfect little lips were slightly parted as if in invitation—an invitation he desperately wanted to take.

Dalton rearranged himself on the bed, trying to ease the aching of his cock. Reaching over, he turned off the lamp by the bed and slid down alongside Alexis' body.. He moved his hand beneath the covers to grasp his cock firmly in hand, while his other hand moved to cup her bare breast.

Alexis moaned softly as he massaged the soft mound in his palm. He twirled the hardening nipple between his thumb and forefinger, causing her body to shift slightly beneath the covers. She was everything he'd ever dreamed and more, and he'd almost robbed himself of the pleasures of her body in a moment of confusion and bad judgment. The guilt over what he'd done—nearly done—ate at him like a cancer. Had she truly forgiven him for his mistakes?

Pushing his disturbing thoughts from his mind, he concentrated on the feel of her skin against his. Dalton pumped his left hand over his cock, but something about it didn't feel quite right. Carefully, he slid from the bed and moved around to the other side, where he climbed back underneath the covers. His right hand now held his cock while his left massaged Alexis' breast before sliding down to tangle in the tight curls at the juncture of her legs.

He closed his eyes as he allowed his mind to drift. Her hot, wet folds parted, gaining him entrance into her body. His cock ached to be where his finger was. Dalton tightened his

grip on his hard shaft and pumped faster, tightening and releasing his grip to mimic the natural flow of Alexis' body.

Imagining the hot wetness of her mouth enclosing him, sucking him into her throat, Dalton arched his back and groaned as his orgasm overtook him. His seed spewed onto his chest and stomach, pooling in hot, sticky patches along his skin. He moved his hand harder and faster, pumping every last drop from his body before relaxing into the mattress.

He lay there panting for breath, feeling her heat around his finger before pulling away and going to the bathroom for a quick shower to clean himself up. Pausing at the bathroom door, he looked back across the room to where she lay sleeping in his bed. God she was beautiful, and whether she knew it yet or not, she belonged to him. He loved her, no matter who or what she was. She owned his heart and he wouldn't have it any other way.

## Chapter Eighteen

The car pulled up alongside the chain link fence surrounding the outer perimeter of Miner's Haven Park, the lights shut off as Alexis climbed from the vehicle. Malachi and Dalton joined her by the fence as the car idled nearby.

"Are you sure about this?" Dalton asked as he handed her a flashlight.

She shook her head. "Not really, but I don't see what choice I have. Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll actually tell me something useful this time."

"And pigs fly," Malachi scoffed.

Alexis smacked him on the arm. "Some help you are."

"Not to sound like a party-pooper or anything, but how do you plan to get in there?" Dalton asked.

She flashed him a grin as she turned to face the fence. "One of two ways." She moved closer, eyeing the top of the fence. Crouching down, she leapt with all her strength, flying up over the fence and landing quietly on her feet on the other side. "But that seemed like the best choice."

"Show off," Malachi muttered under his breath.

"How'd you do that?" Dalton asked.

Before Alexis could say anything, Malachi crouched down. "It's easy, really," the wolf began.

"Malachi, no," Alexis hissed, stopping him before he could jump. "You don't have time to go showing off for Dalton. We have no idea when the night patrol will be back."

"What about you? How will you get back to town when done?" Dalton ran a hand through his hair as he scanned the area in search of the patrols.

"I'll holler for Maximal or Simon. They won't like it, but under the circumstances, they'll have to deal." She focused her attention on Malachi. "Keep him safe, Mal, or else."

"Or else what?" Malachi gave her his most innocent look—a look she knew all too well.

"You really don't want to find out the answer to that," she warned, pointing a finger at him. "There's a car coming. You two get going. I'll meet you back at the motel room as soon as I can."

The men nodded and climbed back into the car before speeding off with the lights still out. Alexis ducked behind a group of bushes moments before one of the night security cars came cruising around the corner, checking the place out. She waited until the car was gone before standing and jogged deeper into the park.

The main cavern entrance was accessible through the tourist center and a couple stories below ground—meaning an elevator ride. Breaking and entering really wasn't her style though, so she opted for one of the lesser known natural entrances into the cavern system. Toward the back, southwestern corner of the park, a spring spewed out of a rock facing. The hole the water spilled from was big enough for her to fit through and make her way into the tunnels.

She stuffed her flashlight into her inside jacket pocket until she needed it. Though she could see in the dark, once she made it inside the caves, she'd need the flashlight to aid her because there was no light at all for her to see by. A Nosferatu's eyes were specially designed

to take trace amounts of light from the surrounding area and refract it many times over to allow them to see in the dark, but in the absence of light this wasn't possible. Hence the need for the flashlight.

Thirty minutes later, Alexis heard the rushing waters before she saw them. Thankfully it was the dry season and very little water spilled from the cavernous opening. She waded out into the pool that came halfway up her shin and climbed up into the opening. The rocks were slippery and many were loose as she made her way deeper into the darkness. Reaching in her pocket, she pulled out her flashlight and clicked it on. The light reflected off the smooth, moist surfaces of the rock formations and made the shadows come alive as they danced around before her. The place was beautiful.

Crystal deposits twinkled in the beam of light as she made her way through the narrow passage into the larger interior chambers. The water at her feet was only inches deep, the splashes echoing loudly against the walls. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and she quickly dropped into a crouch. She covered her head as a swarm of bats spilled through the tunnel. The flutter of hundreds of tiny bat wings stirred up an amazing amount of wind, causing her hair to fly around her head as they whizzed by on their way out into the night to hunt for the insects they preyed upon.

As soon as the last winged creature passed, Alexis climbed to her feet and grimaced at the way water had seeped into her clothing. At least she'd worn jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt this time. She'd known better than to wear one of her leather outfits into such an environment. The tunnel twisted and turned as she dodged stalagmites and stalactites. Alexis followed the path of water back to its source, a crystal clear underground lake.

She pursed her lips as she surveyed her surroundings. How best to get across this icy body of water? Even though she could jump a great distance, the landscape was so wet and slippery she feared sliding back into the extremely cold depths as soon as she landed. Oh, how she wished she had the ability to flash or shape shift, both of which would be very helpful right about now.

Alexis turned a series of slow circles, moving her flashlight beam over the walls from floor to ceiling. A thin ledge was visible from where she stood to the next solid formation on her left, but moisture was evident on the narrow rock formation and taking a dip wasn't on the agenda. The cold wouldn't really hurt her—much—but she despised being wet. Having to see the Moirae pissed her off enough as it was, she didn't need the added aggravation of being soaked to the bone for her troubles.

To the right, the pool of water appeared to reach toward the wall in a narrow ribbon. Across this narrow band of water, a large solid concrete slab lay. She must be close to one of the tour paths. The concrete would still be moist and probably slippery, but at least the railing would keep her from sliding back into the water.

Alexis took three steps back, dashed forward and leapt over the water and the railing to land hard on the concrete structure. As soon as her feet made contact, they slid out from under her, sending her barreling head over heels into the opposite rail. The breath whooshed out of her as her back slammed against the metal poles and pain raced through her muscles as it rattled her bones.

She lowered her head and breathed deeply, slowly easing the ache in her chest. As the pain subsided she climbed to her feet and focused her powers, seeking any trace of the Moirae.

Somewhere, hidden within this labyrinth of an underground wonderland, the enigmatic trio waited. She could only hope they had something worthwhile to tell her.

Water dripped from the ceiling and splashed in small pools on the floor. The underground water system gurgled softly as it traveled along its rocky path. Some unseen creature scurried along in the darkness, running from Alexis' unnatural presence and the light from her flashlight. A bat flapped its wings as it rearranged itself on its perch. The cavern was teeming with life and Alexis had to work that much harder to ignore the sounds, forcing herself to focus on the tell-tale sign of where her goal lay in wait for her.

She opened her eyes and turned her head in the direction she believed them to be. Her expulsion of air echoed loudly in the dark confines. "They would have to be down the hardest fucking path," she muttered as she vaulted over the rail, making certain to maintain a firm grip on it so as not to fall again.

There wasn't time for this shit. Diego was in the area, looking for some ancient source of power, and she was traipsing through the dark to talk to three women she hated with a real passion. They should know better than anyone how important it was to keep Diego from obtaining his goal, but still she slowly, painstakingly made her way through the slippery darkness toward where they waited in hopes they had something—anything that would help her stop the monster that had made her.

Time had no meaning in this mystical world she found herself in. Alexis had no real way to know how much distance she'd traveled; the dark void seemed to go on forever in all directions. The aura of power grew in intensity with each cautious step forward she made. She paused as magickal energy enveloped her, turning a full circle with her flashlight in hand in search of the source. The hidden entrance could be anywhere in this sunless network of caverns.

If only tossing a pebble at the walls would work, but that would prove fruitless. Only the one summoned could breach the barrier guarding the entrance into the Hall of Wisdom. With a heavy sigh, Alexis made her way to the wall on her right and began the painstaking process of running her hands over the damp, rocky surface, trying not to damage the environment in the process. Cavern formations were so fragile.

The wall beneath her palms suddenly gave way as her feet slipped. Alexis tumbled into the hidden chamber, landing in a heap on the white marbled floor. She pushed herself up and blew out a quick huff of air that had her hair dancing in front of her face. How the hell did they get a white tiled floor and columns into a cavern? *Duh, Alexis, they're magickal.* She shook her head and climbed to her feet.

Stalking forward, she balled her hands into tight fists at her side. Something dark and urgent gnawed at her gut. She focused, searching along the link between herself and Malachi. Just as she was about to make contact, movement in front of her drew her attention, jerking her back to the present.

"You have come," a monotone voice said from deeper within the chamber.

"Did I really have a choice?" she quipped, walking toward the platform that slowly rose up in the room's center. "If I'd known that, I'd have stayed home."

The dastardly trio glared at her. "We have news for you, child."

Alexis raised her eyebrows. "Well?"

"The Slayer is in great danger. You must protect him," the woman on the right said.

"What?" Alexis nearly screamed. "What do you mean he's in danger?"

"Diego attacks, even as we speak."

Alexis didn't have time to be shocked at their first ever non-enigmatic answer. "You called me down here to tell me he's in danger, which wouldn't be the case if I hadn't been called here to begin with." This was just too much. "Simon! Maximal! One of you get your ass down here now!"

She spun in a circle, looking up at the ceiling as she waited for one of them to answer her call. Both appeared at the same time.

"Simonius, you cannot be here," one of the Moirae rasped, pointing a finger at him.

"Oh, blow it out your ear," he replied, turning his back on the women. "What's wrong?"

Alexis pointed at the wenches behind him. "They are.. Take me to Dalton."

"Is she making any sense to you?" Maximal asked.

Simon shook his head. "Not a bit, I'm afraid."

"Dalton is in danger because of them," Alexis said through clenched teeth. "It'll take me hours to get out of here. Please take me to him so I can see what damage they've caused."

"They cannot help you, young vampire," the middle of the Moirae stated.

"Didn't I tell you to mind your own damned business," Simon shouted at the women.

Power welled up within Alexis from some unknown place within her. Heat consumed her body as her rage overtook her senses. She saw red as she lowered her head and glared at the three women. Her skin burned and tingled, but she ignored the sensations. Slowly, she stalked toward the trio, fury fueling each and every step she took.

Both men grasped her by the shoulders, restraining her forward momentum. She fought to break free, but they held tight. Alexis wanted blood—the Moirae's blood—and wouldn't be satisfied until her bloodlust was quenched.

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"Dalton, Alexis is going to kick my ass for letting you come here, and yours for coming when she finds out. She told me to keep you safe," Malachi said, picking up a picture off a shelf and looking at it closely.

Dalton took the photograph from the wolf's fingers and replaced it on the shelf. "What she don't know won't hurt her. I just wanted to grab a few changes of clothes and some more of my gear and then we'll head back to the motel."

Malachi shook his head as he looked Dalton over from head to toe. "I just don't know what she sees in you. You're so...human."

"At least she won't have to worry about catching distemper or rabies from me."

Malachi bristled, his shoulders straightening in a menacing way.

Dalton threw his hands up in defeat. "Okay, sorry. How about we try to get along for Alexis' sake?"

The wolf shrugged one shoulder. "I guess I could do that—for her." His nostrils flared and a growl rumbled in his throat.

"I thought you just agreed to get along?" Dalton stared at the other man and his stiff posture. "Something going on I should know about?"

"We've got company." Malachi's lip curled back to bare his teeth, which grew longer right before Dalton's eyes. "Don't freak out on me, okay?"

Why did people keep telling him that? "Okay." Though he wasn't entirely sure it would be okay.

The man seemed to grow taller as Dalton watched. His arms and legs thickened and covered in hair as his clothing tore away, leaving only a small section of his pants covering his crotch.

"Is this what a werewolf looks like?" Dalton looked at the way Mal's face twisted and altered with the change.

"I'm not a were, but I guess you could say yes, this is what a were would look like. Bipedal form, though I can go all wolf." His dark, shaggy head shook. "We don't have time for this. Prepare to defend yourself."

That's when he heard it. Low grunts and groans steadily grew louder. Feet sliding against the ground turned to the sound of someone on the porch. Dalton rushed to the wall beneath the staircase and hit the panel with his fist. A hidden door opened up to reveal his secret arsenal. Grabbing a gun, he quickly loaded the chamber before reaching for a shotgun and a bag of ammunition.

"Always prepared for the attack?" Malachi quipped.

"In my line of work you kinda have to be. What the hell is out there?"

"Hexads," the other man snarled. "Vile creatures neither human nor vampire. No doubt a gift from Diego. He must know Alexis isn't here."

The sound of glass breaking echoed through the house, followed quickly by the scent of smoke. "They're trying to burn us out." Dalton rushed to the back of the house and tried to stomp out the fire, but it grew too quickly. He pulled back to the front. "We can't stay in here for long."

"And we can't go out there where you'll be unprotected." His green eyes glowed yellow as he stared intently at Dalton. "It's you he's after, not me."

Well then, he'd just have to give the asshole one hell of a fight and make him work for it. There was no way he'd go willingly with the monster, though he already knew how this night would play out. He just hoped the wolf didn't get hurt in the process, because it would be his fault if anything happened to the other man.

Dalton grabbed Mal by the arm. "Malachi, get out of here.. As you said, it's me he's after. I don't want you hurt in this."

Mal tilted his head to one side. "Aw, slayer, didn't know you cared, but I can't leave. Alexis would kick my ass—hard." He shrugged. "How about we kick some Hexad ass? Take out as many of the nasty things as we can."

Dalton pumped the shotgun in his hands. "Sounds like a plan," he agreed as the first wave of monsters entered the house.

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Maximal and Simon tightened their hold on Alexis' shoulders as the room vanished and they rematerialized in front of Dalton's house, which stood ablaze. "Take me back," Alexis screamed, jerking away from the men. "I'm going to beat the shit out of those three."

"Alexis, you can't harm them," Simon pointed out.

Crackling and snapping registered in her mind.. Slowly, she turned her head toward Dalton's house to see it engulfed in flames.. "No!" Alexis screamed, rushing toward the inferno. Gods she hated fire, but what choice did she have? If Dalton or Malachi was still in

there, she couldn't leave them to such a horrid fate.

She ran with all her strength and speed across the yard and up the steps. The door didn't even slow her down as she plowed it over and skidded to a halt in the burning foyer.

"Dalton? Malachi?" She held her arm up in front of her face to shield her eyes from the bright flames.

The fire crackled, popped and roared as it devoured everything in the structure. Where were they? Her gut instinct told her at least one of them was still in the building. Over the roar of the fire, she barely heard a low moan coming from the living area.

Rushing through the flames, she dropped to her knees beside Mal where he lay in human form behind the couch on the floor. She felt for a pulse and checked his breathing. "Talk to me, Mal, what happened? Where's Dalton?"

"Diego," he rasped, lifting his head weakly before dropping it back down to the wooden floor. "Tried to stop them."

She smelled the burning flesh of Hexads mixing with the smoke from the burning house. "I need you to change, Mal. Full wolf, hurry." Alexis watched as his gorgeous, yet badly beaten human form altered into that of a large, dark brown wolf. Carefully, she picked up his limp form and stared around her for a way out of the blaze.

The door she'd entered through was now covered in flames, eliminating it as an exit. Drawing in a deep breath, she kicked the sofa out of the way and charged for the window. Alexis leapt toward the glass, turning her back to the window at the last moment. She hit the porch with the wolf on her chest then rolled out into the yard. Somewhere in the distance above the inferno, she heard Max and Simon rapidly approaching.

Alexis climbed to her feet, never taking her eyes off the downed wolf. This was all her fault, regardless what anyone else would try to say. Everyone she had ever loved or cared for in her life died – sooner or later, they all fell. First her mother then Paul, and now Malachi and Dalton.

Her gaze flitted to the two men hovering over Mal's still form. Would they be next on the ever-growing list of casualties? She didn't think she could bear to lose either of them, or anyone else for that matter.

She fingered the cross at her breast. The past was over and couldn't be changed, but what about the future? Hadn't the enigmatic trio said her destiny was in her own hands?

A glimmer of hope moved into her heart and warmed her entire being. And with it came realization. If anything had happened to Dalton she'd have known. They were connected since he'd given her his blood. She suddenly found herself wishing she'd spent a little more time honing her vampy skills.

"He's alive," she whispered without fully realizing she'd spoken aloud.

Maximal nodded. "He is, but he's hurt."

Anger churned in the pit of her stomach. Pain sliced through her at the thought of Dalton in the hands of such a cruel, merciless monster. Diego would pay for this and pay dearly. Enough was enough.. He'd gotten away with his heartless behavior for far too long.

She fisted her hand around the cross and yanked with all her strength, breaking the delicate silver chain and sliding it from around her neck.

"What are you doing?" Simon stood, as if preparing to rush her.

Alexis held her arm extended at her side, the chain and cross dangling from her fist as



she stared at him with glowing red eyes. "You've been telling me for years I need to let go of the past." She lifted her head arrogantly, defiantly. "Well, consider it forgotten." With that, she opened her fist and allowed the necklace to fall from her grasp. The silver pendant and chain disintegrated into nothing but ash before it ever reached the ground.

Turning on her heel, she stormed away.

"Where are you going?" Simon called out after her.

"To kick Diego's demonic ass all the way to hell," she shouted back.

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Maximal jumped to his feet and made a move to go after her, but Simon's hand at his shoulder stopped him. The bald man shook his head. "Let her go, Max." He turned his silvery-gray eyes to the ancient Nosferatu. "You know this is part of her destiny. She's doing as she's meant to do."

Max let out a sigh. "But I don't have to like it, Simon."

"Neither do I, but it has to be done. We took a vow not to interfere." Simon lowered his gaze to the wolf at his feet and grimaced. "Well, not to interfere with her life, anyhow."

"I'll get him. Meet me in Nazryne."

Simon nodded and watched the vampire disappear from sight. He stared off in the direction Alexis had disappeared, sent up a silent prayer and then followed in Max's wake.

## Chapter Nineteen

"Will he live?" Maximal asked as Simon got up off the side of the young wolf's bed.

His bald head nodded. "He will, but I'm afraid he'll be scarred. I've already broken so many rules I hate to think what they'll do to me for this."

Max patted the other man on the back. "They haven't yet come for his soul. Alexis will be indebted to you, as will Quinn. I supposed I should call him to inform him of what's happened."

"He knows," Simon said with certainty. "But you could call to let him know the boy will live."

Maximal nodded. "I'll do that as soon as we're done here. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go back to the club and wait for Alexis while ignoring the summons that's ringing in my head." Simon's eyes swirled silver for a brief moment.

"Pissed, aren't they?"

Simon shrugged. "Since when aren't they? I can handle them. They think they call the shots, but I know how to get around them. Fynx is my way in."

"One of these days she won't cover for your ass anymore."

He shrugged again. "I'll deal with that when and if it happens." He moved to the door. "Alexis is going for the book."

"She'll want answers as soon as she does and we still can't give them to her.. Can we?" Max hated all this, but all he could do was play along.

"No, we can't. I care about her, too, Max, but we're only along for the ride." He sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I'll see you at the club. Have someone keep an eye on the pup."

Max nodded. "I'll go inform Rashad of what's going on then meet you at the club. We may as well face her wrath together."

He watched Simon nod then disappear. At least this mess was almost over. He only hoped Alexis turned out victorious, else they were all in very big trouble.

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*I want him back!* Alexis sent the demand racing along the mental path leading to Diego's demented mind. She had no idea what caused him to be the evil bastard he was, and at this point she really didn't care. His demise was all that mattered.

Diego's laughter echoed in her mind, letting her know her message had been received. *And you think I will just hand him over at your command? I think not. Have you learned nothing over the years, little one? I am the master here.*

Alexis rolled her eyes, even though she knew he couldn't see her. By openly communicating with her, he was leading her right to his doorstep. *Then you will die.* It was that simple. Okay, so he would die anyhow, but she didn't have to tell him that part.

Again, he laughed. *How about a trade?*

Alexis paused and straightened to her full height. She didn't trust the monster, not a single bit, but perhaps this was the opening she needed to get inside and closer to him.

*What kind of trade?*

*Piqued your interest, have I? I want the book and you can get it for me.*

Suspicion ran to the forefront in her mind. *Why don't you go get it yourself, oh powerful one*, she sarcastically sneered.

*So glad to see you finally acknowledge my power, Alexis. Why should I go after it when I can get you to do it for me? Will you accept the trade?*

There was no way in hell she was trusting this backstabbing bastard. *Where is it?*

Alexis got a clear mental image of him smiling evilly at her response. Her entire body shuddered at the sight.

*Slater's Creek.*

Okay, *that* wasn't so bad. Slater's was a ghost town, but she could handle the Wraiths.

*In the graveyard*, his gravelly voice finished off.

Shit! Now that was a whole other story. *Afraid of the spooks, Diego? What's the matter? Afraid the specters of those you killed will haunt you?*

*I fear nothing*, he angrily spat at her.

Pain sliced through her arm, bringing her to her knees. What the fuck?

*What the hell did you just do, Diego?*

*Felt that, did you, dear? Let's just say your slayer is a little less...pretty now.*

She was so going to enjoy ripping the bloody bastard's heart out, showing the still-beating black mass to him before he died. *Do not do that again if you wish to see your precious book.*

*Then do not goad me, Alexis. A man only has so much patience, especially with a woman.*

Oh, gods please spare her his chauvinistic speeches. Sheesh. *I said I'd get the damned book, Diego. Leave him be.*

*For now, my pet. For now. Bring it to me tomorrow night.*

*Where?* He was up to something, but she had no way of figuring out what.

*I'll let you know when the time is right.*

The link faded until it was severed completely. Fuck! She turned back, heading toward Dalton's home. She'd go back for his car and then gather her equipment before heading east of Guarda toward Slater's Creek and the graveyard. She wasn't looking forward to this. Wraiths didn't scare her, but she'd learned long ago just exactly what they were capable of. Many were very resentful, especially toward the Nosferatu. It wasn't *her* fault they'd died and failed to move on. Hell, in many cases she hadn't even been born yet, or anywhere close to it, but that wouldn't stop them from holding what she was against her—whether she was one by choice or not.

"The things I get myself into," she muttered as she kicked at the reddish brown sand at her feet. She looked to the horizon then glanced at the watch wrapped around her wrist. It would be dangerously close to sunrise before she made it to Slater's, and a day stuck in a Wraith town wasn't something she relished.

Drawing in a deep breath, she took off running as fast as she could. The less time it took her to get back to the car, the sooner she could get to Slater's, get the book and get the hell out of Dodge.

When Alexis finally made it back, she was completely out of breath. She doubled over at her waist, hands on her knees as she drew in large gulps of air to ease the burning in her lungs. Even as she regained her breath, her eyes darted around her, surveying what was left of Dalton's home.. The main supports to the house had already collapsed when she finally

stopped running. Flames still flickered and licked at the badly charred wood as it hissed and popped ominously. Dalton would be very upset at the loss of the house he'd been so very proud of, but so long as he escaped this with his life, he would manage.

Alexis jerked the car door opened and slipped into the driver's seat. She knew how to drive. Maximal had insisted she learn how with each new birth of the car, yet something was missing. She snapped her fingers. Keys! Keys were very important for starting the new age models, unlike the ones of old.

She pulled the corner of her bottom lip into her mouth and worried it with her teeth. No keys. Her eyes darted to the smoldering remains of the house. Most likely they'd gone down with the structure. That left only one option.

"Thank you Melyn," she murmured as she leaned over and set to work hotwiring the contraption.

The engine roared to life. Alexis smiled and sat up in the seat. Now to get back into Guarda, grab her gear and get to Slater's post haste. She threw the car into reverse, whipped it around and gunned it as she headed to Olympus. Once there, she'd gear up for the hunt—then Diego would be in serious trouble.

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"She'll come for me, and when she does...beware," Dalton said in a raspy voice. His face hurt and his wrists were numb from the rope tied tightly around them.

Diego threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, she'll come all right, but I'm not afraid of her." He turned to face his captive. "You see, I made her, and that makes me the more powerful of the two."

Dalton wanted to laugh but held his tongue. No sense in provoking the sick fuck. He straightened as much as his bruised and aching body would allow. Diego's eyes were like windows into a soulless void, but he made himself stare into the dark depths. "When she kills you, I will watch and enjoy every second of your pain."

A hand flew toward him with lightening speed, impacting his face with a sickening thud. "Too bad you'll be dead shortly after she arrives." He grabbed a handful of Dalton's hair and tugged his head back, exposing his throat. "I know she's fed from you," he whispered, his fetid breath washing over Dalton's face. "That connection she now shares with you is the only thing keeping you alive, because if I were to give in to temptation, you would be dead."

"I'm not afraid to die."

"Perhaps you should be," Diego sneered, yanking hard on Dalton's hair. "Besides, it's not the dying part you should worry about. It's what I do to cause your death you should fear."

"What do you need with a book if you're so big and powerful?" He had to admit to being curious as to what good a book could do a vampire, especially one as evil as this one. Hell, he was amazed the ass knew how to read.

"Because with that book I will rule the world," the monster purred.

Dalton would have rolled his eyes if they weren't so swollen. Instead, he laughed. A deep, rumbling sound that shook his entire body and made all his bruises and cuts along his skin hurt, which made him laugh even harder.

Diego's face twisted in rage and Dalton braced himself for the beating to come. But he

didn't care. It would all be over soon and this would be but a memory, another page in the story of his life. The first blow knocked him over backward, bending his legs up and under him. He just kept laughing as Diego took out his rage on him. Soon, it'd all be over—so very soon.

## Chapter Twenty

Simon was nowhere to be seen in Olympus. The club looked as though it lacked something quintessential without the brightly colored strobe lights glinting off his hairless head. The entire feel of the club was off in his absence, but he was doing something far more important than tending to a bar. He was saving a life—a good life, no matter how much he disliked her Lycan friend.

She made her way through the throng of writhing bodies, ignoring everyone and everything along the way and headed into the back toward the staircase leading into the basement. Turning in the opposite direction from the room in which she slept when necessary, she headed to a system of shelves. After making sure no one was looking, she slid her hand around the items adorning the metal structure. Pressing gently against the hidden button, she listened for the faint click that signaled the door's opening and then pulled her hand away.

A nightlight burned in the darkness, giving off just enough illumination to keep her from stumbling over the sparse furniture. The door slid closed behind her as she stepped inside. Turning, she reached for the light switch and flipped it. The room was instantly bathed in bright, white light. She turned her attention to the closet and threw the door open.

Shucking her clothes, she dug through the bins in the small storage area until she found what she searched for.

Alexis stood before the full length mirror hanging on the secret room's closet door. She zipped her shorts, then pulled her custom made belt around her hips and fastened it at her side. With her leg propped up on a low shelf, she pulled up the zipper on her thigh-high boots and then switched to the other to repeat the process. This was her favorite outfit. Each piece was made of flawless black leather and fit like a tight, well-made glove.

Her shorts were cut super short, leaving anyone watching her to believe if she moved just so they'd get the show of their lives. The super tight halter top she wore wrapped around her rib cage to fasten at her back as twin straps moved up to twine around her neck where they connected at her nape. The two-inch, thick heels of her boots made her already long legs look even longer, and left a few inches of skin visible between where they left off and her shorts picked up.

Midriff left bare, she pulled on her matching black, leather duster that hung down to caress the backs of her calves at about the midway point. Dressed to blend in with the night—to kill if necessary.

Alexis turned away from the mirror to collect her arsenal. She pulled the large sword she favored from its sheath to examine the silvery blade before sliding it back into the scabbard and leaning it against the wall by the door. Next, she slid a couple packs of explosives into one of the pockets on her belt. The detonators were placed in another pocket at her other side. She didn't dare get them too close together. A small, two-inch dagger was slid behind the belt's buckle and an assortment of various-shaped throwing stars fit into yet other compartments on the belt.

The final touch was made when she pulled the long, massive locks of her dark hair back away from her face and secured it with a lime-green ponytail holder. Simon constantly told

her she needed to add a bit of color to her outfits, so this was her attempt to please him. She simply refused to add any more color than that small elastic band.

The nightly call of insects was a sign of life in a world seemingly devoid of it, yet here in Slater's the pesky, noisy little critters were eerily silent. Death surrounded the small town like a tightly drawn shroud. The entire place and outlying areas gave her the creeps—totally. What tragedy had befallen this place?

Alexis closed the car door with a quiet click then strapped her silver sword between her shoulder blades. Pulling her coat tighter around her, she stepped beneath the swinging 'Welcome to Slater's Creek' sign. The faded, wooden sign creaked as it swung from rusted chains, though no wind blew.

The air beside her head stirred and Alexis fought the urge to shudder. The Wraiths were saying hello, but she didn't have time for conversations with the dead. She was here for a specific purpose that didn't involve listening to the irate rants of the specters.

She surveyed the faded and falling-apart buildings as she walked down the town's main street. Several of the structures sported condemned signs. The majority had windows with little or no glass in the frames and the steps were either missing or badly broken.

Somewhere unseen, a shutter banged against a wall. Doors lay across the threshold or hung by only one hinge. This place certainly deserved its ghost town label and again she wondered at the events that had transpired here so very long ago.

The gravel and sand beneath her feet crunched with each step, which was highly unusual. She usually made no sound when she moved. Was the entire town enchanted? The possibility left her unnerved. Alexis kept her face forward at all times, though her gaze darted all around her, always on alert. With each passing moment spent in the town's interior, it became more and more apparent as to why Diego had sent her to complete his dirty deed.

Silvery moonlight spilled across the reddish-hued ground, lending an already spooky place an even more eerie feeling. She knew a tour company brought in tourists through the day, though no one dared venture here after dark—no one except her. The town was considered private property. Simon owned the entire area, though no one would ever know that. He hid his assets well, despite once letting it slip while they spoke.

The large, ornate metal gates of the cemetery loomed before her. A thick chain wrapped and weaved through the gates bars to keep them firmly secured to one another, locked with what had to be the largest padlock she'd ever seen. Alexis picked it up and ran her fingers over the ancient-looking locking mechanism. So easy to break, especially in its rusted condition, but Simon wouldn't be happy with her if she did. She dropped the lock and stepped back, lifting her gaze to the fence's high top.

Normally she'd just jump over the thing, but with the way her luck went lately and the sharp spikes at the gate's top, she wasn't about to risk it. A high stone wall surrounded the plot's perimeter and would serve as her way in.

Located at the town's heart, the graveyard was somewhat unusual for this area in that a large majority of the patrons were buried in crypts or mausoleums instead of the average grave. Perhaps the place's magickal history was partly to blame for the oddity, and she knew it was magickal if Simon was involved with the place.

Alexis leapt up onto the stone wall, landing in a crouch. Her legs bent at the knee,

ankles pulled in close beneath her, she rested the fingertips of her left hand on the cold smooth stone and moved her gaze over the area. The place had a New Orleans feel to it in both appearance and Wraith activity. Orbs darted to and fro through the air over the landscape, adding to her summation of the place.

She dropped to the ground below with the agility of a cat. The place was quiet—too quiet. Other than the initial hello from the Wraiths, the invisible residents of the town were silent. The feel of the land brought to mind images of someone holding their breath in anticipation of what would happen next.

Glimmers of power she'd felt upon her arrival grew steadily stronger as she made her way deeper into the garden of statuary and stone tombs. The dates on the gravestones dated back to the early 1800s. Most of these people had been dead for as long as she'd lived. Some had been gone even longer.

Strangely enough, the thought would have once saddened her, yet all she felt was joy in the fact she still lived long after she should have ceased to exist. She moved silently through the shadows until she reached the largest mausoleum in the yard. Rusted metal gates barred the way to the door leading inside, which was locked as well as sealed. Someone had definitely wanted to keep whoever or whatever lay within those rock walls contained.

Alexis gripped the metal bars, feeling the rust crack and flake away against her skin. Drawing in a deep breath, she leaned into the barrier then jerked back with all the force she could muster. A loud creak and pop sounded as the fastenings that held it in place broke free.

She tossed the broken piece of fence aside then turned her attention back to the heavy, solid metal door that stood between her and her goal. How to go about opening this? She gnawed on her bottom lip, pulled her coat back behind her and out of her way, then lifted her leg and kicked the door with all her strength. It strained against the seal holding it in place, but did not open. Fine cracks formed all around the edges.

"Okay, so that didn't work," she murmured. She suddenly spun, landing a roundhouse kick in the door's center. It popped and then fell like the heavy sheet of metal it was with a loud thud.

Alexis slowly lowered her leg, all senses on full alert as she waited for whatever was held prisoner inside to realize it was finally free. She raised a brow. Nothing happened.

Stepping onto the fallen door and into the dark room, she paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the deeper shadows. Nothing within the small interior moved. Cobwebs hung in curtains from every available surface and a thick layer of dust covered everything in sight. Name plaques were cracked, showing their age, the names on a few were completely worn off.

Three crypts lay inside the room. One large one flanked by two slightly smaller ones. Alexis moved closer and circled around the center tomb. She traced her fingertips lightly over the large, heavy lid. What secrets lay encased within?

"Only one way to find out." She flexed her hands, positioned them at the edge and pushed with all her might.

The large stone slab jerked then slid around to lay crossways atop the case. Inside laid a dusty, armor-clad skeleton.. "Armor?" She leaned back and looked along the sides for a date. "How long has this thing been here?" Nothing but worn and faded etchings adorned the side. Oh well.

In the crook of the boney figure's arm, a dusty and tattered cloth was wrapped around



something. Was this what she sought? Carefully, she grasped the decaying cloth with her fingers and gasped when it crumbled beneath her touch. As the ancient fabric fell away, golden light spilled out into the darkness. The book!

A smile broke out on Alexis' face as she grabbed the book and quickly slid it down into the mesh bag hanging from her belt. "That was easy," she remarked, turning back toward the door.

"Give back the book," a rusty, scratchy voice reverberated around her.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and a slight tremor worked its way through her body as she paused mid-step. She slowly turned her head to peer over her shoulder.

"Fuck!" The skeleton sat up and stared at her with empty eye sockets and opened mouth as it climbed from the crypt.

She drew her sword and spun, neatly separating the skull from the rest of the body. "That was simple enough," she murmured, moving to replace the sword in its sheath.

Rattling bones made her grit her teeth as she watched the skeleton pull itself back together. By the gods!

Alexis let her blade fly, slicing and dicing the skeleton. When it lay in a pile at her feet, she quickly scooped up as much of it as she could and tossed it into the crypt, then shoved the lid back into place.

"Give back the book," the scratchy voice repeated as she heard it pull itself back together within its tomb.

The heavy lid vibrated as the creature tried to make its escape. She hurriedly grabbed up a statue sitting along the wall and placed it atop the tomb before returning for its mate and laying it along side the first. Maybe that would hold it—for a few minutes at least.

Alexis slid her sword back into its sheath and dashed out the door, where she skidded to an abrupt halt. "Oh shit," she breathed. The entire fucking graveyard had sprung to life. An army of walking skeletons ambled forward, moving in to surround her.

She pulled her sword out once more and sliced the creatures nearest her. One fell and she moved to the next. By the time she downed that one, the first had pulled itself back together. Unable to fight her way out, she leapt to the top of the mausoleum. Not out of danger, but at least out of their reach—temporarily. They were creating a chain out of themselves so that others could get to her.

Reaching behind her, she grabbed a grenade from her belt, pulled the pin with her teeth, and tossed it into the amassing bone army. "Sorry, Simon," she murmured, wincing as the small bomb exploded and scattered bits of bone all over the lot.

It hadn't even slowed them down. Skeletal fingers grasped the edges of the roof. Alexis shifted her weight from one foot to the other, braced herself and leapt for the nearest structure. Halfway across the gap, power surrounded her, her body felt funny and suddenly her target was no longer there.

Alexis screamed as she hit the ground hard. She pushed herself up and jumped to her feet. Something slapped against the side of her head. Fear formed a knot in her gut. Slowly, she turned her head and was rewarded by a slap in the nose by a swinging rope. She swatted it away, noticing for the first time the knot in it.

Taking a step back, she gasped as she noticed it was a noose. Then, something hit her in

the back. Alexis closed her eyes and slowly rotated her body.. When she opened her eyes, she stared into the fathomless pits for eyes in a skull.

"Could you give me a hand?" its scruffy voice asked.

He swung back and forth from the noose, no arms or legs to be seen. No wind blew, yet the ropes continued to swing as if pushed by the air's hands.

"A hand?" it repeated.

Alexis drew her sword and severed the skull. It hit the ground and rolled. Upon resting, it said, "Thank you."

She did the only thing that seemed sensible to her at that moment—she screamed and quite suddenly found herself standing next to Dalton's car. She jerked the car door open and tossed in the sword, then felt her chest and stomach. "I flashed," she murmured, shocked at the realization. "I flashed!" She did a little dance in the dusty street, singing "I flashed" in the process. Then she suddenly stopped.

"Oh hell," she cried. "I don't know how I did it."

The sound of rattling bones broke through her sorrow at the knowledge. She glanced down the street, noted the skeleton army moving her way and dove into the car. She started the car as quickly as possible, gunned the engine, threw it in drive and peeled rubber out of there without looking back.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she reached down and pulled the book up onto the seat beside her. "I sure hope Simon had safeguards set up or else I just set one badass army loose on the world."

## Chapter Twenty-One

*You got my book?* Diego's evil voice purred in Alexis' mind.

She narrowed her eyes and ground her teeth together. "I got the damnable thing, but you won't be getting it tonight." Stall. She had to stall him until the next night. With the discovery of new powers, she desperately needed to find someone who could explain to her how they worked—and she had just the person for the job in mind.

*Be careful, girl. I'm not a fledgling you can push around. Besides, have you forgotten so soon what I have in my possession?*

Alexis clenched her hands into tight fists at her sides. "And you remember what I said I'd do to you if you harm him. You do not want to cross me, Diego. I'm tired of your games."

*Then I should just slit his throat right now. If you're not willing to play, what's the point in having the board all set up?*

"If you do, you will never see this book," she promised in a low growl. "And then I will hunt you down to the ends of the Earth if I have to."

*Fair enough. It would seem we are of equal standing—for the moment. You have until tomorrow night. I'll be in touch later with the location where we should meet.*

Alexis curled her lip but didn't reply. The bastard could rot in hell for all she cared and before this was through, she'd personally see to sending him there with a one way ticket.

She pulled the car into a parking space outside Olympus and cut the engine with a wave of her hand. Clutching the mesh bag containing the book to her chest, she climbed from the car and quickly headed into the club through the back door which she opened with magick. She'd deal with Simon's ire over it later. There was no time for his no magicks on Olympus' property and besides, it was after hours.

"I sure hope you had containment spells up around Slater's," she said as she waltzed into the club from the kitchen. She pulled up short when she spotted Maximal reclined on a chair with Simon across from him, leaning back against the bar. "What's going on?" Her eyes narrowed at the pair.

"So who tells her?" Maximal asked, climbing to his feet.

Her gaze darted from one man to the other. "You knew, didn't you? You knew it was there all this time. How could you do this to me, Simon?"

"I had no choice, Alexis." Simon held his hands out and shook his head. "I was already stretching the rules by placing the book at Slater's and keeping it safe. Don't worry about the skeleton army, they're harmless."

"Harmless? They tried to *kill* me, Simon. That isn't harmless in my book." She glared at him, hands on hips.

Simon scratched his bald head. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Maybe you're slipping in your old age," Maximal chuckled.

"This isn't funny, Max. I have until tomorrow night to learn all about my powers before I have to face Diego. He wants this damnable book." She shook it at the two.

"Honey, I tried to teach you your powers, but you weren't interested. It may be too late for that," Maximal pointed out.

Alexis narrowed her eyes at him and bared her fangs. "You've both spent who-knows-

how-long lying to me about this book, and now you won't help me learn what I need to know. Why didn't you just tell me the truth?"

"As I said, my hands were tied in this matter," Simon replied.

She turned to Maximal. "And what about you? You don't act the least bit surprised by any of this."

Maximal took a step toward her. "Alexis..."

She took a quick step back. "Don't Alexis me. How could you? I trusted you – both of you. And this is what you do." Alexis shook her head. Her chest hurt as all sorts of wild ideas flooded her mind.. Feelings bombarded her, betrayal being the foremost of them. She held up a finger in front of her. "You know, I don't even care enough to hear an explanation." And with that, she flashed herself out of the club.

Alexis kicked a can on the sidewalk outside Olympus. Now what? Those two were her only hope. She stopped mid-step. Her head rose as she stared straight ahead with wide eyes and snapped her fingers.

Rodrigo.

He was young. Barely more than a hundred years, but already he was one very powerful Mage. If anyone could help her out, it would be him. "Please be home, buddy," she whispered as she closed her eyes and focused on Rodrigo's front door. A heartbeat later, she reached up to knock on the dark-wooden door.

The door swung open to reveal a tall, slender man with dark mussed hair and equally dark eyes. He appeared to be half asleep, but flashed her a grin when he recognized her.. "Alexis," he said, stepping aside to allow her entrance into his home.. "What brings you here at this hour?"

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Hi Rod, sorry to wake you."

He shrugged one shoulder. "What's a little lost sleep for a friend? Though I have a feeling this isn't a social call."

Alexis shook her head. "Afraid not."

His dark eyes narrowed on her. "Why is your aura so dark?" Rodrigo stepped closer and walked a full circle around her. "Hmm, interesting. It's not black as I'd first thought."

"What does black mean?"

"Death," he replied in a no nonsense tone. "But it's not black, more a mixture of several colors."

She raised both brows at him. "Is that good or bad, Rodrigo?"

"You seem really tense, too." He kept circling her, his gaze moving up and down her non-stop.

"Yeah, well, I kinda have a lot going on right now." She followed his movement, wondering what he was up to.

He paused and rubbed his hand against his chin as he nodded. "Prophecies will do that to a person."

"What do you know about it?" She narrowed her gaze at him.

Rodrigo shrugged and flashed another grin.. "Probably more than I should."

Alexis shook her head. "I get so tired of people doing that to me. Anyhow, I came here for a reason."

"I expected as much." He sat down on the sofa and stared up at her. "So, what do you

need?"

"A lesson in powers."

He was back up on his feet in a heartbeat. "You're telling me you don't know how to control your powers?"

"I'm telling you I don't even know what my powers are."

Rodrigo rubbed his forehead and let out a long breath. "Hold out your hand."

She eyed him warily but did as instructed. He immediately grabbed her hand and lightly ran his fingertips over her palm. Alexis giggled and tried to pull her hand back, an action Rodrigo rewarded with a scowl. "What? It tickles."

He audibly expelled his breath. "Alexis dear, this is important."

Alexis pulled her lips into her mouth and clamped her teeth down on them to keep from giggling, though she did smile. "What do you see?" she mumbled almost unintelligibly.

Rodrigo lifted his head to look at her. "Do what?" His brow furrowed.

She released her lips and licked them. "I said, what do you see?"

"I think you're an elemental." He waved his finger at her in a swirling pattern. "It would explain the aura."

"An elemental? And that means what exactly?"

He held her hand palm up in his. "Close your eyes and picture a ball of water in your hand." She just looked at him. "Alexis, you have to help me out here."

She rolled her eyes and sighed before closing them and focusing on a large ball of water in her palm. Seconds later, water dripped into her hand. Her eyes flew open and a ball of water hovered before her. "Wow, did I do that or is it you?"

He released her hand and stepped back. "It's all you, babe."

Alexis rolled it around her hand and from one palm to the other. "I had no idea."

Rodrigo just nodded, an awed expression on his face. "Now try lightning."

The water evaporated. Alexis closed her eyes and envisioned a ball of lightning in her hand. Slowly, she peeked one eye open and gasped at the site of electricity dancing along her skin. "This is..."

"Amazing," Rodrigo filled in for her. "I've never actually seen anyone who could do that." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Try fire."

She shook her head adamantly. "Oh, no. I'm Nosferatu. My kind and fire don't mix."

He tilted his head to one side and raised a brow at her. "Trust me, Alexis. It's perfectly safe."

"Yeah, well, if it hurts me, watch out for the lightening." She closed her eyes again and focused on a ball of fire. Heat warmed her palm seconds later. She blinked, unable to fully grasp what was going on. "This is unbelievable. Am I really doing this?"

"I swear you are, Alexis. There's two more to go."

"Air and earth?"

He nodded. "Air and earth. You can control the winds and cause earthquakes if you want, but I'd prefer not to test either of those in the house, if you don't mind."

Alexis laughed. "I think I can manage. Do you know anything about flashing?"

"Teleportation? A little, but not a whole lot. Again, not my talent."

"Do you think you can explain to me how to control it? I suddenly discovered I could do it earlier tonight.." She lowered herself onto the arm of a nearby chair and slid out of her

jacket.

Rodrigo's eyes narrowed at her as he quickly closed the distance between them. He grabbed her arm and held it up to his face for a closer look. His fingertip rubbed over her inner arm. "What is this?"

She tried to pull her arm away from him. The markings on her inner arms were a mystery to her, and she didn't like them being messed with.

"You bear the mark of the dragon. Alexis, do you have any idea what this means?" His voice was filled with awe, as were his eyes.

"I have no clue. They've always been there, but no one knows how or why."

He chewed on his lower lip. Alexis reached up and ran her fingertip over his mouth. "You shouldn't do that, Rod. It's not very manly."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Was just lost in thought."

"Care to tell me what's on your mind? I know it's about me and these marks."

"It's the mark of the dragon, hence the dragon design. You are very special, Alexis." He ran his fingers over the dragon etching on her arm again.

"Gee, Rodrigo, I think you're pretty special, too." He really wasn't making any sense to her.

His dark head shook. "No, Alexis, I mean you are *really* special. A rarity in this world and in all honesty, forbidden by the Council."

Terror gripped her heart at his words. "The only thing forbidden by the Council is a—" She stopped and stared at him wide-eyed. "No way!"

"You've said numerous times you have no idea who your father was. Maybe it's more a matter of what he was rather than who."

She ran her hand through her hair and dropped down into the chair—hard. "I'm a hybrid."

"It's not the end of the world, love.. It just makes you super special."

"It marks me for death!" she shrieked.

Rodrigo laughed. He actually laughed at her. "Doll, you're forgetting one thing."

She looked at him through eyes still wide with shock. "And that would be?"

"You have the Fates on your side. If you were the abomination the Council believes, why would they be helping you in your quest?"

Alexis worried her bottom lip. She had to admit that he had a point—sort of. "So what am I?"

He dropped down to his knees before her and patted her knee. "That, I have no idea on, but I have a feeling all will be revealed in time. What's this?" He pulled on the mesh bag attached to her waist. His eyes widened and his mouth formed an 'O'. "Is that what I think it is?"

Alexis grabbed the book and clutched it to her chest. "I have no idea what you mean by that."

"Don't play coy with me, Alexis. That's the Book of Antilles. What are you doing with it?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that Diego wants it very badly." She relaxed a little, lowering the book to her lap where she nervously picked at the bag.

"You don't intend to give it to him, do you? The power of that book is legendary."

"I don't have a choice, Rodrigo. He's got Dalton." Just saying it hurt. If anything happened to Dalton it would be her fault. The past was repeating itself. It was the incident with Paul all over again—only this time she would make damned certain things turned out differently.

"Dalton. Now where do I know that name from?" he muttered to himself, standing to pace the floor.. He snapped his fingers and spun around to face her. "The Slayer? Why are you concerned with the Slayer?"

Alexis turned away from his penetrating stare.

"By the gods. I never thought I'd see the day when Alexis Chantal was in love. I mean, I hate I'm not the object of such affection, but damn. The Slayer?"

"Oh, would you shut up already. Sheesh. Why is it so fucking hard to believe I could feel for him?" She refused to say the word love out loud. "I was a slayer once, too, you know?"

"Well, they always said opposites attract."

Alexis picked up a pillow and threw it at him.. He barely ducked out of the way in time. "You never did explain to me how to control my flashing."

"Flash me and I'll show you some control," he quipped.

She glared. "Rodrigo, I'm being serious here. This is no time for jokes, and dawn will be here soon."

He threw his hands up in defeat. "Okay. I'm not real sure about this, but I do believe all you have to do is concentrate on the place you want to be or the person you want to find and you're there."

"I can find Dalton like this?" Hope bubbled up into her chest. Maybe things weren't so dire after all.

"Probably, but do you think that wise? If you've just now discovered you have this power that means it's unpredictable. I wouldn't suggest you put yourself into any life-threatening situation just yet with it. Especially not this close to dawn. What if you popped up in an open field exposed to direct sunlight?"

"Yeah, that would be bad.." She jumped up off the chair arm and grabbed Rodrigo in a tight hug. "Thank you so much. I knew I could depend on you, even if everyone else has betrayed me."

He reluctantly wrapped his arms around her and smoothed his hand over her hair. "Who betrayed you?"

"Simon and Maximal. So many lies...and for what purpose?"

Rodrigo shook his head. "I have no idea, sweetie, but I'm sure they had their reasons. Those are the two most noble men I've ever known. I don't think they'd ever intentionally hurt you if they had a choice."

Pulling back, she shrugged her shoulders and moved to retrieve her jacket. "Maybe, but I'm too pissed to ask questions right now."

His dark eyes flashed a moment as a smile cracked his lips. "Once you get back to your rooms at Olympus, you'll find a little surprise waiting for you."

She quirked a brow at him. "A surprise? Like what?"

He chuckled. "Something useful that will hopefully help you tomorrow night." Moving to the lamp on the end table, he flicked the light off. "Now, you'd better go so you'll

still have time to get inside in case you miss.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, though he couldn't see the action and flashed herself back to Olympus while holding her breath. Luckily, she appeared safely in her room. The breath she'd been holding whooshed out in relief. Though she'd never admit it to anyone, she'd been afraid her jump across time and space would miss.

Her skin pricked as the sun peered over the horizon and though she couldn't see it, she knew it to be so. For the first time in memory since becoming a creature of the night, sleep didn't overtake her as the sun rose. Knots formed in her stomach and she grew more and more restless as the minutes ticked by. What if she failed Dalton? What would become of the man who held her heart if she failed the task before her?

With a weary sigh, she pulled off her jacket and tossed it over a chair before flopping down on her bed, but still, sleep did not come. To occupy her mind, Alexis played with her powers, morphing a ball of energy from light to water to fire and back again. How could so much power be within her and stay hidden for so very many years? She'd had absolutely no clue she could do these things. As the day slowly dragged by, she felt her powers growing, something that should have taken years to happen. This was...unnatural, even for one of her kind.

She glanced at the clock by the bed. Three hours to sundown. So lost in her powers she hadn't even noticed how much time had truly gone by. Pulling herself up from the bed, she went into her small adjoining bathroom.

Alexis stared at her reflection in the mirror after a day without much sleep. This was the night she'd lived her entire life for. Everything she'd done led up to this moment in time, which only made the next couple of hours before sundown all the longer and harder to deal with. She only hoped that Dalton was all right. If anything happened to him, it would be because of her and she couldn't live through that again.

On impulse she opened up the medicine cabinet—which was mostly empty—and pulled out a pair of sharp scissors. Alexis didn't even think about what she did as she pulled strands of her dark, waist-length hair away from her head and clipped it, allowing the loosened locks to fall to the floor and gather around her feet. Snip after snip, hair rained down onto the white tiled floor until it was completely obscured.

She blinked as she finished, making sure that no long strands remained before replacing the scissors in the cabinet. Her once long hair was now short and curled around her face in jagged little wisps. The new look was a far cry from the old one, but she'd felt the change necessary. At least now she knew her hair would stay out of her way during the face-off with Diego.

Alexis moved to the tub and turned on the water, then removed her clothing as she waited for the room to steam up. She climbed in, enjoying the hot sting of the shower against her skin. The hot spray helped her to relax and stay focused on what was to come. If she had any prayer to succeed tonight, she had to keep her cool—but still she worried.

She soaped up her body and let the water raining down on her rinse it away. Time to prepare. Shutting off the water, she stepped out onto the white mat by the tub and toweled herself off before dropping the towel and flashing herself into her secondary chamber where all her weapons were kept. Tonight's battle called for something special.

Pulling open the secret chamber doors, Alexis stepped inside her small arsenal room, a



tall glass case now stood that hadn't been there before. "Rodrigo," she murmured. She ran her fingers over the cool, smooth surface and the case suddenly opened with an audible click.

Cool, black leather and the finest silver with intricate etchings of dragons awaited her. The silver bracers that would lock around her wrists contained tiny dragon etchings on the inside that matched perfectly to the marks on her arms. Tucked just inside the collar, she noted a small, pale blue piece of paper. Gently grasping it, she pulled it out and unfolded the sheet.

*Alexis,  
A special outfit for a very special lady. It should help protect you  
in battle. Wear it proudly as you face your destiny.  
Rodrigo  
P.S. Kick Diego's ass for me.*

Alexis laughed. Leave it to Rodrigo to be so eloquent. She tested the material by sliding it between her fingers and thumb. Tugging on it, she determined the outfit was light but durable and knowing Rodrigo, it was made to protect her from magickal attacks as well as from the swipe of a blade. The back of the matching coat was what really caught her eye. The entire length from collar to tail was covered in an intricate red and golden oriental-style dragon, much like the marks on her arms.

She pulled on the pants, taking her time to make sure the leather lay smoothly against her skin. Silver buckles lined the outer hem from waist to mid-calf on each leg, allowing room for her boots to slide beneath the fabric. Alexis tightened each and every fastening to make the fit perfect before pulling on her top. The short-sleeved, leather tunic conformed to her torso like a second skin, cupping her breasts perfectly before moving down scant inches below them and stopping.. Her abdomen was left bare between the leather pieces, though she couldn't figure out the reasoning behind it.

Matching the engravings within the bracers to the marks on her arms, she snapped them into place before slipping on her boots. She moved to stand before the mirror and stared at her reflection.. Her fingers smoothed over her chest, noting the absence of the chain she'd worn for more than two-hundred years. She missed her cross but not the weight she'd been forced to bear because of it.

Alexis quickly strapped on her guns, slid a dagger into her boot and grabbed her sword before heading for the club's main floor. She found Simon making last minute preparations before the club opened at sundown.

"Aren't you up a bit early?"

She shrugged and laid her sword down on the bar. "I've not slept." He gave her a stern look. "Don't look at me like that. It's the first time since I turned I couldn't sleep during the day. I need a favor."

He raised a thick, dark brow. "Alexis, I—" Simon picked at a short lock of her hair. "What did you do to your hair?"

"I cut it," she replied, giving him a 'duh' look.

"I can see that, but why?" He walked around her, full circle.

"Because I wanted to. Now, my favor?"

"I'm already in trouble because of you," he pointed out.

Alexis let out an exasperated sigh. "Look, all I need for you to do is move Dalton's car to the parking garage. I need to leave as soon as the sun sinks below the horizon and that'll make it faster."

He held his hand out. "Keys."

She shook her head and stared at him with what she hoped was an innocent look. "I don't have any."

Laughter echoed in the room behind her. "Alexis, girl, you are always losing your keys."

Alexis glanced over her shoulder to see a woman with short, bright, neon-orange striped hair coming her way. "Forest, I don't have time for this." She turned her attention back to Simon. "Please?"

"All right. I'll be right back." He patted her arm and headed for the back door.

"What's got you so up tight? And have you seen Malachi? Quinn's worried," Forest remarked.

Pain sliced through Alexis' heart. "I think you'd better talk to Simon about that. I've got something I have to do. I'll catch up with you later, okay? And tell Melyn thanks for me, if you see her."

"Thanks for what?" Forest called out as Alexis headed for the passage leading into the parking garage.

"She'll know," Alexis called over her shoulder as she exited the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Meet me two hours due south of the church near the canyon..* Diego's dark voice practically purred in Alexis' mind. She could envision him rubbing his hands together gleefully in anticipation of obtaining the book.

"That will take me four hours just to get to you and the sun's not yet all the way down," she replied as she gripped the steering wheel and watched the sky slowly darken around her. He didn't have to know she was already sitting in the car under a parking garage where Simon had moved it for her. She was about to try something she'd never dreamed of before—she only hoped it worked.

*Then I suggest you drive quickly.* Just as quickly as he'd touched her mind, Diego was gone.

Alexis blew out a huff of air as the last of the orange, red and pink bands in the sky turned to a deep violet. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on taking herself and the car to the church where Father Malone had died. His loss still ached deep in her heart. Damn Diego and his sadistic ways. At least they'd managed to save the mother and child from his cruel hands.

The air around her sizzled as the magicks built within and around her. She refused to open her eyes until the power dissipated. There was no way she'd open her eyes too early and ruin the jump—if it had even worked. Moments later, the hair on her arms finally lay back down and the electricity in the air vanished.

Slowly, Alexis peaked open an eye and gasped. She let out a loud whoop as she stared up at the Catholic Church. "Hot damn, I did it." She punched the roof of the car then cringed when she heard the metal dent. "Oops." Oh well, she'd just cut two hours off her travel time. She was pumped and ready for action—of the kick ass kind.

Starting the car with a wave of her hand, she threw it into gear and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. She only hoped she could mask the car from any police officers patrolling the area, because there was no way she was stopping for anything until she reached her destination.

Her mind played horrid tricks on her during the long drive to the canyon. She imagined all sorts of terrible things happening to Dalton, and how she would retaliate against Diego for harming her man.

Alexis parked the car and quietly closed the door. She didn't want to tip off the enemy she'd arrived early. The canyon was a quarter mile away, but that wouldn't take long to travel. Arriving early gave her a tactical advantage over Diego and she intended to exploit that advantage to the fullest.

She hurried across the dark, desert landscape, keeping to the shadows and the protection of what little cover the sparse vegetation offered. The mouth of the canyon lay just ahead when a lone figure stepped out of the shadows. Alexis instantly crouched into an attack position. She hesitated, not feeling waves of evil coming off this one as she had with the others. Slowly, she straightened and lowered her blade. "Who are you?"

He stepped closer, a beam of moonlight slicing across his face. "I am Renaldo. Diego sent me to stop you—" he threw up his hands defensively when she lifted her sword "—but

I'm not going to."

Alexis narrowed her eyes at him. "Why not?"

"Because you are the first I feel can defeat him."

She stepped closer to him. "How long have you been with him?"

His handsome face scrunched up as he curled his lip. "Nearly a century with no way out until now.." Renaldo shook his blond head. "I won't go back."

"You won't have to." She started past him.

"Wait." He turned to face her. "I didn't even get your name."

"Alexis."

"What do you plan to do?" He looked around them nervously, as if expecting Diego to leap from the shadows at any moment.

She smiled, one corner of her mouth tugging upward. "I plan to send him to hell where he belongs."

Renaldo nodded. "Then I wish you luck." He stepped back into the shadows and vanished.

Alexis felt sorry for the man. She knew what it was like to suffer at Diego's hands, though not to the same extent. At least now Renaldo would be free and the world would be at least a little bit safer for everyone.

Drawing in a deep breath, she turned back to the task at hand. Diego waited just ahead with Dalton. She cautiously touched Dalton's mind, finding a strange peace there. The only hint of fear she could find was buried deep—real deep. What was the man up to? She seriously hoped he wasn't planning to pull something stupid.

She stealthily made her way up the small rise covered in shrubs and cacti to the canyon's rim. Asshole. He'd said they were near the canyon, not in it. She peered over the edge, careful to stay in the dark shadows. Diego stood down below near a raging fire with Dalton nearby, hands tied behind his back. All around them in the darkness a group of Hexads circled in their almost mindless ways.

Dalton looked tired. She detected the sweet aroma of his blood in the air and her blood boiled. Anger seethed within her.. Alexis climbed to her feet, staring down at the macabre scene below her. Diego wanted a show—a fight. Well, he was about to get his wish.

Alexis stepped off the ledge, reveling in the feel of air whipping around her on her way down. She hit the rocky ground with a loud thud, landing on bended knee. Springing to her feet the instant she made contact with the earth, she glared at her nemesis through glowing eyes.

"Expecting me?" She sneered in Diego's direction.

He glanced at his watch and cocked a brow. "You're early. What a pleasant surprise. My little pets didn't give you any trouble on the way in, did they?"

Feet shuffled in the darkness, blending with the moans and low guttural sounds of the Hexads just out of the ring of light cast by the fire. She tilted her head to one side.. "What's the matter, Diego? Afraid to face me on your own?" She clucked her tongue. "I thought you were supposed to be the big bad boogeyman."

Diego moved to where Dalton sat on his knees leaning forward with his head hanging down. He grabbed a handful of the Slayer's hair and jerked his head back to stroke his throat. "Shall we see just how bad I can be?"

Alexis kept a tight rein on her emotions. It wouldn't do to let him know just how terrified for Dalton she really was. She shrugged with a carelessness she certainly didn't feel. "Apparently you're not too bad if you have to hide behind a human."

He bared his fangs at her as he released his hold on Dalton. "I don't need to hide behind anyone," he sneered.

She examined her nails, rubbing one as if something were on it that shouldn't be. Lifting her gaze back up to Diego, she said, "Oh, were you talking to me?"

His lip curled back. A growl rumbled from his chest. Diego launched himself at her and a blade seemed to come out of nowhere, flying straight for her head. Alexis lifted her arm, shielding the blow with the loud clank of metal against metal. She smiled and laughed at him. "I came prepared."

They circled each other. Alexis never took her eyes from her opponent, yet knew where each and every one of his little minions were just the same. She tugged up the sleeves of her coat and showed off the silver bracers she wore. "Pretty, aren't they?"

"Mage armor," he spat at her. "Afraid of me, Alexis?"

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Not at all, Diego. Not at all."

"You have my book?"

Alexis slid her hand down into the bag hanging from her belt and pulled out the book. She wiggled it in front of his face, just out of reach. "This book?"

"Give me that," he screeched, making a swipe at it.

Alexis jumped back, clucking her tongue. "Not so fast. You have to release Dalton first."

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers. Dalton's arms instantly fell free. "Consider it done, but don't expect him to be able to leave." His evil laughter echoed off the canyon walls.

Her eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

Diego smiled, baring his fangs and ran his tongue over the sharp points. "It's no wonder you're so fond of him. His life force is strong."

A growl rumbled low in her throat and bubbled out before she could stop it. "I warned you not to harm him."

He shrugged. "The book, Alexis, and I just might let the two of you live through the night."

She threw the book at him, swiping her leg at his to throw them out from under him at the same time. The instant his hand connected with the book, he disappeared.

Alexis growled in rage. Damn the coward. He reappeared near Dalton and cracked the book open. She'd expected a big show of power, a tremor in the air, anything to show the power of the book being released. Nothing happened.

Diego screamed, an ear-piercing sound that reverberated throughout the night and caused Alexis to wince. She shook her head to shake herself free of the noise.

"You bitch! What the fuck did you do to my book?"

Alexis' eyes widened. "I didn't do anything to it. What did *you* do?"

He threw the book at her and grabbed Dalton by the hair once more. "Make it work or watch him die."

She narrowed her gaze on him. Never taking her eyes off him, she stooped down and

picked up the book. If it hadn't worked for him, what the fuck made him think it'd work for her? Continuing to watch Diego with his claws at Dalton's throat, she held the book in front of her as she tried to figure out what to do.

"Open it," he screeched, dragging one long nail across Dalton's throat. A small line of blood appeared on her love's skin.

Her eyes flashed. "Why should I?" She loved Dalton with all her heart, but she couldn't allow Diego to gain limitless power, no matter the cost.

Diego buried his long nails into Dalton's throat. "Because I said so."

Alexis' skin heated and her eyes blazed.. Her heart pounded in her chest, her breath came in quick gasps and she growled, a low rumbling noise originating deep in her chest. She thrust the book open as fire consumed her entire form.

Diego's shocked gasp barely registered in her mind as bright light spilled forth from the pages, surrounding her in a whirlwind of bright color. The swirling colors lifted Alexis off the ground. Her head fell back and her arms flew out at her sides. The book fell from her hands and dropped toward the earth as time slowed to a standstill.. Slowly, Alexis lowered back down to her feet.

Blood drops hung from the wounds in Dalton's throat as if frozen. Diego's face was twisted in rage as he stood unmoving, staring at her. Alexis looked around her, noting how the swirling colors had paused mid-flight to hang in the air, their light trails paused behind them.

"What the fuck?" She was unable to believe what she saw.

"The time has come to make a very important decision," a musical male voice said from behind her.

Alexis spun to face the source of that beautiful sound. "What choice?"

"Save the love of your life or save the world." His golden head shook. "You can't do both."

Her gaze darted to where Dalton leaned forward, frozen in time. Pain gripped her heart at the thought of a world without him in it, but what good would saving him be if there was no world to live in?

"Can't you save him?" She returned her gaze to the man beside her. His long golden hair hung down around his pale face, nearly obscuring his blue eyes completely from view.

"I cannot interfere. I am only here to make you aware of your choices and what is at stake."

"You ask too much of me, and yet when I need you, you aren't there." None of this was fair. It was all take and no give—and she was on the losing end no matter what path she chose.

His pale eyes narrowed on her. "You know who I am?"

She nodded. "I'd know you anywhere, no matter what guise you chose to take on." And she did know him, though she wasn't sure how. It was just a feeling deep in her heart that told her the truth of the matter.

"I've already done more than I should have."

Alexis shook her head. "No, you haven't done enough." He reached toward her, dropping his hand before touching her. His eyes said how sorry he was, though the words were never spoken. He vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

Her arms burned where her dragon marks were. She pulled up the sleeves of her coat as thick, ebon lines appeared on her skin, originating underneath the bracers she wore. They twisted and crossed up her arms. She felt the path they took, encircling her body as they grew.

The colors around her began to swirl once more as a necklace appeared around her throat. The world began to move again as time started back up. Electricity moved through her body and she knew beyond a doubt what it was she had to do.

She spared a glance at Dalton, aching for his loss as the energies built within her. Drawing her right arm back, she thrust the electrical energy at Diego, slamming him against the canyon wall. Lightning arced, encircling his wrists and ankles and anchored him to the rock facing.

A burst of energy rippled out around them and the screams of the Hexads dying echoed in the night. Alexis smiled evilly as she slowly approached Diego, feeling the burn in her eyes and the crackle of the lightening along her skin.

"What...what are you?" Diego stammered as she drew near.

"Your worst nightmare, Diego. I am what you made me." She reached up and raked her nails across his cheek, smiling at the thin, red lines that appeared there. Holding her hand before her face, she stared at the blood covering her elongated nails. With the power came knowledge. "Brother."

"What? What did you call me?" he demanded.

"Brother. You are my brother." She lowered her hand and furrowed her brow. Brother—but how? "We share the same father."

Diego's head shook. "No, it can't be. I have no siblings."

"You did, until you killed me. And now it's my turn to return the favor."

He spat at her and laughed. "You may kill me, but at least I die knowing the pain I caused you. He's dead, and there is nothing you can do to change that."

Alexis drew her sword and plunged it into his chest, piercing his heart and shoving it straight through to the hilt until it lodged in the rock wall behind him.

He hissed in pain. "This will not kill me, little sister. You should know that."

She took several steps back. "Perhaps not, but this will." Alexis raised her arms above her head as the flames once more engulfed her body. She channeled the energy in a large ball and flung it at him, watching as his body turned to ash and fell to the ground.

Dropping to her knees, she felt the powers recede. Her fangs retracted and her eyes burned, but in a new way that wasn't familiar to her. The legends were true. By the gods, they were true. She was human again!

"Alexis," a man's voice called out from behind her.

Her head jerked around. Renaldo leaned over Dalton, pressing a hand to his throat. "He lives, but I do not know for how much longer."

She scrambled to her feet and ran to Dalton's side. What to do? She wasn't vampire anymore—she couldn't save him.. Tears burned her eyes and slid down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, brushing his hair back from his unnaturally pale face.

She cried out in pain. Fangs sprang forth in her mouth. What the hell? Her mind didn't have time to process what was going on. She used her fangs to rip open her wrist and pressed it to Dalton's lips. "Forgive me for what I must do. Drink," she ordered, seizing control of his mind and removing all choice from him. She then licked the wounds on his

neck, closing them.

Alexis looked at Renaldo. "Thank you for saving him, but you must go. Find shelter before dawn arrives."

"But what about you?" He gained his feet and hesitated.

"Don't worry about me. Just go...and thank you again."

He nodded and hurriedly left.

Alexis lowered her gaze back to Dalton. Her vision grew cloudy as her blood drained into him. "Maximal, a little help would be nice right about now," she whispered, leaning over Dalton's still form and closing her eyes.

Maximal appeared at Alexis' side and dropped to his knees. He closed the wound on her wrist. "You little fool," he muttered. He looked around him at the scene to get an idea of what had gone down here this night. Spotting the book, he climbed to his feet and retrieved it, then moved to pull Alexis' sword from the rock wall.

He noted the pile of ashes below where the sword had been. Pain gripped his heart. So, she had succeeded. Rashad would be happy to hear his daughter had survived, even as he mourned the death of his son. This should never have happened, but they had no control over the games played by the gods.

With a sigh, he returned to the couple and knelt back down beside them. Placing a hand on each, he flashed them all back to the safety of Nazryne.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Alexis slowly opened her eyes. The intricate design on the ceiling was strange but comforting, even as her mind spun in confusion. She bolted upright in bed as last night's events came back to mind with startling clarity. Frantically, she reached up, noting her fangs. Had the legends been wrong?

She slid from the bed and moved to the mirror.. Green eyes stared back at her. What? Her brow furrowed as she ran her tongue over the sharp points of her fangs. This didn't make any sense. If she still had fangs her eyes should be black, not green.

A knock sounded on the door a moment before it swung open. She spun around to find Maximal staring at her. "Glad to see you up and about. We were beginning to worry," he said, moving up beside her.

"My eyes," she whispered.

"Are a beautiful, vibrant green." He stroked her hair. "Are you hungry, little one?"

She nodded. "Why are they green?"

He smiled. "That is the question, isn't it? I'd love to tell you, but I think someone else is better suited for the task." He took her hand in his. "Follow me."

Alexis hesitated, pulling against his hand. "What about Dalton?"

"He's fine, though he has yet to awaken. I have someone watching him. As soon as we're done and you are fed, I'll take you to him."

She nodded and allowed him to lead her from the room. "Where are we?" she asked, taking note of the beautiful décor. The hallway was long with oriental rugs of red, blue and beige covering the entire length of the floor. Intricate gold lamps adorned the walls along with thick, golden-framed mirrors and pictures of people she'd never seen before.

"We are in the Imperial Palace," he answered, smiling at her.

"The palace? I've never been allowed in here before."

He patted her hand. "This is a special circumstance and once this is all over with, you'll find that many things have changed."

She stared up at him questioningly, but he said nothing more. Maximal led her to a set of large, ornate, copper doors. He shoved them open and allowed her to enter before closing the doors behind them.

In the room's center sat a large, black marble throne upon which a dark-haired man reclined. If she had to garner a guess, she'd say he was the emperor, but one could never tell in this place.

"Alexis, this is the ruler of the Nosferatu nation, Rashad Blackspell," Maximal said, propelling her toward this strange man.

The emperor climbed to his feet and moved toward her, hand extended and a smile on his face. "Alexis, you have no idea how long I've waited for this moment."

She swallowed, suddenly very nervous. What did one say to a ruler?

Rashad looked to Maximal, an unspoken question in the man's eyes. Maximal shook his head and Rashad seemed to stiffen a little. What could this man possibly have to be nervous about?

"I have something for you," he said, snapping his fingers. A small woman dashed up

beside him, carrying a tray that held a decorative box on top of it. He carefully opened it, then lifted it and presented the box to Alexis.

A delicate-looking silver tiara lay on a bed of red satin inside the box. She shook her head. "I don't understand."

She watched as Rashad swallowed. "You are the princess of the Nosferatu," he said in a quiet tone.

Alexis lifted her gaze from the box to him and then looked to Maximal for confirmation. Max nodded. "Princess? Then that would make you—"

"Your father, Alexis. I've wanted to tell you so many times. You have no idea what it was like for me to know who you were and yet not be able to see you, to tell you everything. That's why I had Maximal watch over you," the man explained.

"It's all true, Alexis," Maximal added, as if he were trying to reassure her. He took the box from Rashad, who then picked up the tiara and placed it on top of her head.

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she stared into a stranger's eyes—eyes like hers. "I've spent my whole life hating the man who abandoned my mother, and yet all this time you've been right here, watching me." Her eyes widened. "I killed my brother—your son."

"You did only what you had to, Alexis. I wanted to contact you, to tell you everything, but the Moirae forbade it," Rashad explained. He lifted his hand and touched her cheek with his fingertips before dropping it back down at his side. "I did the best I could do under the circumstances. You weren't even supposed to exist. I know the laws and yet I broke them."

"My whole life has been a lie," she whispered. A thought suddenly occurred to her. "I can go out in the sunlight, can't I?"

Maximal shrugged. "Probably, since you could before Diego forced the change on you. Without his taint it's possible. But are you willing to test the theory?"

"Maybe later," she replied, returning her gaze to Rashad—her father. "All I ever wanted was a family."

"Alexis, I—"

She stepped forward to slide her arms beneath his and encircle his chest. Beneath her ear his heart beat steadily, a soothing rhythm. He lifted his hand to touch her hair hesitantly before wrapping his arms around her and holding her tightly to his chest. "I've ached for this since the day you were born," he whispered in her ear.

A single tear trailed down Alexis' cheek. She was home—finally, she was home.

The match slid against the rough strip on the side of the box with a scraping sound that echoed in the silence, broken only by Eli's steady breathing. Alexis touched the small point of light to the candles before her, wrinkling her nose at the acrid smell of the smoke emanating from the small stick she held. She moved about the room, repeating the process until the dozen candles of various shapes, sizes and colors were all lit, casting a dim orange glow across the room.

Eli's new vampiric eyes would be super-sensitive to the light for the first few weeks, and candlelight would be much easier for him to tolerate. He had not yet awakened from his slumber—the deep sleep of the newly turned. When he did finally awaken, he'd be hungry and she'd eaten enough to feed them both.

Alexis positioned the small wooden box she'd brought with her in the center of the dresser and opened the lid. The silver stake contained within on a bed of royal-blue satin gleamed in the candlelight. First, she'd wake Dalton up and love him thoroughly, then offer him his out. As long as she died by his hand, he would be free of this curse she'd brought upon him. She couldn't bear the thought of putting him through what she'd gone through all those years ago.

She lightly trailed her fingers over the cold metal before lowering the lid and moving to the side of the bed. The lightweight, sheer white material of her robe slid intimately against her skin as she sat down beside him and brushed the hair back from his eyes. He was so very handsome. Already his bruises and cuts suffered at that monster's hands were almost completely healed.

Leaning over him, Alexis kissed every yellowish-brown spot on his face, every healing cut. She wanted desperately to soothe each and every one of his aches, to make him feel loved because he was—deeply. No matter how this night ended, she would give him one pleasant memory to wipe out all the bad that had happened over the past week.

"Eli," she whispered in his ear, sucking the soft lobe into her mouth and teasing it with her tongue. "Eli, wake up baby."

He groaned softly and moved his head toward her. Alexis leaned back and watched as his now-black eyes opened to stare up at her with confusion in their obsidian depths. "What happened?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip. "Do you remember anything?"

"Just that it hurt like hell," he replied, pushing himself up into a sitting position. "I feel—odd."

Alexis brushed his hair behind his ear. "You're probably starving."

He looked straight into her eyes. "Your eyes are green."

She nodded. "And yours are black."

"Bla—" He put his hands up over his face. "I'm...I'm like you?"

"Sort of, though not quite."

He nearly leapt off the bed. "Oh God, I'm not one of those in between things, am I?"

Alexis bit her tongue to keep from laughing and shook her head. "No, I'd never do that to you." She moved up onto her knees and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him tight. "I did only what was necessary to save your life. I couldn't bear to go on without you."

His hands settled on her shoulders then played with the short locks of her hair. "You cut your hair."

She nodded, sliding her cheek against his firm stomach. "Just before I went to face Diego. You have no idea how scared I was when he—"

He pulled back and lifted her face to where he could look in her eyes. "When he what?"

Alexis reached up and traced her fingers over the place where Diego's talons had pierced Eli's flesh. "When he cut your throat. He couldn't get the book to work for him, so he took his anger out on you. I'd thought you lost to me, but an unexpected ally kept you alive long enough for me—"

"To change me."

She lowered her gaze and nodded as his stomach rumbled. "You hunger. You must

feed.”

His handsome face paled. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Yes, you can. It doesn’t have to be a distasteful act.” She took both of his hands in hers and pulled him down onto the bed next to her. Caressing his cheek, she pressed her lips to his. “Trust your instincts, Eli.”

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “Why have you started calling me Eli?”

She shrugged as best she could while lying against the mattress beneath him. “To distance you from your past and make the transition easier for you. I remember how difficult it was for me to accept the change.” She smoothed a finger over his brow. “I don’t want you to have to go through what I did.”

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He couldn’t love her more if he tried. The fear she felt was evident in her face each time she chanced a glance at his face. He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck. The beat of her heart thundered in his ears and his gums pinched. Leaning back, he reached up and felt across his top lip where he felt two unfamiliar bumps.

“Your fangs just came through,” she whispered, confirming his fear.

The steady thump, thump of her heart increased in pitch, beckoning him like a siren’s call. Without thinking, he pinned her hands above her head with one of his and leaned into her neck. He smelled her clean floral scent mingled with her own natural womanly aroma. His tongue swirled over her pulse point causing her to gasp. She pressed her breasts up into his chest, arching her back as he scraped his teeth over her flesh.

Instinct took over as her heart pounded in his ears, taunting him with its delicious song. His mouth opened and he sank his teeth into her throat. Her intake of breath was audible and she cried out in a strangled moan as she lifted into his body. Eli released his hold on her hands and slid his own down her body to cup her soft breast in his palm.

Her arms wrapped around him, pulling him down against her. “I need you, Dalton,” she cried in a hoarse whisper, pulling at his bare arms.

He sucked on her neck, pulling the delicious taste of her into his being. Her blood was hot and sweet, sating him in ways he could never have imagined. Swiping his tongue over the pin-pricks in her neck, he lifted his head and looked at her and the hazy glaze over her eyes.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” He worried he’d done to her the same thing she’d done to him the night he’d nearly killed her.

“Oh no,” she breathed, shaking her head.. “In fact, I want you to do it again.”

He furrowed his brow as he stared at her in shocked disbelief. “But what if I take too much.”

“I fed well before waking you.”

It was then he noticed the high color of her cheek bones. She looked downright rosy. He traced a finger over her face.

“I knew you’d be hungry – very hungry – so I came prepared,” she explained.

“Have I told you yet how much I love you?” he whispered, brushing his lips against hers.

“You...you do?”

He smiled. He’d never heard her sound so unsure before. “Absolutely. With all my heart.. You are the most amazing woman I have ever met.”

A flash of pain briefly flickered in her beautiful green eyes. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." Alexis smiled and traced a finger over his lips. "Make love to me, Eli. Help me forget, just for a little while, all the bad things that have happened to us lately."

He couldn't shake the feeling she sounded rather sad instead of happy, like his words were meant to make her, and he couldn't help but notice she hadn't returned the sentiment. "Alexis—" he began before she placed her fingers over his lips.

"Just love me, Eli. Please?"

There was a note in her voice he simply could not place. He cupped her face in his hand to stare deep into her eyes. She was hiding something.. He should press her until she talked, but her hand moved over his cock and all thought quickly left his mind.

His tongue slid between her lips, slid against the sharp point of her fangs. He didn't want to hurt her with his own, which were still showing. Reluctantly, he pulled back. "How do I make my fangs go away?" he asked, noting how odd that sounded.

Alexis traced a finger over his top lip and shook her head. "You don't need to. Feed...you won't hurt me." She tilted her head to one side and pulled the loose collar of the robe she wore back.

Indecision played at his mind. How could he be certain he wouldn't hurt her? "I..." He didn't know what to say or do.

She trailed a long nail over her pulse point, leaving a bright-red line of blood in its wake. Hunger gnawed at his stomach as his heart rate picked up. Leaning forward, he licked the small line of blood before sinking his fangs into her throat.

Her head fell back and she moaned, pressing herself against his body. Dalton lowered her to the bed, refusing to release his hold on her. His hand moved between them to undo the tie of her robe and pulled the folds back out of his way. He trailed his fingers over her soft, satiny-smooth skin down to the tangle of curls at her mound..

"Fuck me," she gasped, lifting her hips into his.

Dalton rubbed the tip of his cock against her clit, teasing her opening. He thrust his hips forward, shoving himself into her as her fangs sank into his shoulder. White-hot pleasure-pain mingled with the hot feel of her sheath enveloping him in its snug embrace. He pumped his hips, ramming his hard shaft into her, jarring the breath from her body in wonderful little gasps.

His fingers bit into her flesh and he jerked her against him as the pressure and frenzied need built within him. He ran his tongue over the puncture marks in her neck then nibbled at her jaw line.

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His blood spilled into her mouth, hot and coppery, spicy and sweet. The rhythmic pounding of his cock into her muff had her heart beating erratically in her chest and her breathing ragged. Muscles coiled like an asp ready to strike as the pressure mounted to breaking point. She dug her nails into his shoulders and closed the wounds she'd made with her teeth.

Turning her head, Alexis searched blindly for his mouth, crying out in passion as his lips touched hers gently at first.. She opened her mouth, darting her tongue out in search of his. Capturing his tongue, she sucked it into her mouth, clamping her teeth down to keep him

from pulling away.

His hips bombarded hers faster and harder with each thrust. The tension snapped, wracking her body as her orgasm rippled through her. Dalton groaned and threw his head back as he thrust into her once more, with enough force to drive the air from her lungs before collapsing on top of her, gasping for breath.

Alexis ran her fingers through his damp hair and kissed his cheek. She cradled his head to her breasts, enjoying the feel of him in her arms. Soon—very soon—she'd offer him his way out, but for now, all she wanted to do was hold him.

After a while, she slid from the bed and pulled her robe back on. Moving to the dresser, Alexis picked up the little wooden box she'd placed there earlier and returned to stand in front of Dalton. He looked down at her as he fastened his jeans, his brow furrowed.

"What's this?" He tapped the box's lid.

"A gift for you." She couldn't look him in the eye. It simply hurt too much. "I'm giving you a way out of this nightmare."

He grasped her by the upper arms. "What are you talking about?"

She finally lifted her gaze to his. "I know you didn't ask to become what you now are. I spent two centuries resenting the fact I had been changed against my will, only to find out I was born to be this creature. But you...you didn't ask for any of this, and you don't have to live this life if you don't want to."

Alexis opened the box to reveal the silver stake nestled inside. "Pierce the heart and remove the head. Once the life has left my body, you will be free—your humanity will be restored."

He just stared at her, making her more uncomfortable than she already was. "Don't you love me?"

A sob caught in her throat and she quickly turned away, unable to bear the look on his face any longer and not wanting to see his features twisted in hate. "I do love you, Eli, and that is why I make this offer to you. I won't have you suffer because of me."

He grabbed her by the arms and spun her around.. "You little fool. What makes you think spending countless years in your arms, being loved by you is suffering? Didn't you hear me when I said I love you? That's no joke or lie. I truly do love you, Alexis, and I wouldn't change the way things turned out for anything."

"You don't mean that."

He shook her. "Look at me, Alexis. Really look at me. Do I look as though I'm suffering?"

She shook her head. "No, you just look angry."

"Because I am, Alexis. The woman I love has just told me to stake her. How did you think that was going to make me feel?"

"Relieved?" she asked. "Happy. I don't know Dalton. I was only offering you a way to get your humanity back."

He stepped forward and pulled her into the circle of his arms, pressing her against his strong, warm chest. "It's not worth having if you aren't there with me, Alexis. If I lost you I'm dead, because life wouldn't be worth living. Can't you understand that?"

Alexis lifted her head to look into his eyes. "Honestly?"

Eli captured her head in his hands and kissed her soundly on the lips. "Honestly, baby.

Teach me what I need to know to survive in this new life, because I plan to live a very long time and spend each and every day of that long life loving you."

He took the box from her nerveless fingers and tossed it into a nearby trash can. "Marry me, Alexis, or whatever it is that vampires do."

Happiness consumed her to the point she didn't even care to correct him on his term usage. Hell, he could call them whatever he liked, she didn't care. She called them in love—and that's the way they'd stay until the end of their days.

## Epilogue

Malachi climbed through the narrow passage of the cavern leading to the surface out of Nazryne. Glacial winds awaited him once he reached the surface, but he didn't care. He couldn't face Alexis, not after he'd failed her so miserably. Because of him, one of the most vile creatures on the planet had taken Alexis' heart and done gods-only-knew-what to the man. He'd never forgive himself, even if she could find it in her to forgive him for his shortcomings.

His hands were raw from where the rocks sliced into his palms. His body ached from the beating he'd taken trying to defend the human, but he didn't care. The slash across his right cheek stung and burned, a life-long reminder of his failure to do his duty.

As much as he hated to admit it, Simon had been right. He was young, irresponsible and stupid—so, so stupid. He'd let his own arrogance get the better of him and the cost had been too much. Malachi had to get away, to think, to come to grips with the disappointment he'd become to all who knew him.

With a heavy heart and a body gone numb from the cold and the pain, he continued his long, tedious journey toward the surface. Once he reached the top, he had no idea where he'd go.. There was plenty of time for figuring that out, he supposed. He had no one left to turn to, no one to depend on. And even if they were willing to help, he wasn't willing to ask. He only hoped the ache and emptiness in his heart would fade with time.

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"Welcome to my world," Alexis sighed, leading Eli into Olympus. The trademark loud music vibrated through the air as club regulars and newcomers alike danced to the frantic rhythm.

"The only thing about your world I care about is you," Eli replied, squeezing her hand.

She smiled up at him. He'd adjusted to his new life so much easier than she had. Pulling his hand to her lips, she kissed it before dragging him toward the bar where Simon waited. Alexis slid onto a stool.

"The usual?" Simon asked, an odd twinkle in his eye.

Alexis narrowed her gaze at him. "What's got you in such a good mood?"

"Seeing you happy." He turned his attention to Eli. "Care for a drink?"

Dalton turned to her. "Can I drink?"

She laughed. "In small amounts until you adjust."

"Good, then I'll have a beer," he said with a grin.

Simon cracked a rare smile and slid a beer bottle in front of Dalton. "You're out earlier than I'd have expected."

"I've been looking for Mal. I don't suppose you've seen him?"

The barkeep shook his bald head. "No, I haven't."

She eyed him suspiciously. "But you know where he is."

"I can't tell you that, Alexis." Simon sat a glass down in front of her and filled it from the special bottle just for her.

"Can you at least tell me if he's okay?" She didn't want to admit it, but she was really worried about the wolf.



Again, Simon shook his head. "Sorry."

Alexis sighed. "Oh well. Maybe he'll show up soon." She leaned closer. "Can you at least tell me what happened to the book? I forgot to ask Maximal."

Simon leaned across the bar until their noses very nearly touched. "Don't worry about the book."

"I lost the Book of Antilles and you're telling me not to worry? What if someone else finds it?"

"They won't," he replied, leaning back to wipe off the bar.

She glanced at Eli who just shrugged. "But what if they do?"

"Alexis, they won't find the book. It was destroyed."

That didn't sound right. "I thought it was indestructible."

She wasn't sure, but the man looked uncomfortable. "What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing," Simon responded.

She glanced at Eli again. "I don't believe him, do you?"

One shoulder shrugged. "I really don't know him well enough to make that decision." He went back to sipping his beer.

"Spill it, Simon."

"I can't. You'll just get angry and I don't want anyone in here hurt," Simon said, turning away.

"I will not get angry." *Of all the nerve.* He made her out to be some sort of...well, she didn't know what, but it couldn't be good.

"Yes, you will. You have major anger control issues," Simon pointed out.

"I do not," she nearly shouted.

Eli turned to face her. "Yes, you do."

She gaped at him. "I...well, maybe a little, but I wouldn't hurt anyone here. Tell me."

"The book was nothing," Simon finally stated.

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean it was nothing?"

"It had no power. It was just a book." Simon shrugged his shoulders and waved his hand in an odd little swirly pattern.

"You're not making any sense. That book held the knowledge of the Nosferatu," she reminded him.

"That book was nothing, Alexis. It held absolutely no power except to get two people together in a life and death situation."

She really gaped at him now. "Then what caused the changes I went through?"

"You did. The book gave you the ability to believe in yourself, Alexis, when nothing else could get through to you. It took the book and the fear of losing Dalton to enable you to embrace your powers, as was your destiny."

"So it was a set up from the very beginning?" This all seemed a bit farfetched to her. "Who would do such a thing?"

Simon's eyes closed and he let out a long breath. "You live in this world and can ask me that. Who do you think would do something like that?"

Alexis leaned across the bar again. "But why would the gods do something like that?"

"Because they are petty, Alexis. This world is like a game to them. Anything they can do to screw with someone's head or life, they'll do if they find it amusing," Simon explained.

She sat back. "So, what about Di—my brother?"

"He was a pawn, same as you," he explained. "He wasn't always bad—not until they forced him to be."

Sadness washed over her. Even though she found it hard to believe Diego had ever been good, her father seemed to love him a great deal. How could anyone love something so evil? "Is there any way to fix it?" She refused to believe an innocent—another word she couldn't believe she was associating with Diego—man would be left to suffer a god's whim.

"I can't tell you that," Simon replied.

"You can't tell me a lot of things.." She turned to Eli. "Dance with me?" She was tired of all this destiny and gods stuff. All Alexis wanted to do was lose herself in the music.

"I don't dance," he replied. "I do believe I told you that when we first—the second time we met."

She slid off the stool and held her hand out to him. "Okay. I'll dance and you just stand there."

His large hand slid into hers and he flashed her the most dazzling smile. Oh yeah. An eternity with this man would definitely be an adventure—an adventure she was all too happy to go on. Funny how a vampire and a slayer could find happiness together, but she supposed stranger things had happened.