



ANGELA CAMERON

BLOOD & SEX, VOLUME 2

Tomas



ra^venous
romance

Jonas [Blood and Sex Volume 2]
by Angela Cameron

Ravenous Romance

www.ravenousromance.com

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One

Jonas moved through the crowd toward the bar where Tori sat, laughing at something that short little fuck of a vampire Montclair said.

"J. Where have you been?" Tori picked her highball glass up from the bar and took a long drink. The strobes flashed through the dark cavern of The Dungeon, making everyone look like a slow monochrome movie. Everyone except her. She almost glowed in the light. And when she cut those dark, exotic eyes to him, they weren't cold like the others around her. They were warm, a reminder that she was the one live thing in the entire building. Oh, there were other humans, but they might as well have been dead. They'd given up long before, and it showed in their eyes. But not Tori. She was a fighter, and that fire in her eyes would never die.

Not if Jonas had anything to do with it.

"I had some business to take care of." He glanced down at the balding little man who had been beside her. He'd turned and was inching away. Jonas smirked. "Nice to see you crawled out of your hole for my opening, Montclair."

"I wouldn't have missed it, *Garante*." The man snorted. His foul, sulfured breath billowed through the air. "No, wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"I see that you've met our *padrone's* new *compagna*." Of course, Montclair didn't know who she was. If he'd known she was Michael's bonded mate, he would have steered clear of her. He was stupid, not a masochist.

"Oh." The man's eyes shifted and a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. "Is that who this is?" He took Tori's hand and went to kiss it.

But his lips didn't touch her.

Jonas planted his hand on the vampire's face and pushed him back slowly. "Don't touch her, dipshit." When he moved his hand, Montclair was squinting, ready for whatever punishment Jonas wanted to dish out. He smirked and leaned down to him. "You staying away from kiddies these days?"

The fucker actually blushed.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I—I'm cured, *Garante*." Montclair started to back away. "I swear to you, I haven't touched anyone since our last ... uh ... chat."

Jonas let his mind zero in on the man's thoughts. He tuned into that sniveling voice inside the vampire's head. It was rampant with panicked curses. Flashes went past of men raping him, huge men in an alley long ago. The pain came in a flash, but then it was gone, replaced by images of teenagers gathering outside the mall. It was recent. He was huddled in a shadow, watching as they passed a joint. He watched a slender boy's ass as he walked past. But Montclair kept moving, fighting the urge.

Jonas mentally jumped out of the man's mind. He blinked down at the little man. Even though he hadn't actually molested anyone else, Montclair would never be clean. Now, having been in his head, Jonas didn't feel clean either. They should've just killed him and got it over with the last time. Michael should have been a stronger *Garante*.

"Get the fuck out of my club." Jonas jabbed a finger into the man's chest. "And if I catch you around any more kids, I'll let the *Serpentine* have you."

The little *vampiro* yelped and skittered away.

Jonas turned toward Tori; she'd moved to sit on top of the bar. It made her look almost childlike. She smiled and downed the rest of her drink, almost missing the bar when she sat the glass back down. "Wish I could do that with criminals."

"If you ever turn, maybe you can."

"Michael's never going to turn me."

"He might."

Tori smirked at him. "You know he won't."

Sad, but true. A waste of a perfectly good female. "He doesn't want you to live like us. He's protecting you."

"Yeah." She let out a sharp laugh. "I haven't even seen him this week. He's so busy with this *padrone* crap that he doesn't have any time for me."

"He can't help it. He doesn't like being away from you, Tori." Jonas folded his arms across his chest. He shouldn't be having this conversation with her. This was Michael's responsibility. But he felt for the guy. It hadn't been easy to establish him in Castillo's seat. Hostile takeovers weren't a game in the *vampiro* world. Especially when the people loyal to the old boss had to be removed from each of the businesses so they could put in their own people. "He's just had too much to do."

"You know, it's not easy for me either." She turned the glass up again, trying to drain what wasn't there. "I have to

pretend not to notice the organized crime he's running. Even prostitutes."

Shit. The little detective was coming out again. And Tori was confusing the human idea of prostitution with the vampire version. "You don't know everything you think you do, Tori." When she laughed, the sweet smell of Jack Daniels wafted his way. He reached out and plucked the glass from her hand. "I think that's enough for you."

Tori swiped for it. She tumbled toward him. Jonas caught her in his arms and let her slide down the front of his body until they stood, staring at each other. His body reacted immediately and he jerked his hips back to keep his arousal from being so grotesquely obvious.

"I think I need to lie down."

"Here." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "I'll walk you back." He helped her through the crowd of vampires, moving toward the hallway where the private rooms hid from the prying human eyes.

"I love the new club." She was practically gushing. "You're brilliant, you know that?"

"Thanks." Jonas smiled as he opened and shut the door to his room, the one no one else could enter. It was a black painted box with dim lighting, a long black couch, and a wall of shackles and whips. At the couch, he was careful to help her sit without letting her fall, then slid his arm from her. "I'm going back out." He pointed to the phone on the wall. "Dial pound if you need anything."

Tori caught his arm. "Don't leave me here. Please."

"Tori, I don't—"

Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open with a gasp. "You know what room this is?" He let her pull him down onto the couch beside her. "This is *the* room."

"What room?"

She blushed slowly.

"Oh." Jonas hardened again, remembering the first night they'd shared at The Scene. He'd tried to seduce her, and was doing a damned good job of it until Michael stepped in. He'd used that blood slave, the one that Castillo left for them. But it was Tori he'd connected with, her body that he'd felt in his grasp. And he knew she'd felt it. It had been on her face when he slid inside the woman. Oh, yes. She'd definitely felt it.

Tori turned her body toward him and whispered. "How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Make me feel like that. Like you're touching me when you're not."

Something dark inside Jonas perked up at the question. He could show her. He could set her body on fire and work her into a fevered orgasm—if it weren't for Michael. He let out a slow breath, trying to ease the ache behind his zipper. "It's just one of the gifts I inherited in the change."

"Would you do it again?"

His chest tightened. Tori had to be drunk out of her mind. Or maybe he misunderstood. "What?"

"Use it. That power."

"I don't think that's a good idea." No, it was a very bad friggin' idea.

"Come on." She poked him in the chest. "Or are you a puss?"

The beast in his chest roared to life. It flicked on that telepathic part of his brain. He shuddered. "Don't push me, Victoria."

She leaned toward him, face to his face. "Just for a second. Show me it was real."

Jonas closed his eyes, trying to fight back the part of him that wanted to devour her. It was Luciano, his dark half, that wanted to take his best friend's *compagna*. And he knew it. But he was powerless to stop that telepathic hand from reaching out to her neck. He stroked the ghost hand down her shoulder, then her arm. He wanted to touch her chest, but moved the feeling down to her knee. He pushed the sensation up her thigh. He wouldn't go too far. When she was sober, Tori would be probably be too embarrassed to speak to him. If he went that far, she'd never look at him again.

When Jonas heard her gasp, he opened his eyes. Tori was lying her head on the back of the couch, her dark curls spilling over the back and falling down around her shoulders. Her breasts moved up and down in a slow pace. Her heartbeat slowed, too, creating a rocking rhythm that begged for a mouth to clamp on her jugular. In his mind, he could feel her body against his again. But he didn't give in. Instead, he moved his power to her face and let it touch her lips.

Those pink lips parted a little.

It was too much. They were dancing dangerously close to that line that would force Michael's hand. Jonas closed his eyes and pulled back into himself.

Something brushed his mouth. Tori's lips pressed against his. The monster inside him shoved forward, but he shoved it back, forcing himself to stay completely still. He didn't move, even when her wet little tongue slipped across his bottom lip.

* * * *

"Hey, El."

Dr. Elena Jensen swiveled in her office chair, turning toward the sound of a woman's voice. It was Vanessa Baker, the leggy blonde who looked more like a lingerie model than a secretary, even in her brown suit. The woman strode into her cluttered white room as if the door hadn't been closed. Why couldn't they all just let her work? Some days it really felt like she was the only one in the building who took her job seriously.

"Good morning, Vanessa." Elena plastered a smile on her face and tossed the case file into the growing stack beside her keyboard.

"Plans for tomorrow night?" The woman slid a hip up onto the front of Elena's desk and held out a black-and-red postcard.

She took it. "I don't think so."

"You're going with us then. You're not spending another Saturday night here."

Elena glanced over the card and caught the words *bachelorette party*, *vampires*, and *The Dungeon*. "Van, I've already told them. I'm not going."

"I'm getting married—your best friend in the whole world—and you're not coming to my bachelorette party?"

She'd never thought of Vanessa as her best friend. In fact, she barely qualified as a co-worker. Most days, she was simply the office tramp. "I just don't think—"

"You think too much. You are going. And we're picking you up at seven." She flashed that brilliant whitened smile and batted her long dark lashes as if she were talking to one of the men. "Johnny's getting us a limo."

Elena smiled again, trying to hide her disdain for the way Vanessa said his name. John was Dr. John Wescot, their boss and head of the immunohematology department. It had taken Elena two years to work her way into this position at the University of Florida. John had been her mentor and friend. He was a brilliant scientist and one of the nicest guys she'd ever known. He was easily twice Vanessa's age and probably triple her IQ. So, it baffled Elena more than a little that John had fallen so thoroughly for the woman. "I really shouldn't go. I have a speech to give Sunday afternoon."

"Oh, right, that new Immuno-X thing. John said something about that."

That *thing* was only the largest leap in hematology in the last century. "Yeah, there's a press conference announcing the findings. There will probably be a lot of questions. I need my rest." She held the invitation back to Vanessa.

"What time does it start?"

"Two."

"Don't worry. We'll have you home in time to get some sleep."

"Vanessa, I need to prepare."

"You've got plenty of time. You'll have most of tomorrow." She picked up Elena's little double-helix paperweight. "Besides, you're a genius anyway. It doesn't matter how much you practice. Most of those guys aren't going to understand a word you're saying."

"That's not the point."

Vanessa wasn't listening. "We can't have you dragging us down in one of your jean-tee combos. Ooo, wear that red dress I gave you for the Christmas party last year. It'll get some attention."

"No, that's a little too much attention."

"You can never get too much attention, El. You just have to learn to enjoy it."

Elena picked up a new case file and started flipping through the pages of data. "Uh ... yeah. I don't have a sexy bone in my body. I'll never enjoy it. You just can't understand."

"Oh, El." She cackled that annoying laugh the way she did whenever someone complimented her. "You're sexy. You're just always hiding under that lab coat." She reached over and touched Elena's hair where it fell out of the ponytail. "You've got this gorgeous brown hair."

"You mean mousey."

"No, it's beautiful. Like milk chocolate. And when you take off those glasses, we can see your blue eyes. They're always so bright when you wear eyeliner, too."

"All right, I don't know about the whole beautiful thing, but if you'll get off my desk and stop talking like you're going to give me a makeover, then I'll come to your party."

Vanessa slid off the desk, practically bouncing. "Be ready. It's gonna be a blast." She opened the door backed out. "And wear some sexy underwear in case you get lucky."

As the door closed, Elena muttered. "Yeah. Right." She wasn't going to make her life even more miserable by filling it with one-night stands. That was for women like Vanessa, the ones who could party all night and still look like Marilyn Monroe in the morning. Women like herself—responsible women—just didn't do that. It wasn't that the thought hadn't crossed her mind, but her life was just too complicated to add silly men to the mix. No, she'd wait until another John Wescot came along. That's when she'd reconsider.

* * * *

Jonas jumped back at the sound of a door slamming in the room beside them. He glanced down at Tori, who leaned closer. When he opened his mouth to speak, it took two tries to make his mouth say, "Stop it."

Tori opened her eyes and jerked her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God." Her eyes went wider. "Oh God, Jonas."

"Don't panic." He took her hand. "It's only because of the bond we share with Michael." He tried to shush her. "We're both blood bound to him. So it binds us in a way."

"I'm sorry." Tears started to roll down Tori's cheeks. "Oh God. I don't want to fuck up what I have with him." She looked helpless; her voice was too high. "I love him, Jonas."

"Let me take the memory."

She leaned away farther, gawking at him. "No!"

He grabbed her face.

She closed her eyes. "No. I don't want any of you screwing with my head."

"And I don't want him to kill us." He rubbed her temple with his thumb. "So look at me, Tori."

He felt the touches of his power caressing her face. He stared at her until she opened her eyes, and then reached into her mind. It was all confusion and sadness, but he pushed on until he felt her thoughts and then her memories, that replaying loop in her head of what had just happened. He rewound the scene until they'd moved into the room. He started there, pulling away the memory and wiping it clean until there was nothing left of the power or the kiss.

Jonas backed out of Tori's mind until he was in his own body again. He let go of her face and watched her blank stare slowly melt into consciousness again.

"Oww." She grabbed her head, squinted, and groaned. "Dammit. My brain feels like someone just stuck a knife in it. God, what was in that Jack n' Coke?"

Jonas cringed. "Maybe you should lie back."

The door to their room creaked open as she stretched sideways to lay her head on the couch. The tall, dark-haired *padrone*, Michael, stood there watching them. In the silence, his anger stretched through the room, making the air feel too heavy. "What are you doing?"

"She's drunk." Jonas added, "She didn't feel good. I thought she needed to rest."

Michael moved to her side and knelt. He eyed Jonas as he leaned closer to her, brushing away a bit of hair so that he

could see her face. He didn't believe the story. "Ready to go home?"

"Hey," Tori whispered, cracking an eye open. "Yeah."

Michael scooped her up in his arms and stood. His eyes narrowed into daggers. "I don't know what happened here, but I do know when you're hiding something, *fratello*." The word sounded less like "brother" and more like a curse. "If I find out that you did something to my *compagna*..." He flexed his jaw and shook his head. "There isn't enough power on this continent to stop what I'd do to you."

Jonas could feel his jaw clenching. He needed to back down, be reasonable, but that beast Luciano was pissed at the threat. The emotion pushed him to his feet. "You got the girl, Michael. Or isn't that enough?" Michael's eyes softened a little, but Jonas continued. "Oh wait. That's right. It's not enough. It never was. That's why you blamed me for Elizabeth."

Michael spun off a string of curses in Italian.

Tori raised her head. "Who's Elizabeth?"

Michael glanced at her, then back to Jonas. "Fuck you, Luciano." He turned and stormed out the door.

Blane, the muscled up *vampiro* with black and green spiky hair, shrugged from his place at the wall beside his the door. "Dangerous game you're playin', *fratello*." He started out the door. "Smart man would back off."

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Chapter Two

Elena crawled out of the limo, careful to hold one hand over the deep V in the red dress that threatened to expose everything as she bent and straightened again, stepping out of the limo onto the sidewalk in front of The Dungeon. In front of her, a massive black warehouse stretched out, decorated in red neon. The two bouncers out front were women, oddly enough. They were tough-looking in their black leather dominatrix wear, but she still couldn't see them holding off a large man if they had to.

A long line of people trailed down the length of the building's front, waiting to get in on the opening night. Most of them were dressed in dark, sexy costumes. Oh, she'd almost forgotten it was Halloween night. Her life really had become nothing but work.

Vanessa, wearing a white bustier and short white veil with rubbers of all colors dangling from its crown, grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's go."

She let the woman tug her toward the front.

Selina, the petite girl from payroll, walked beside them. Usually she was conservatively dressed, but tonight she had on a black slinky dress that let the tattoos on her back show. "Has everyone got their invitations?"

"Yeah," Vanessa said, stopping just short of a bouncer-ette.

The leather- and chain-dressed woman glanced down at her. "Baker party?"

"Yup." Vanessa smiled.

"Go on in."

Elena walked in behind Vanessa as the other bouncer woman, who looked even more like some kind of Nazi's wet dream, opened the door. She was sure that Selina and Leigh were behind her, but once she moved into the music and lights, she lost track of them. Instead, she followed Vanessa and a hostess who led them across the dark, crowded cave of a club and up a flight of stairs to a VIP section on the open second floor. It overlooked the main club and had its own bar along one end, a row of enclosed booths along the wall and a row of round, chrome covered tables along the railing.

They stopped in front of the third table. The hostess motioned toward the table's large place card in the center that read *Baker Party*, surrounded by a centerpiece of decapitated and otherwise mutilated wedding cake topper statues, tiny red roses, and black ribbons. Elena couldn't help but laugh. It was almost pretty. "It looks like someone isn't fond of marriage."

"I think it's sick," said Leigh, a petite blonde. She was the office secretary, and sweet, even if she had a bad reputation because of the torrid affair with her former boss, the chairman of the English department—and his wife.

"Oh, come off it, Leigh." Selina slipped into the seat next to the railing. "You don't want to be married any more than the rest of us."

"I never said that."

Selina smirked.

"I don't think I'll ever marry." Elena took a seat across from her. It put her back to the stairway and made her feel uneasy, but it was the only one left.

"Don't, honey. Men are dogs. Even if you find a good one, they still hump your leg and your best friend's, too, if she comes over," Selina said.

"Shit, are you going to be like this all night?" Vanessa leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her stomach. "I was afraid El wouldn't have a good time and you're ruining i—"

"Hi." The sound of a voice next to Elena made her jump. Her eyes cut to the sound and a pale woman with short white hair smiled down at her, her black lips parting to reveal two tiny white fangs. They had to be fake, but even this close, Elena couldn't see the edges of the prosthetic. "I'll be your mistress for the night. My name is Jayden. What can I get you ladies to start?"

"Cool fangs," Vanessa said.

"Thank you."

Elena looked at the rest of the costume. The owner had gone all out. The waitress's costume, like the others, was a glossy black French maid's costume with fishnets and heels. It was sexist, but it suited the club perfectly.

"What would you like?" the woman asked.

"Get her a bloody screw." Vanessa winked at Elena and explained, "That's their signature drink."

Elena didn't argue. It was Vanessa's night.

Jayden took the other orders, then added, "The owner, Master Jonas, said to let you know that the first round of drinks is on him."

"Can we tell him thank you?" Leigh was twisting a ribbon from the centerpiece through her fingers.

The waitress nodded. "I'll tell him. I'm sure he will enjoy meeting you."

When the woman walked away, Vanessa clapped. "Who wants to dance?"

Elena glanced down from the elevated railing to the throng of costumed people below them, dancing to the fast tempo. "I'm going to sit here."

"Come on, El." Selina moved out of her chair and then pushed it back under the table. "Let's find you a man."

"I'm fine right here."

Vanessa and Leigh stood too, but it was Selina who added, "Don't make me drag you down there."

Elena cackled. "I'd like to see you try."

Selina took a step forward. Leigh grabbed her shoulder. "Elena's coming with us."

* * * *

Jonas pushed away from the main bar in the club. "Let me know if you need anything."

Jude nodded, mixing three drinks at once. "I will."

He walked along the edge of the dance floor toward the stairs that led to the VIP section. Opening night was going smoothly. The humans and vampires mixed, all in costumes. Halloween had been the best possible time to pull off the

themed bar, convincing everyone that the real vampire fangs were part of the deal. It even allowed him to advertise the vampire drink menu, which Jude sold only to people she sensed as real immortals.

Someone bumped him, knocking him slightly off step. He cut his eyes to the human.

She was a voluptuous thing with in a red dress that showed off her full chest. It wasn't the figure of most of the women who came into the club. This one was all curves and softness, a real woman. And it made that darkness inside him roar to life.

She gasped, those dark eyes going wide under long lashes. "Oh. I'm sorry. I'm such a klutz."

"Don't worry about it." He muttered, rubbing the shoulder she'd elbowed, then continued to the stairs and up to the loft area. He'd have to find her later.

Jayden, the newest addition to Michael's family, caught his attention as he rounded top of the stairs. She was at an empty table, placing drinks on little black napkins. "The bachelorette party wants to meet you and thank you for the drinks." She placed the last drink down and then held the tray in front of her. "They're really hoping for a good time."

He nodded. "I'll stop by in a minute."

A few quick paces and he slid into the booth reserved for him alone. He scooted around so he could see the room from the middle and opened his cell phone. He punched the green button twice and redialed the mansion's number.

Gregory answered, "Yeah?"

"I couldn't hear when I was downstairs. What were you saying?"

"Michael wants you here at three for a meeting."

"Okay. Group meeting or just me?"

"Group. But you should still rein it in, man."

"I know."

"She's attracted to you through blood. That's it."

"I said, I know."

"Just makin' sure that you see it for what it is. I got your back."

"Yeah." Jonas laughed and clicked the phone shut. Gregory really was going to have to learn to mind his own fucking business.

He tucked the phone into this pocket and leaned back against the seat. Nothing good could come from the meeting. Michael was probably planning to kick him out of the mansion. Hell, he would if someone was making moves on his *compagna*. In fact, he'd probably kill him, which was one good reason why Michael was *padrone*, not him.

"You've got to loosen up, Elena."

Jonas glanced across the floor to the group of women taking their places at the empty table and the condom-draped veil. He smiled. The display would have gotten her publicly beaten just a few decades before. But not now. At least in this world, women were finally starting to have fun, enjoy the same privileges as men. And it was about damned time.

Some men liked for their females to cower. Not him. Give him a spirited woman any night. Someone with plenty of fight.

He slid out of the booth and strode to the table. He watched them, letting the thoughts of the women seep into his mind. He'd pay for it later. But for now, he wanted to know what they were thinking. Especially that one in the red dress.

Their thoughts came as sporadic images and words until the one in the tattoos noticed him. Her voice came through clearly. *Oh hell. I wish I hadn't started today.*

She bumped the hand of the one beside her, a blonde, who smiled. Her voice was a little too high and it annoyed him. *Hello, mamma. Turn around so we can see your ass.*

He felt the energy drain out of his shoulders. Their thoughts were the same as every other woman who came into the club—greedy and dull.

Jonas glanced to the one on the left. She was the one who'd elbowed him on the dance floor, the one with the curves.

She glanced up and her cheeks went pink. *Dammit. Not him again.*

The thought made him laugh.

"Hello, ladies." Jonas placed a hand on the back of the one in red's chair and leaned toward the table so that they could hear him better.

The one in the red dress looked away. *Please don't be the owner,* she thought.

He tried not to smile. "Jayden told me you wanted to meet me."

She let out a string of curses in her mind that made him glance at her.

The one in the veil of rubbers held her glass up. "Thanks for the drinks, sweetie."

Then the tattooed woman whispered to the blonde. "You're about to be Mrs. Wescot, Vanessa." She looked up at him. "What's your name, handsome?"

Oh. Don't look at him. Just be cool. Keep looking at the dance floor.

A little laugh slipped out when he said, "Jonas."

The blonde with too much lipstick smiled. "But Jayden called you *Master* Jonas."

Shut up, Leigh. Let him leave, the red-dressed one thought.

"If you want to call me master, you have to be my slave."

Leigh giggled. "I'll be your slave any day."

The quiet one buried her face in her hands. *When he's gone, I'm so fucking out of here.*

Jonas smiled wide enough to let them see his fangs.

When the blonde gasped, the one he wanted looked up at him. Her eyes moved from his eyes to his mouth, then to his neck. *You can bite me right—Oh my God.* Her eyes darted back to the dance floor. *Calm down, E. It's just a guy. A very hot ... probably arrogant ... and probably dumb guy.*

Jonas cleared his throat. It pulled her attention back to him. He stared straight into her eyes, ran his tongue over a pointed tooth, and then said, "I may take you up on that offer. That is, if I don't bore you to death in the meantime."

Her brows went up. He tried to pass it off as a response to Leigh, but the woman understood what he meant.

Leigh put her hand on his arm. "You're soooo not boring."

The one in red's brows relaxed again. *Keep it together. He was just talking to Leigh.*

The blonde, Vanessa, hit the woman on the arm. "Elena will be your slave."

Elena. A classic, sophisticated name. Jonas smiled.

She glared at the bride-to-be. "Shut up, Van."

Everything inside him screamed to shock her out of her silence, but the fear that radiated from her wrenched his heart. Only one other woman had ever been so determined to ignore him. And she'd been his greatest challenge. But now she was the *padrone's compagna*. "If you're all willing to trade, I'll take Elena in exchange for all the drinks you want."

"Done!"

"No." Elena narrowed her eyes at the other woman. "Don't speak for me, Selina."

Vanessa laughed. "If you throw in food, we'll even gift-wrap her."

"I am not going with him." Elena's voice was high. She looked straight up at him, into his eyes. The fear and anger that mixed in those lovely sapphire eyes made him suddenly wonder what she'd look like in his bed. Wrapped in black satin. Sweating and breathless.

I can't do this. As soon as her thought hit his mind, she looked away.

Jonas glanced at the others. "Well, I think Elena would prefer to be alone." He struggled, but managed to close his mind to their thoughts, then put on his best stage smile. "I'm only taking willing victims tonight."

"I'll go with you," Leigh said, leaning forward to show more of her cleavage. Her hand went to his leg and made one slow move up to his side. "I'm not afraid of vampires."

He laughed. "You might be surprised." He took a step back to get her hand off him. "What if I send you into the private party in the back? That's where the real vampires mingle."

Elena slid from her seat.

"Where are you going?" Vanessa said.

"I'm going home. I've got a big day tomorrow."

"Noooo."

Selina joined in. "Please stay."

Elena shook her head.

Jonas laid a hand on her shoulder and she stopped. When Elena glanced up into his eyes, he let that power flow out of him, sending the warm, calming energy toward her. "Don't leave just yet. You'll get all the drinks and snacks you want. And I promise not to let anyone molest you while you're back there."

She nodded slowly.

Vanessa cackled. "Don't protect me then."

He motioned toward the stairs. "After you."

* * * *

"I'm fine. I still have my drink." Elena sat in the end of the U-shaped booth closest to the entrance, holding what was left of her vodka and cranberry juice. She didn't need another drink. She needed to escape. But she was playing the nice friend. If anyone gave them a hard time, she'd just slip out. Otherwise, she'd wait another half-hour and then call a cab.

"Go ahead and get her another. She'll be done in a second." Vanessa winked in her direction as she spoke to another waitress who also wore a French maid costume.

"I'll be right back." The waitress said as she turned to walk away.

Selina whispered, leaning around Vanessa, who sat between them, "El, that guy was hot. Why'd you blow him off like that?"

Elena laughed. "He was just screwing with my head, Selina. No one like him is interested in someone like me unless it's a game."

"That's not true." Vanessa slapped Elena's arm when she said it. Her intoxication was starting to show.

"He's staring at you now." Selina nodded her head toward the bar.

Jonas sat on a stool, facing them, with his elbows propped on the bar top behind him. When Elena looked at him, he winked. At least, it looked like he winked. Maybe he had something in his eye. Or it was a twitch.

She pointed her finger at Selina. "He's probably wondering why you're all acting like you've never seen a good-looking guy before."

"You've really got to get laid," Vanessa said.

Selina nodded. "Go over and talk to him."

"No!"

Leigh glanced toward him. "Did you see his pants? I bet he's got a huge—"

"Oh my God." Elena downed the rest of her drink and put the glass back on the table.

"Don't pretend that you're not thinking about someone like him when you're—"

"Shut up!" Elena covered her eyes so that she didn't have to see him. "You all need to worry about who *you're* fucking and stay out of my life."

"Sheesh," Vanessa said. "Sor-ry."

The waitress arrived with a tray of fresh drinks. "Here ya go, ladies. The bartender made them extra strong. Just for you."

"Yay." Vanessa took the first one when it reached the table. "Thanks."

Elena took the second. Maybe it would help calm her nerves. Or at least keep her from killing these harpies before she left.

The waitress walked away just as three guys in worn jeans and tees approached the table. They were hard-edged, pierced, like the guys who'd been on stage when they'd come into the club. The shorter one with the curly black hair and dangerous eyes spoke first. "Nice veil."

Vanessa blushed a little.

"We saw you come in," the tall one with messy brown hair and a nose ring said. "Jonas said you were having a party. Can we buy you a round of drinks?"

"Sure." Selina motioned them to scoot down so that the guys could move in. "Sit down."

The third one, a bulky guy with bleached hair and black tribal tattoos on his arms sat down beside Elena before she could scoot all the way around. He smiled down at her.

"Hi," she said, pulling her arms and legs together so he wasn't touching her.

He spread his legs apart and touched hers anyway. "You're hot," he said in a deep voice.

Oh, dear God. "Thanks." She felt Vanessa poke her ribs with her fingernail. "You're—uh—big."

"You have no idea."

Vanessa kicked her under the table.

Elena laughed nervously and reached down to rub her shin. "So. What do you do for a living?"

"Play drums in the band."

"What's the band's name? I missed it."

"Samhain."

"Cool name. That's a Gaelic festival of the dead, isn't it?"

His brows moved up his forehead. "Yeah. Gavin there is Irish." He pointed toward the one with brown hair that had his arm hooked around Leigh. "But how'd you know that?"

Selina smirked. "She's the resident genius. She knows everything."

"There ya go, Cade. Just your type," Gavin said.

Cade smiled and put a tattooed arm around her. He was warm and smelled like *Escada Pour Homme*, Bruce's old cologne. "Do you like to read?"

As he talked about Jane Austen, she weighed the idea of being with him for just one night. She'd probably end up with crabs or something. Yeah. She wasn't going home with him, but she could sure sit here and flirt her ass off. If she was lucky, she might even get felt up before the night was over.

Elena downed half the newest glass of vodka and hoped for a speedy high.

* * * *

"You're eyes are so blue." Elena leaned closer to Cade's face, staring into the azure circles that seemed to move and swirl. "Do you wear contacts?"

He laughed and pulled her tighter against him. "I'm all natural, baby." With his other hand, he pushed a bit of hair out of her face. "Why don't we go in the back?"

"Yeah, we'll all go back there." Gavin kissed Vanessa's cheek, then lingered around her jaw. "Jonas has some great rooms back there."

He'd been doing that for thirty minutes. Or was it forty? Elena couldn't remember and it didn't really matter. That third vodka had made her feel a little more light-headed—and horny—than she'd expected, which was why she didn't need to go in the back with them. "I think I'm gonna stay right here." She smiled at Cade. "You go on."

"I really want to go back there." He pushed her chin up so that she stared into those beautiful eyes again. This time he spoke in a whisper that seemed to black out all the sounds in the room like tunnel vision for the ears. "And you're coming to the back with me, aren't you?"

She felt herself nodding and sliding out of the seat with his hand on hers.

"Gentlemen." The voice pulled her attention to the man standing beside her. Jonas smiled at her. "Feel free to go in the back. Choose any room you like." He swapped an intense

stare with Cade, then continued. "Elena and I have business to discuss."

The room started to spin a little, and Elena sat back on the edge of the bench. The men spoke in hushed voices as the others piled out of the booth, making her seat rock a little.

"You okay, El?" Selina said from somewhere to her right.

"I'll be fine. Just need to get a cab and go home."

"I'll help her," Jonas said.

"You owe me, Luciano," Cade said just before he walked away with the rest of the group.

Elena glared at them both. "I don't want you to help me." She scooted toward the edge of the U-shaped booth as she mumbled to herself, "I am not staying here." At least not with this Romeo trying to get into her pants.

Jonas sat on the edge of the seat, blocking her exit.

"Move!" Elena bumped his hip with hers.

"That is starting to get annoying."

She bumped him again. "I'm ready to go. You sent Cade away and now I'm ready to leave."

"Come on." He took her hand and tugged her toward the north wall. As they passed the bar, he shouted to the tender, "Call a cab. Tell them to come to the side."

The unnaturally beautiful woman picked up a black cordless phone and started dialing as Jonas pushed open a plain wooden door. He pulled her into a dimly lit hallway that housed two unmarked black doors. At the end of the hall was an exterior door with a bright exit sign that made the darkness take on a dim red glow. The sounds from the club were muffled here, but still echoed in the long corridor.

"Cade wasn't a saint. You should be grateful." He stopped suddenly and turned, pushing her against the wall by her shoulders.

Elena gasped and looked up into his face. "What are you doing?"

He leaned in.

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Chapter Three

Elena closed her eyes, expecting to feel his lips on her, but he pressed his cheek to hers instead. He inhaled deeply. The hair on her neck stood at attention and a chill ran down her spine. "Wha—what are you doing?"

She reached up to push him away, but his hands blocked hers. He reached those large hands up and placed them loosely on her neck. His hips pushed against hers. His erection was undeniable.

"There's something about you." His voice was soft and thick. "I don't—" He sniffed again, this time dragging his lips across her jaw. His skin was warm against hers, but there was something in it that made her picture static sparks crackling between them. "You smell different."

Elena closed her eyes and felt the electricity firing through her body start to make her heart race and her nipples harden. "I need to go home." Her voice was unsteady and broke the words so that they were unconvincing, even to her.

"Not yet." He stroked her cheek with his thumbs. She opened her eyes to see him staring at her with predatory, swirling black eyes. Something like a growl rumbled in his chest. "Close your eyes."

The words came with such authority, she knew he wasn't used to asking permission for anything. She nodded and closed them.

Jonas's lips moved to hers. They hovered just above hers. His sweet breath blew across her skin and made her shiver. Elena pushed her head forward enough to catch his mouth.

Jonas stiffened for a second. Then he overtook her, flattening her body against the wall. His hands held her still while he explored her mouth in a lush, slow motion that made her mind go blank.

Elena lost a few moments before she his mouth moved to her chin, allowing her to think a little. Not once in all her years had she let a stranger this close to her. And not once had any man made her feel so desirable. It was dangerous.

He worked slowly along her jaw, holding her head to the side. His lips reached her pulse. His body shook in her grip, and then he stopped moving completely. He was utterly and totally motionless.

She didn't even feel him breathing.

* * * *

"What wrong?"

Jonas tried not to let Luciano overtake him. He stayed still, pushing back the monster that wanted so badly to devour the human in front of him.

"Jonas?"

A car horn honked outside the door.

Jonas drew away slowly. It felt like the force that had drawn them together was slowly losing its grip, like pulled taffy, as she moved away.

She blinked to look at him with a "what-the-hell" look.

He hung his head and pointed toward the door. "Go home, Elena."

"Did I do something wrong?"

No. He couldn't exactly tell her that it was because she—her blood—smelled so good that he just wanted to drain every last drop out of her. She didn't need to be here. She was too tempting and he had enough trouble controlling Luciano without having to worry about someone who smelled that good. "Don't come back."

"What?"

"Please."

She moved toward the open door and he heard her breath catch. Her heart pounded.

Jonas's chest went tight. *Dammit*. He should have left her alone.

He knew she glanced back at him, but he didn't move or look at her. Even as she pushed the door open.

* * * *

Outside, a yellow minivan waited for her with its engine running in a small fenced parking lot. A heavysset man with a walrus mustache and hat leaned toward the window. "You call a cab?"

"Yeah." She nodded and moved into the back seat, pulling the door shut behind her. The cabbie wasted no time putting the vehicle in reverse and starting backwards.

The door to the club opened again. Jonas burst toward them.

She patted the driver's seat. "Stop. Stop. Stop."

He hurried to the front window as it slid down. "Here." He thrust a handful of bills toward the driver. "Make sure she gets where she's going safely."

"Thanks." The driver took the money.

"You'll answer to me if she doesn't." He glanced down to the placard on the dash and back at the man. "Ya got me, Chuck?"

The man's eyes widened. He nodded. "Yeah."

"Thank you," Elena said.

Jonas nodded, letting his eyes rest on her for a long moment. Then he pushed away from the van and walked toward the club again. As they backed away, she watched him turn and hurry back into the building.

* * * *

"I still don't understand how you can stand to drink that." Jude, a short girl with black and magenta hair, smiled at Jonas from behind the bar. She'd agreed to come work as tender after Michael closed *The Fallen*.

He clutched a glass of blood-laced vodka in his right hand. The lights flashing in the room made the liquid dance from crimson to almost black, then back again. It didn't taste good, but it helped to make the voices in his head go away. "It works better than drinking from one of them. The alcohol content's higher."

"Yeah, but the taste." She shook her head. "All human food makes me nauseous. I'll take a drunken hottie any day."

"Just one of my quirks, hon."

"Why didn't I get something handy like that? You can digest human food and do mind jobs. All I got was speed."

"You got more than that. You're the fastest thing I've ever seen." Jonas took another drink. "How's the take?"

"You're doing great." Jude mixed a Cosmopolitan without looking away. "I think tomorrow night will be even better. The humans will love the vampire theme."

He smirked. "Yeah."

Gregory, the *fratello* with blond spikes that matched Blane's, knocked on the bulletproof glass beside him and then pointed to Jonas's glass. "Jonas, what was going on in that room?"

In a second, Jude slipped him a bloody vodka, never stopping to look at what she was doing.

Jonas took a sip of his drink. "I was just helping Tori."

"Not what Blane said. Sounded like Michael was pissed, too."

Jude cleared her throat. "Hey. Have you seen that new movie?"

Bless her heart; she always tried to keep the peace. He smiled at her. "Which one?"

"The one where the vampires go into that town with a month of darkness. They wipe them all out." She flashed a carnal smile. "Wouldn't you love to do that just one time?"

Gregory nodded and downed his drink, then slid the glass back to Jude. "I remember when we could do that. Damn, I hate being modern."

"Don't complain." Jonas slapped his *fratello* on the shoulder. "At least they still don't think we're real. If they did,

you might be running from the inquisition again. I don't think you could pull off posing as a nun these days."

Greg puffed his chest out and shoved Jonas's shoulder. "Man, why have you always got to bring that shit up?"

"Because that was the funniest damn thing I've ever seen."

"Fuck you." Gregory pushed away from the bar, flipping him off as he disappeared into the sea of bodies.

"Jude." Jonas pushed his glass through the hole in the divider. "If I skip tomorrow night, can you handle the place for me?"

"I know I can handle it." Jude handed a drink to a blond vamp down the bar, then moved to stand in front of him, wiping her hands on a towel that hung from her belt loop. "But I really think you should be here. What if something goes wrong?"

Jonas could barely hear her over the mental voices that were starting to crowd his mind. He rapped the surface with his knuckles. "I'm going to turn in for the day."

She nodded again and started on the drinks.

"If you need me, call my cell." Jonas headed toward the side door. The scents and thoughts of the others pushed in on him. He walked faster.

Lately, they'd become almost overwhelming once he'd opened the path, especially after sex. The orgasms left him too open. That brief respite that the climax gave him almost wasn't worth the onslaught that followed. He pushed out the staff entrance at the end of the bar and into the crisp night air. Still, the thoughts weighed on him. The images of lustful

fantasies and cravings for blood raced through his head so fast that his own thoughts were lost in the mix.

He half ran to the driver's side of the midnight blue '67 Mustang Fastback he'd swiped from Castillo's collection before Michael could sell it. His hand tugged the door open and he slipped into the leather seat. In a heartbeat, the engine roared. The only thing that could stop the throbbing migraine that the voices would bring was speed. Speed and tunes and the distances that came with them.

He popped the stick into gear and floored it, spinning into the parking lot. He fishtailed onto the road that ran down the length of the city, except he went the other way, into the darkness of the deserted rural area. Out there were forests of pine and palm where few people lived and even fewer would be awake to invade his thoughts while he regained control.

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Chapter Four

Jonas stepped into the foyer of the mansion that Michael, and by extension the family, had inherited from Castillo's death. The white marble on the floor and antiques on every corner was a welcomed luxury at first. But now it was starting to be too much. It wasn't his. It was Michael's, just as everything else in his world was. He had to get out of here.

The door on the left opened and Blane motioned him inside. "They're waiting."

Of course, this was how it was to be now. Formal meetings would replace the late-night chats at the bar. That's how it was with a *padrone*. He was glad Michael finally found his place. He had all the things he'd ever wanted: money, stability, control, power, and Tori. Jonas just wished it didn't have to fuck his life up so much.

Jonas entered the large meeting room to see Michael at the head of a long conference table. The heads of each of the *cosca's* businesses were seated too. Blane, to Michael's left, controlled the black market within the territory. Nothing went in or out without his say. Plus, he had more brainpower than anyone in the room. Gregory, next to Blane, controlled the blood sports and was the muscle of the *cosca*. Arracado sat across from him, looking like the pimp that he was. Weiss Valenti, the *fratello* who controlled the blood trafficking, sat beside him, looking down at his cell phone. Stewart, one of the two suits who handled the accounting, sat across, next to Jack Knife. At the end was Simian, the Serpentine

representative. Man, that vampire was creepy sitting there with those serpent eyes.

The space to Michael's immediate right, Jonas's place, remained open.

"Thank you for joining us, *Garante*," Michael said, raising his hand toward Jonas as he approached.

So, it was going to be that formal. Jonas took the hand in his, flipped it over, and kissed Michael's wrist. The act wasn't new to him; he'd done it for centuries. It was the appropriate greeting for his *padrone*. Failing to do so in public was an insult that would force Michael's swift and immediate punishment. It wasn't because either of them wanted it that way, and he knew that. Between them, protocol didn't matter. But the others weren't so progressive, and Jonas wouldn't undermine his friend's new authority by snubbing him publicly.

"Good evening, my *padrone*." Jonas kept his head bowed and released the hand.

Michael motioned to his seat. His voice matched the detached formality of the situation. "Please, sit."

Jonas slid into the squeaky leather chair as Michael spoke. He hated those damned chairs.

"Tonight, I have received word from Khalil of a plot by the Bureau for Human Ascendancy to kidnap a human scientist who has created a unique serum to boost the human immune system and rate of healing to a level comparable to our own." Michael leaned back in his chair. "The scientist is within our territory and requires our protection from the Quietus Agents. With the changes since our takeover, I thought it was best if

we worked together to send the most logical scout to keep an eye on her without weakening our hold here."

Several people voiced their agreements, but he raised his hand and continued. "Do any of you have someone who can stand in for you in your absence? I won't force you because there may be an extended absence."

It was perfect. An opportunity to escape what was becoming more like Jonas's own personal hell on a daily basis, while keeping his loyalty to Michael. He leaned back and folded his arms behind his head while the others argued about the impossibilities between themselves. He smirked. "I'll do it."

Michael didn't look at him. "I need you here, Jonas."

"No, you don't. You are completely safe." He smiled a genuine smile, hoping to ease the tension that hung between them. *I need to get out of here. Please.*

Michael arched a brow at the last word. The *fratello* knew that Jonas didn't use it often. He sat quiet and nodded. *As you wish.* "Jonas is to be our scout." He motioned toward a side door. "The file is on my desk if you'd like to go. You'll have to leave there tomorrow at dusk, and we have a long discussion coming." *I'll give you the short version later. Some heads are going to roll here over the child pornography that that leech in Arracado's crew started.*

Have fun. Jonas slid out of his seat and nodded once to Michael. "Thank you, *padrone*."

Be well and come back as the garante I know. I cannot continue to look the other way.

He didn't answer, striding toward the office door. Leaving the meeting now would give him just enough time to find a warm body for the night. A smile parted his lips. He knew just the human—that Goth girl who always wanted to be bitten. He'd wiped her mind so many times she'd probably have brain damage, but she only wanted to feed him. And that sounded pretty friggin' nice.

* * * *

Jonas tossed his black duffel bag on the bed in the Orlando hotel room and smiled. Michael was going to bitch like an old maid when he got the credit card bill for the five-star room. But until then, Jonas could order as many movies as he wanted. It wasn't as though they weren't loaded, now that they had Castillo's estate.

He kicked off his boots and slid onto the bed, grabbing the job file out of the bag's pocket as he went. He leaned against the wooden headboard and opened the manila file in his lap. The target was one Dr. Cybil E. Jensen, an immunohematologist—yada, yada—works at DIACorp. He ticked down the details like her description and address. He'd have to plug it in his GPS later.

She was obviously intelligent. Her resume read like a dream for any scientist in the country. Her childhood had been more challenging, though. Her father was an alcoholic construction worker who'd beaten her most of her life, landing her in the hospital as a child and in therapy during her first years of college. She'd recovered well, managing top grades in her classes through it all.

She was a fighter. She had to be. No one came from a trailer park in the middle of B.F.E. and managed to become one of the nation's top scientists before she was thirty unless she was as tough as hell. And that made him like her, respect her for all that she'd overcome, because he'd been lower-class as a human, too.

Under the right circumstances, he thought. She'd make one hell of a vampire. Probably cure us all.

He flipped to the next page and his jaw fell open. There—in black and white—was the woman from the club. Elena. The one who'd almost managed to undo his restraint in the hallway. The one who had smelled and tasted so good that Luciano had almost taken over.

He smiled. He could almost taste her on his lips now, like honey.

Jonas closed the file again and tossed it on the bed, then leaned back, tucking his hands behind his head. He stared up at the white ceiling. This was going to be an interesting assignment after all. Too bad she'd never know he was around.

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Chapter Five

Elena stood in the lobby of the lecture hall at the Orlando Sheraton, greeting people as they filed past toward the exit. The speech was a success, or at least that's what Dr. Bruce James, her ex and colleague, kept saying. She really didn't know. Once she was on the stage, her anxiety shut down the rest of her senses, leaving her with a blurred memory.

"Enough brainiac stuff." Vanessa grabbed her arm and tugged her toward a corner where Selina and Leigh were waiting next to a large potted palm. "We need to talk to you."

The other two giggled as she entered the fray. Leigh grabbed her hand. "How was the vampire?"

"What vampire?"

Vanessa laughed and hit her on the arm. "Don't swallow your tongue, El. We know you didn't do anything we'd do."

"But please tell me that you made it to second base." Selina glanced around cautiously. "He's so fucking hot."

"I just went back to the room. That's all." Elena folded her arms over her chest. Just the thought of him made her body ache again. "But you three stayed out late."

"Oh, that Cade." Leigh shivered. "You don't know what you missed there."

Selina rubbed her neck and Elena looked at her closely for the first time. She was pale with dark circles under her eyes. She looked sick. "I honestly don't remember much of anything after we left you."

Vanessa laughed. "Because you were so wasted."

She shook her head. "No. I really wasn't." She fought a yawn that came anyway.

"Didn't get much sleep, did you?" Vanessa smirked. "You're not telling everything. I know you're not." She narrowed her eyes. "Did you at least kiss him?"

The heat rushed to her cheeks.

"I knew it! He's a great kisser, isn't he?"

Elena nodded, letting a smile creep across her face.

"Details!" Vanessa was downright giddy. "You're going to have to tell me everything. After all, I'm about to get married. I'll have to live my sex life vicariously through you."

The others laughed.

Elena just smiled. "There isn't much to tell. He caught me in the hallway and kissed me."

"Just like that. Forceful?"

"Yeah." He was a little bossy, and the memory of it made her nipples harden. Good thing she was wearing a bra with some padding.

"Oh!" Vanessa giggled. "I bet he *is* a dom. That's what I'd heard."

"Well, he can spank me any day," Leigh said.

Elena let out an uncomfortable laugh. They were possibly the most juvenile friends in the entire world, but they were good for a laugh. "I don't think he's a dom."

Vanessa winked. "Joanna told me that her friend, Carla, went into one of his rooms regularly. He's really into some kinky stuff."

Elena felt like someone had just took a shiny needle to her new red balloon. That ache of disappointment bloomed in her

chest, taking back the space she hadn't realized had been filled by an infatuation with the sexy club owner.

"Are you okay?" Selina said, reaching for her shoulder. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"I need to go. I'm really tired." And she really needed to get away from them. Elena's ego couldn't handle another blow—like imagining the man of her dreams having kinky sex with random women. Sure, most men wanted it, but she didn't have to have the fact rubbed in her face like this. Especially when she had no claim on him. It was childish, but she couldn't help the ache she felt.

Vanessa hugged her in one quick move. "I'll check on you tomorrow." She added in a whisper, "I have to know everything."

"All right," Elena said.

She turned and strode toward the double glass doors. Just a few feet and she'd be out in the crisp night air, away from so many questions and scrutinizing eyes. She'd just given the speech of her career and still all she could think of was that blond god, Jonas. She really had to get a man. Until then, she at least had jogging to keep her mind off sex. Well, sort of.

* * * *

Jonas sat on the bench in the Orlando City Park with a black baseball cap pulled low on his head. He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the curious stubble of his newly shaved head. He'd been thinking about a haircut for a while, but the fact that his target would recognize his face made it

necessary. Still, it would take a while to get used to the new cut.

He plugged the ear buds into his ears and pushed the start button on his mp3 player. The pounding drums started his favorite song of the moment, Nickelback's *Burn It To the Ground*. The beat ticked past as he watched the mouth of the jogging trail, waiting for Elena.

She walked through the gate. Her brown hair was pulled into a high ponytail that bounced when she walked. Her dark blue jogging pants and white tank top followed the curves of her body. She was talking, using her hands to gesticulate.

With her, a dark-haired man in a pair of crimson scrubs shook his head. The glasses moved on his face a little as he spoke. Then he reached for her shoulder. It was too familiar a touch for co-workers.

They were a couple?

Elena needed a new man.

Jonas snorted and tried to ignore the monster inside, gunning for the guy's jugular.

Jonas turned his attention toward the man, opening his mind. The thoughts were chaotic. Raw emotions bounced around between anger, lust, embarrassment, and jealousy. It was not unusual to find no defined thoughts in a person's mind. It happened sometimes with particularly emotional people.

He pushed the pause button on the player and pulled one of the earphones out.

"I don't mean that you gave a bad speech, El. I just meant that you could have given more credit to the team." The man

ran a hand through his hair. "You could have made me look a little better."

"Bruce, I'm sorry." Elena fidgeted, then put her leg on a bench and started her stretches. "I was nervous."

Jonas could feel the anxiety inside her, but not solid thoughts.

"You shouldn't have been the one to give the speech."

"It was my project," she said.

"We all helped."

"Only in the final tests."

"Why are you trying to diminish my help?" The man stopped, anger took over. "Are you that selfish?"

Elena's mind raced through several emotions, everything from hurt to anger. "No."

Jonas's hands gripped into fists. He took a long breath, and tried to disconnect. The man was starting to piss him off. The fact that he couldn't hear their defined thoughts was making the situation even more frustrating.

Elena turned and started away from the man, but Bruce caught her by the arm.

Jonas stood up, but stopped on his second step. This was not his fight. He was only here to protect her—from the Quietus Agents.

"Don't walk away mad." Bruce pulled her closer, leaning in toward her face. "I just want you to keep us all in mind as you move up. We've all worked hard to see this through to the finish."

Elena nodded.

Dammit. The emotions coming from her were a tornado of anxiety and anger that was mixing with Bruce's jealousy. Those feelings were only adding to his overall frustration.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" Bruce asked.

"I just want to rest. I've had a long weekend and I think it's starting to catch up with me."

"Let me take you out to dinner tomorrow night. To celebrate."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I'm not taking no for an answer."

Elena shrugged. "All right, but it had better be expensive."

Bruce leaned in and kissed her. It was soft and quick.

The sight of her kissing him stung—even more than watching the dipshit talk down to her. And that was weird. He wasn't the jealous type, especially when the female wasn't his.

When the man pulled back, licking his lips, Jonas turned and started walking down the path. Luciano was screaming inside him. His muscles were tensed, aching to hurt that *cane*. It was all he could do not to fly across the park and rip the fucker's head off.

Jonas walked until he heard the sound of shoes beating the paved track in his direction. He turned to see Elena moving in a steady pace with two white cords that led to her own ear buds, bouncing with each step. She headed off toward the path that weaved through the palms, pines, and large oaks. The trees gave the path a secluded look around the sizeable lake.

He waited until she passed, then headed off behind her, trying to keep his pace slow enough that she didn't notice him. He pressed the play button and jammed the ear bud into his ear again, letting the music drum out the anger that still bubbled beneath the surface.

* * * *

Jonas slowed so Elena would stop glancing behind her. She sensed him more than he'd anticipated, forcing him to veer off the track occasionally to make it look like he wasn't following her. They'd been around that track enough to count for six miles on her run. It surprised him more than a little that such a feminine body was so strong. Not once, in all the run, had she opened up and run at her full speed. A part of him kept hoping for it, waiting for her to run like the prey that she was. That was the part that he kept fighting back. It was *him* trying to take over, and he had no place in this. Especially when Jonas couldn't seem to get his mind straight or stop watching her ass as she ran.

Sure that she was finishing up, he moved down the path and out the gate toward the parking lot. In the second row, on the end, sat his Explorer. He clicked the remote button to unlock it, then opened the door, waiting inside for her to leave so that he could follow.

The drive to Lady Lake was quick enough, despite the fact that he was following Elena's little white Camry, which was apparently incapable of going over the speed limit. They turned onto a small road that led into the middle of nowhere. It was hard to follow her with no traffic for distraction, so he

hung back and pulled into one of the neighbor's drives. When her lights disappeared around the bend, he pulled out and drove slowly in the direction of her house. An overgrown road jutted out to the right just as his GPS called out that he had arrived.

Jonas pulled onto the little road, parked the SUV and hopped out. He checked to make sure the two custom, silenced 9mm pistols were secure in their holsters under the zippered hoodie that he wore to hide them.

It was a quick jog to the edge of the trees that bordered the patch of spotty green grass that was her lawn. He knelt at the edge of the tree line and watched Elena park in the garage on the west end of her house. It was a modern home with many windows. It wasn't a house he'd have chosen; it was too open to be secure. But it suited her.

The door went down slowly behind her, then lights began to flick on in the house. Jonas darted across the lawn to the east side, then edged to the north behind the home. There, a rock patio stretched out across the back with a barbeque grill and tan patio furniture. It was all surrounded by several large pots with palms and plants that he assumed was for added privacy. Inside her house, sheer curtains were drawn across the sliding glass doors, but the light inside was on, making it easy to see Elena when she came downstairs.

She wore a long T-shirt that came almost to the middle of her shapely thighs. There was one big bloody word scrawled across it. *Redrum*.

Jonas smiled. She shared his taste in movies.

Her tanned olive skin glistened with a new application of lotion or oil. He wondered how it would smell. She wore no makeup, but she didn't need any. To emulate skin like hers was the reason why most women wore makeup.

She flicked off the lights and moved to the long brown couch in front of a big screen television. When she plopped down, he caught a glimpse of her panties. They were white cotton with little pink flowers on them. He closed his eyes and focused on that monster inside him, the one was flexing, filling his body so full of rage that he felt like his skin would explode.

When he recovered, Jonas sat in one of the patio chairs. It was easy to keep the vigil over his little scientist while she munched on steamed broccoli and watched *Interview With The Vampire*. He laughed along with her every time Lestat reveled in being what he was. He laughed harder when she moaned at Louis's incessant self-pity.

But it was her recitation of Armand's lines that excited him. He knew that she'd probably seen it before because she pulled it out of the extensive movie collection in the cabinet, but what made her like that character more than the others? She'd never know just how close she was to knowing the true monsters—and how much they were like her beloved Armand.

Toward the end, after she finally drifted off to sleep, he went to the door. Lucky for him, she had no alarm system. But he'd have to change that if he was around for very long. It wasn't safe.

Even after he picked the lock and stood behind the couch, she had no idea. She was a sound sleeper, lost in her dream world. And he was very, very good at being quiet.

He flicked out the last light in the living room and sat down in front of the entry door. If anything made a sound, he'd be the first to notice. If anyone broke in, they'd have to come through him. And from this position, he could see the wall that was mostly glass and the back yard, where Agents would approach if they came after her.

He glanced at his watch. He didn't know for sure how early she woke for work, but he doubted it was late. They had a good three hours before he'd need to go outside and about five before sunup. There was plenty of time to venture into her dreams. Jonas closed his eyes and relaxed, edging toward sleep.

* * * *

Elena woke up to the sound of someone saying her name. The room was dim and smelled of sweet incense. She opened her eyes but didn't move, realizing she didn't own any.

She glanced around, happy to see she was still in bed. But this was not her bed. This one was draped in long pieces of gauzy crimson fabric that fluttered in the breeze. Overhead, the ceiling was a layer of stars and night sky that made the top canopy. It was a dream, obviously, and what a wonderful place to be. This was much better than those dreams where a faceless man chased her with a huge knife while she ran at a ridiculously slow pace, struggling to run faster.

"You're right," a male voice said from her right.

Elena turned slightly beneath the sheet. Something moved smoothly along her skin. She looked down to see she was dressed in a black satin gown with an intricate layer of lace at the bodice that hid nothing. She pulled the covers as she sat up, watching the hulking figure of a man walk around from the foot of the bed toward her.

He pulled back a length of fabric. "It is a dream."

It was the man from the club, Jonas, wearing only a pair of black leather pants. It was one of those Gothic sex dreams. She'd been watching far too much television. "What are you doing here?" As if she didn't know.

"I don't know. It's your dream." He sat on the bed, turning toward her. His hand reached toward her face and moved a bit of her hair. "But I'm glad I'm here."

She started to pull away, but something in her resisted. She didn't really want to go. And since it was a dream, she could stay. No one would know but her. She smiled at the idea, wishing that he would kiss her again.

He moved toward her.

Elena put her hand on his warm, solid chest. "Can you read my mind?"

He laughed. "Yes."

Oh shit.

"Don't worry. You have nothing to be ashamed of," he said.

"That's not the point. You're invading my mind."

"If I know everything you want and give it to you, do you really care?" Jonas leaned in farther and grabbed her face in his cool hands.

He didn't let her pull back when she tried, but brought her mouth to his. His lips were as cool as his hands sliding over hers. Her heart thundered in her chest and her ears. She melted in his arms, letting go of the sheet to run her fingers up his smooth chest. She scraped her nails across the little bit of flesh and heard a moan in his throat.

His nipple hardened under her palm. His kisses grew greedy. Jonas wrapped one arm around her lower back and scooped her rear from under her, effectively flattening her against the soft mattress. He was on her before she could take a full breath. His weight made her grow moist.

He took a long breath and sighed. "You smell wonderful."

He said it like he could smell her readying for him.

She shuddered at the thought and caught his mouth again. This time she pulled his face to hers. He explored her mouth with his while his hands searched her waist and chest. She didn't flinch at his touch, as she would in real life. In dreams, no one cared if you were a little bigger than you should be. Unless it was a nightmare. And Jonas was definitely no nightmare.

He pulled back a little and looked down, then pulled down the sheet that had been between them. She followed his gaze to where his hands wound in the fabric of her gown. In one firm jerk, he ripped the gown down the center from its deep V to her navel. Her breasts were swollen with anticipation.

He let out a low growl and devoured one of her nipples. She moaned, arching up to him. His teeth scraped the skin. It was only a little pain, but enough pleasure to have her reaching for his head.

Jonas's hand caught her arm and slammed it back to the bed beside her, never leaving her skin unkissed. He growled out a warning, then moved to the other nipple. This time, he held the arm on that side.

He felt so good. Better than she had imagined. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She was imagining him now. And he was so much better than Bruce.

Jonas stopped and glanced up. "Who?"

It took a moment for the word to register. She leaned up, looking at him as she panted. "My ex." She arched her back and then rolled to rub herself over his erection. It didn't matter. "I want you. Now."

He seemed to think for a moment, then leaned back. His hands slid up her thighs, taking their delicious time as they pushed her gown up to her hips. When there was no other cloth to separate them, a wicked smile spread across his lips. His hands pushed at her thighs, spreading her wide. In a blink, he was on her, licking and sucking between her legs.

Elena didn't try not to scream, letting it echo in the room as her back arched.

He nibbled at her clit, sending her over the edge faster than she'd ever gone. Her body erupted in an explosive orgasm.

When she came back into her body, Jonas was on top of her again, kissing her breasts. She grabbed his face and pulled him up to her. The kiss was soft and sweet, laced with the taste of her body.

He pulled back and smiled down at her. "That didn't take long."

'Cause no one's ever done that to me.

"You're kidding."

Shit. "No."

"Bruce should be shot." He kissed her again. "We'll have to do that a few more times tonight."

He started back down, but she caught him. "No. I want you inside me."

Jonas moved fast, suddenly perched on the edge of thrusting inside her, kissing along her jaw. His mouth caught the skin of her neck as he made the first forward motion. He was big, bigger than most, and it had been a long time for her. Knowing that only heightened the feeling of him sliding slowly into her. Spreading her.

But he was so careful. He kissed her softly on the neck and then whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

When he leaned back, he pushed farther inside.

Elena's breath caught with a moan.

He went farther this time, her body loosening for him. She gripped his shoulders, but Jonas grabbed her hands, pulling them over her head. The move made their bodies slide over one another as he tried not to put his weight on anything but his elbows and her hips. He was heavy, but only enough to make her feel small beneath him.

Elena writhed against him, driving him deeper until she was fully impaled.

He slipped back, then surged forward again, easier this time and the next until they found a steady rhythm. By the time they reached it, she was close to going over the edge

again, moaning regularly as her body tried to arch beneath him.

He moved his arms from hers. "Hang on to me."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

Jonas pulled her up into his lap, never letting her slide off him. When they were upright, he gripped her hips and pulled her down onto him. She groaned loudly, wrapping her legs tighter around him. In this position, he was deeper, almost to the point of pain. But she didn't stop.

A few hard thrusts and her body clamped around his, milking him as she shuddered with waves of release.

Jonas's body shook, his own orgasm taking him.

Elena took his mouth, kissing him as he laid her down onto the mattress again. After a moment, he pulled away and lay down beside her. Then he pulled her into his arms.

"Stay with me," Elena said, running her hand over his chilly skin. "Just for a while."

"I can't. Your dream is about to end."

"Why?"

"You're waking up."

She held onto him and closed her eyes.

His hand wrapped in her hair and he kissed the top of her head.

She tried to look at him, but it was dark, like her eyes were almost closed. Slowly, the feel of his skin against hers began to fade while the buzzing of an alarm clock grew louder, pulling her back to reality, where there was not a gorgeous guy in her bed.

Jonas [Blood and Sex Volume 2]
by Angela Cameron

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Chapter Six

Elena lifted a crystal glass of Bordeaux to her lips and took a sip. It was dark, the color of the simple sheath dress she'd worn for the celebratory dinner tonight at the stylish Maison Noir. It was her favorite restaurant because it looked like something out of a movie, with its monochrome palette and candlelit tables.

She'd been watching Bruce's lips move, and tried to listen to his words, but her brain just wouldn't do it. It wanted to flash back through the memories of last night's gothic wet dream with that gorgeous imaginary vampire. She didn't know what was sadder, the fact that she was so enthralled with her dream lover, or that she was enjoying it so thoroughly. She should have felt some guilt for being so enraptured by a stranger she'd met in a trashy club. But she didn't.

A little fantasy about a hot guy wouldn't kill her. She'd woken up with a smile and couldn't wait to go home, to go back to sleep tonight. It was silly, she supposed, but it made her life interesting.

She probably should get a real man. Bruce was nice. But a part of her wanted someone with a little more—sexual finesse. When they were an item, Bruce knew one tune and one tune only. Missionary style. Once a week. Saturdays.

Something about the way Jonas looked at her told her he knew as many tunes as she was willing to dance to. He would

be so easy to fall for, and it made her wonder if she'd made a mistake by leaving that night.

"El?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you think?"

"About?"

Bruce's jaw clenched. "Going to the mountains with me."

She swallowed hard and sat the glass down on the table again. "Um."

"Were you listening to any of what I said?"

"Yes."

"What is wrong with you?"

"I just have a lot of my mind." She fumbled with the fork beside her plate. "It must be the publicity."

"Forget it for tonight."

"Okay." Her stomach twisted and she didn't understand her body's reaction. It was just a trip with her friend. They'd been together since her junior year in college, and still she had in this moment a sense of dread swirling through her mind at the thought of going anywhere with him.

"You know what? Just forget it, El."

"What?"

Bruce raised his hand to catch the waiter's attention.

"Forget going anywhere. Every time I mention doing something together, you get this weird look on your face." He whispered, almost spitting out the words, "You don't want me anymore, and I finally get it."

The waiter dropped off the little black folder with the bill and glanced between them. He must have caught on to the

tension because he turned and walked quickly away. Bruce stuffed two hundreds in the folder and stood. "I'm not interested in continuing like this."

Elena grabbed her black clutch and hurried out behind him.

* * * *

Jonas sat up straighter in the seat of his Explorer. He drummed the steering wheel with his thumb to the beat of the music coming from the speakers. All he got was this strong wave of confusion from Elena when she burst through the restaurant door, following Bruce. She was saying something.

Jonas rolled down his window and turned down the radio. When he focused, he could feel the guy's anger in the air around them.

"Bruce, please. I didn't—"

The man whirled on his heel and pointed his finger at her. "I don't know what's going on with you, but you're not interested in even speaking to me. You haven't since that damned party."

Her confusion turned to a suffocating embarrassment. Elena looked away, then started toward her car in a small parking lot across the street from Jonas's.

Bruce followed after her, his fists clenching. "What happened there, El?"

She pulled her keys from her little purse and went for the door lock. Jonas didn't have to see her hand shaking to know that she was nervous.

"You screwed someone else, didn't you?"

She turned on him. "No!"

The lie stung Jonas's palate like sour candy. He hadn't been with her. Was she feeling guilty about their kiss? Maybe when she combined it with the dream, it felt like a lie to her. If that was the case, she was extremely honest.

Bruce pressed into her space, forcing her back against the car. "There is another guy. I see it in your eyes. Why didn't I think of it before?"

Jonas's chest tightened. He grabbed the door handle. He needed to stay in the Explorer, to stay hidden. But that asshole was going to push it too far. He could feel it like he could feel the man's twisted sense of entitlement to Elena.

"You're wrong, Bruce." She turned her head away. "And if you're going to act like this, just go home. Don't call me anymore."

Bruce's hand gripped the back of her neck, jerked her toward him, and he kissed her mouth hard, forcing himself on her.

Fear streaked through Elena, mixed with embarrassment. She shoved Bruce backward. "Stop it!"

Jonas gripped the steering wheel, waiting for the man's growing anger to find its target. If that fucker hurt her, he'd blow the cover. And as much as he'd love to rearrange Brucey-boy's face, Elena's safety might suffer as a result.

Bruce closed the distance between them, holding her close by the neck. She struggled against his grip, her fear and embarrassment turning to rage.

That human ground his hips against her. "Did he fuck better than I do?"

"You're insane." Elena cackled and shoved him again.

The man started toward her this time, and she raised the keys in her hand, instantly ready to punch him with the pointed end of one long key. "Go to your car, Bruce."

Bruce stepped toward her again.

Jonas stepped out of the Explorer and started walking toward them. He might be able to keep his face away from her long enough to put the human in his place without risking everything.

A loud zap sounded.

Bruce screamed and jumped back. "Ow. Fuck. You almost got me, you crazy bitch."

Jonas let out a loud chuckle and started back to his vehicle. Elena, it seemed, could handle herself. That knowledge made his heart swell with pride.

Elena stood there with a small black thing in her hand. She was holding a Taser on him, ready to fight the larger man. Her emotions settled to a calm that Jonas understood too well. It was what he felt right before he killed, when he knew the prey was his.

She watched Bruce while she pulled a ring off her hand and tossed it at him. "Go home. Don't ever call me. It's over, Bruce. I didn't sign up for this shit."

The man turned, grabbed the ring off the ground, and walked away with his head down. His hands were gripped into fists.

Elena watched him, still on guard as Jonas slipped into his Explorer. When Bruce disappeared around the corner, she got into her car and backed out of the space. Jonas followed her

home, keeping a safe distance, and smiled to himself. The doc was going to be more fun than he'd imagined.

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Chapter Seven

Jonas crept through the door after Elena finished her shower and went to sleep. She'd been sad and angry about Bruce—then she'd finally felt relief.

He waited until that soft little snore of hers became regular and went into her bedroom. She was curled on her side, covers kicked off. The pair of pink cotton panties she wore looked strange under the worn black T-shirt with a fading silver Aerosmith logo across the chest. All the women he'd seen in bed, for decades, were either nude or put on a show for him with lingerie. Seeing her there in the simple clothes made him want to crawl into bed with her and never leave. But he wouldn't. There would be no second mistake in his life.

Not since Elizabeth had Jonas let himself get so close to a human. He never should have let that affair go so far. She'd been Michael's, and Michael was his best friend. It had taken almost thirty years for him to talk to Jonas again. Of course, Jonas didn't blame him. The human had been Michael's first *compagno*, and when she died, Michael's blame was justified.

It was probably the single most regrettable thing in his life. And the reason he would always owe Michael.

Elena groaned and moved her leg. He moved to the corner, where he slid down the wall to sit on the floor and watch her. She was a strong person—not as emotionally fragile as Elizabeth had been, but she was still human. She had no place in his life, especially since she pushed the limits

of his self control. Elena needed to marry and grow old with someone.

The thought made his heart ache in his chest. *Shit*. He had to stop this. Tonight he'd meet her again, cheer her after the rough evening. But tomorrow night would be different. He'd start to pull away, end the dreams.

* * * *

Elena strolled along the wrought-iron railing on the balcony of the second story. It was an old house that overlooked a cobblestone street with gaslights flickering below. A carriage and horse clopped into the darkness at the end of the street. She could hear someone playing a somber piano tune. It was the New Orleans of long ago.

She looked down. She was wearing a simple burgundy dress with black lace. By the look and fit, it had to be a house robe. Beneath it, she could feel the corset and stockings still in place. Elena smiled and reached a hand up to her hair. It was loose and flowing, as though she were readying for bed. She smiled.

Elena moved inside, past the French doors, to a large bedroom with flickering candles placed here and there around the room. A few were on the ornate dressing table, and a few more on the carved mantle to the right. A few were even on the bedside table opposite the netting that surrounded the high, large bed and its luxurious bedding. The room smelled of roses and jasmine, and was everything she would have chosen for a honeymoon suite.

Something thudded behind her on the balcony. Footsteps. She didn't turn because she knew it was him, the man she'd been hoping would visit her again tonight.

Jonas approached slowly, barely making a sound. But a wind came with him, blowing out the candles in the room as if he had done it on purpose. His hands reached around her, circling her waist. He smelled like warm spices, and his voice was soft against her ear. "I've been looking for you."

Elena smiled to herself. "I wondered if you'd come at all."

"I never fail to come, *Madame*."

The heat crept up into her cheeks.

Jonas pulled her hair to the side and kissed her neck behind the ear. His lips were smooth and cool against her. Electricity shot up her spine, and her core began to heat in that way that only he'd inspired.

She leaned against his chest.

He kissed her neck again, then scraped his teeth slowly down toward her shoulder.

Elena shivered and let a gasp fall out of her mouth.

Jonas took her hand and led her to the balcony without a word. Behind him now, she could see that he wore a long dark coat that scraped the floor when he walked and swished around his black boots. He turned to her, his white shirt hanging open to show his smooth white chest. "Let's play for a while first."

"Okay." Elena arched a brow at him.

Jonas scooped her up into his arms. He held her there as if she weighed no more than an ounce. "I hope you really do like vampire movies."

She laughed. "Yeah, they're my favor—"

Elena screamed as they leapt off the balcony to the street below. And then they were flying, running so fast that the buildings were a blur and the wind whipped her hair.

They slowed a few minutes later. Her eyes adjusted slowly to the dim world around them. The silver glow of the moon highlighted ancient oaks that moved in the breeze. There was a moss-covered forest, but they no longer appeared to be in Louisiana. "Where are we?"

"In my favorite place on Earth," he whispered, moving out into the clearing. "Kensington."

"Isn't that in England?"

"Yes."

In the distance, the tower of a gothic cathedral reached high into the sky. They walked down a path that opened to a large graveyard full of intricate statues that glowed in the fog. Headstones stood as lonely memorials to people from centuries past, most covered in grime or moss. It would have been creepy if not for the strong arms that were not setting her on her feet. And that wicked gleam in his eye. He had to be the most dangerous thing in the graveyard—probably in the entire world. At least for her.

"Do you like hide-and-go-seek?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

He smiled. Then he was gone with a whoosh.

"Where are you going?"

His voice echoed back, "Start running, Elena."

She refused to run. Instead, she walked toward the tallest grouping of stones at the back near the decaying cathedral.

"That's not hiding," Jonas's voice whispered from her right. Elena giggled and darted behind a mausoleum.

Something grabbed her ankle. She shrieked despite herself. Her heart raced. Before she could look down, whatever had grabbed her was gone.

She groaned. "Jonas!"

His chuckle echoed from a distance. "You're making this far too easy."

She put her hand on her stomach and struggled to catch her breath in the corset. It was harder than she'd imagined to breathe normally when she was cinched so tight. Still, she managed to breathe, and snuck between the statues and marble buildings, working her way to the chapel. If she could make it there, he couldn't come in. Vampires were repelled by holy relics. Right?

She darted past another building and something tickled up her neck. She yelped and moved quickly in the opposite direction. Then she doubled back, heading straight for the chapel. As she pushed the door open to the deserted building, she smirked and yelled out to him. "Come in here and get me, if you're so strong!"

With a loud squeak, the door pushed shut and cast her in darkness. She walked across the cold stone floor between the wilting pews, moving toward the altar. Silence roared in her ears, making her heartbeat the loudest sound around her. The building was covered in a thick layer of dust. It was still beautiful.

At the altar, the building was a cave of solid shadow. She stepped inside to hide in the darkness.

An arm wrapped around her waist and another went to her hair. They turned her and pulled her against a firm chest. Lips caught hers and gave her a slow, deep kiss that made her knees wobble.

Just as suddenly as they'd arrived, they were gone, leaving her standing and breathless. The door at the head of the church was open. His voice trickled inside. "You're it."

She took off, almost running in the corset.

Inside the graveyard, she stopped and listened. There wasn't a sound. Knowing Jonas, he'd take every opportunity to terrify her, too. She took as deep a breath as she could to steady herself, and closed her eyes. She tried to listen to that part of her instinct that knew he was in the bedroom.

Immediately, her feet started toward the right. She opened her eyes and darted between the small buildings.

"You're getting warmer," he whispered.

"This isn't fair. You move faster than me."

Something caught her around the waist, forcing her to the ground. They tumbled together onto the damp grass.

Jonas pulled her on top of him and his lips parted in an amoral smile. "Of course, you're right."

She laughed and leapt up. "Cheater."

Jonas was suddenly in front of her, pushing her against the cold stone of a large mausoleum. "So punish me."

Elena leaned forward and caught his mouth in a covetous kiss.

He growled and moved his left hand lower until he reached the clasp at the waist of her robe. He flicked it open and smoothed the robe back. The cool air hit her bare thighs and

chest, making chills cover her skin. The goose bumps heightened the sensation of him stroking her hip.

Jonas broke the kiss and went straight to her neck. He nibbled at her pulse.

Her eyes fluttered shut when his cool palm pressed against her core. Elena moaned and felt his finger slide between the wet folds of flesh. Her mind went numb. She couldn't think of anything but his finger stroking her into a frenzy. Her breathing was labored, and her breasts heaved above her corset.

Jonas's mouth tightened down on her skin. His teeth pressed into her, threatening to break through the surface. Two fingers pushed inside her, moving slowly, then faster, hastening loud moans that rattled in her chest.

"Come for me, Elena."

Her vampire flicked his thumb over her clit, sparking the explosion inside her. He didn't stop; he drove her forward until she bucked in his grip, riding the orgasm until it began to fade.

Jonas's teeth pushed through her skin with a wet pop. He pressed against her body, moving his hands to her shoulders where he gripped her tight. His mouth pulled the blood slowly from her neck, heating his body against her. The heart began to pound in his chest.

Her orgasm returned, forcing a pleased groan from her throat. He pushed his hips between her legs, grinding her against the marble while he drank from her.

When the heart in her chest slowed and her skin started to chill, alarms sounded in her mind. He was killing her, but she

didn't want him to stop. It felt too good, too surreal that her orgasm could go on and on. Even as she faded, it morphed into a silvery glow inside her, where the only sounds were her dim heartbeat, his breath coming fast against her neck, and the hungry moans of the monster feeding at her neck.

Jonas's teeth slid from her skin.

She opened her eyes and felt her head swimming fast. He'd taken too much, but still she smiled.

He scooped her into his arms and walked over to a long slab of granite shaped like a wide casket. Jonas laid her on top and snuggled in beside her, tucking her into the bend of his arm before he pulled her robe around her tight.

"I'm tired," Elena whispered, running her hand inside his open shirt.

"Close your eyes."

She nuzzled her face against his now warm chest and closed her eyes.

* * * *

Jonas sped past two of the blocks, dodging early morning traffic. He'd fallen into a deep sleep, lost in the relaxed intimacy of the dream with Elena. He'd barely managed to make it out of the house before she woke. Now the sun was coming fast, and he had to make it back to the hotel before he got torched. He had one more block before he could make it to the safety of the parking deck.

He sped for the entrance to the parking deck. It was blocked with a white sign that read, *Parking Deck Full*. "Shit!"

The SUV squealed as he turned a sharp corner and then did a U-turn to park in an open space on the street. He didn't like the lack of security, but it would have to do. He opened the door and ran at human speed toward the hotel, but he was too late. The sun was up, peeking between the buildings. His skin, especially where his hands and neck were exposed to the elements, began to burn. He bit down on his lip and ran a little too fast.

Jonas ducked into the hotel and went immediately for the stairs. He took them at inhuman speed. On the sixth floor, he darted into the hall and then to his room, swiping the keycard to unlock the door.

"Fuck." He waved his hands in the air, trying to cool the burn. When he looked at them, blisters had already begun to swell. Inside, he pulled his shirt over his head and kicked off his shoes. If he went to sleep, it would heal, but not fast enough. The burns never quite healed fast enough.

* * * *

Jonas heard the familiar beep of his phone and fumbled around the nightstand for it. The little blue envelope showed on the screen announced a voice mail, and he pressed the button to check it.

It was Michael's voice. "J. I just got a call from Simian. He said that the Serpentine in Orlando tracked a pair of Agents heading your way. I've called Gregory. He's going to leave at sunset to help you. Get the woman and the formula in a safe place. Don't get caught."

Jonas glanced at the clock. Five in the evening. Less than an hour before he could go out to wait for her at the park where she always ran at sunset. He slid off the bed and staggered toward the bathroom. His hands were still tender, and his skin felt too tight because of the scabs and peeling skin. Leave it to him to get sun burnt dreaming about a human.

That woman was starting to be a problem. One that made him stupid.

* * * *

Elena propped her leg on the fence rail and bent forward, stretching the muscles in her legs and hips. She glanced around once more. That tension in her spine was there again, like she was being watched, but Bruce was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't come by her office or called her. Maybe he'd gotten the point.

She turned and stabbed the ear buds into her ears, then flicked on the mp3 player. The pounding rock filled her ears, creating the fast beat that helped her run for hours on end. She took off, jogging down the path to the right, the one that twisted through the bit of forest.

Her second lap came quickly. The tune in her head switched to Linkin Park's *Bleed It Out*. The fast beat inspired her. She pushed herself faster. It wasn't often that she ran flat out. Actually, it was only when she felt that extra bit of stress that didn't intend to leave, like the kind she had today in her shoulders. It had come on when Vanessa entered her office for all the dirt on her breakup with Bruce.

She had to get some new friends.

Her feet pounded along with her heart. Elena rounded the corner near the small block building that housed the smelly bathrooms. A wind blew across the path on the other side, giving her a sudden chill.

She turned the corner and saw the black length of track nearest the lake. Usually it was lit by the orange halogen glow of the streetlights on the path, but not tonight. The light must have blown again.

Elena ran into the darkness, breathing hard and feeling that familiar burn in her thighs. She smiled. This run was the highlight of most of her days, which were generally spent in the office or lab. But Immuno-X had given her the power she needed to get a job just about anywhere. It wouldn't be long before she'd be able to move out of the city and have her own place to run.

Just a few paces away from the edge of the darkness, something slammed into Elena. It felt like she'd run into a brick wall—an immense, hairy brick wall that tumbled with her over the path. They rolled into the shrubs, then down an embankment.

Elena landed on her back, the air shooting out of her lungs. She was still gasping when she rolled onto her side.

Something growled at her feet.

Elena sat up slowly. At her feet, crouching in a stance that was all muscle and tension, was the biggest dog she'd ever seen. Only it wasn't a dog. No, it was more like a black wolf with glowing red eyes. Its hair stood on end, and it snarled at her, drooling on the one tennis shoe she still wore.

"Niiiiiice doggie." She backed up slowly.

The creature snapped its teeth and leapt toward her.

It stopped in mid air.

Then it went sailing off to the left with a loud yelp.

She looked up. Her eyes focused slowly on a tall figure, a man with short blond hair in a pair of athletic pants and a baseball cap. His face was shadowed, but his jaw was strong.

"Get up."

She knew that voice.

"Come on."

The monster growled again from her left. She jerked her head toward the sound in time to see it jump into the air.

A shot rang in her ears, and she looked back at the man. The stranger was aiming a pistol. The monster fell, but started toward them again. The man walked closer, popping another shot into the thing's head. It fell then, going into convulsions. The hair melted away, turning into skin.

It was a man, a large one with long black hair who kept groaning

Elena gasped and moved to her knees. Something was very, very wrong. And she had to get out of here.

"Come here, Elena," the stranger demanded.

The figure on the ground stopped shaking while the first bullet burst from its skin. It was as if someone had pushed it out from the other side. The wound healed instantly.

But the one in the forehead didn't break the surface. Bluish-green streaks started to flow out from the wound, tainting the man's skin.

This was wrong.

So fucking wrong.

And the stranger was still holding a gun, moving toward the thing's body. "We need to get out of here."

She knew it, but her body wouldn't work. It didn't move.

A howl came from somewhere deeper in the trees.

That jarred her brain loose. Elena got to her feet and ran up the embankment, using the small trees and limbs for support as she went. On level ground, she ran right toward the parking lot; that was the closest way. Her feet hit the ground and drown out the other sounds with a quick thud-slap, since she was missing one shoe.

Another shot came from behind her.

She jumped, but kept running. Was the man shooting at her now?

* * * *

"Shit." Jonas popped another shot into the Quietus Agent that lay on the ground in front of him. This time it went into his heart. It would spread the body's reaction to silver faster. The body would disintegrate while Jonas chased Elena.

He stuffed the gun into the leg holster, then went up the embankment. He ran as fast as he could without drawing too much suspicion, if case someone saw him.

As he turned the bend and saw Elena, she turned her head. She screeched, "Stay away from me."

He didn't see anyone, so he kicked in his natural speed. He caught her in a fraction of a second and tackled her to the ground, careful to let her fall on top of him. He held her tight

in his arms. Good thing they were in the dark. "Don't scream."

Elena opened her mouth, but he clamped his hand over it. "I said, *don't* scream."

Jonas locked eyes with her. Recognition flashed through, and then her eyes narrowed. *Shit*. "I'm trying to protect you. If you scream, you'll get us both killed."

He couldn't take his hand off. He needed to wipe her memory first.

He stared into her eyes. Those walls that kept him from hearing her thoughts and feelings started to melt. Her memories were close, but shielded by her panic. The feeling shifted and then slammed back into place.

Jonas pushed again, but couldn't get to the memories.

Dammit. "Promise not to scream?"

Elena nodded.

"I'll have to kill you if you do." It was a lie, but she seemed to buy it.

She nodded again.

Jonas pulled his hand back slowly. "We're going to get up and go to my car. There are more of them."

"What the hell was that?"

"Let's just say it was one of the bad guys."

"What are you, then?"

Jonas rolled them onto their side and held her hand as he got up, pulling her up with him. "Consider me your guardian angel."

Elena snorted. "You go around killing people when you're not clubbing?"

"Kind of." He glanced around, but towed her toward the parking.

"Let go of me." She tugged.

He didn't stop. "Look, we don't have time for this shit. Shut up and keep walking."

"No." She tried to plant her feet.

Jonas whipped her forward and threw her over his shoulder. He jogged and watched the shadows for Agents.

"You're killing me up here."

Jonas let out a sharp laugh. "Correction. I'm keeping you from getting killed."

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Chapter Eight

Elena recognized the water fountain beside the path. They were nearing the entrance of the park when two more beasts came barreling out of the trees behind them.

"Run," she said, trying not to scream.

Jonas flew past the gate. Suddenly she didn't feel so bad about him catching her.

With neck-cracking speed, he opened the door to an Explorer and chunked her into the back seat. She hit the leather with a thud and scrambled back up to see him move into a fighting stance, his knees bent. His hands were ready at his sides.

"Crank the thing," he snapped.

She scrambled over the seat. "Where are the keys?"

"Under the seat," he called as one of the beasts leapt toward him.

Elena reached under the driver's seat and grabbed a ring of keys. She grabbed the largest and reached for the ignition instinctually. It was the right one.

Something slammed against the driver's side. She looked up. Jonas wrestled with one of the wolves, trying to keep it from biting him while he reached for something. She didn't understand why he hadn't already shot the things, but it didn't matter. She turned the ignition, but didn't look away. Jonas snapped the thing's neck with a loud, wet crack. It hit the ground as the other leapt at him. This one managed to sink its teeth into his shoulder.

Jonas let out a roar. His skin turned the color of ash and his hair snaked down, growing half way down his back in seconds. His ash white mane set off the dark veins that started to appear under his skin like marble.

He grabbed the beast and yanked it off his shoulder. Then, like snapping a twig, he broke its head off.

Jonas tossed the remains onto the ground, then turned and opened the door so fast that she didn't quite see it.

Elena stared into the eyes of someone else. Jonas as no longer there. These eyes were sparkling black gems and his face was as ashen as the rest of him. A tattoo of swirls and barbs, like tribal art, snaked down his right cheek from the corner of his eye and disappeared behind his ear. It appeared again on his neck but went down into his shirt.

"Move."

The deeper, jagged voice startled her, but Elena still managed to crawl into the passenger's seat.

The man—or thing—appeared in the seat. "Your seat belt."

"Oh." She reached for it, jerking it and fumbling to get it into the latch.

He threw the vehicle into gear and sped out of the parking lot. "Where do you keep the serum?"

She blinked at him. "Immuno-X?"

He didn't answer, but his jaw flexed. She had the distinct feeling that she was starting to piss him off.

"At the lab."

They sped off toward her lab, flying between cars so fast that she closed her eyes. It didn't help. The squealing of their tires and honked horns told her what her eyes didn't.

"You don't have to be frightened. I won't kill you." He let out a sharp laugh. "Not with my driving anyway."

She opened her eyes and slowly looked at him. In the light that came and went from cars and street lamps, she could see that this thing was larger than Jonas. Or maybe the constant tension in his muscles only made him look that way.

"What?" he hissed.

"What are you, Jonas?"

"I'm not Jonas."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Luciano."

"I thought—"

"Jonas will return."

She watched him watching the traffic. He was frightening and beautiful, like a poisonous rose, beckoning to be sniffed so that it can deliver its fatal perfume. His skin looked like it was either soft as silk or hard as stone. She reached toward it. Her hand was close enough to feel the icy cold radiating from him.

His eyes snapped toward her. "Jonas won't like it if I devour you."

She jerked her hand back.

"We seem to have a fondness for you." The thing looked at the road again.

The first word made chills shiver across her skin. Jonas wasn't just Jonas. He and Luciano were two people, like split personalities. Only much freakier.

* * * *

Elena was thoroughly disappointed that the security guard in the front of the DIACorp building didn't notice them. Luciano had been dragging her, pulling her along like a puppy. Now, in the elevator, he let go of her arm.

"Get the serum and we have to go. They'll be here before long. You don't want them to get it."

"Okay."

He watched the numbers lighting up as they went down the elevator shaft. "They're trying to kidnap you."

"Why?"

"You can reproduce the formula."

"Is it another government?"

"You could say that."

Luciano grabbed her arm again just before the door opened. In the hall, she tried to keep up with him, but she stumbled a little down the plain white tiled hallway. They stopped dead in front of the glass door with her name on it.

"Punch in the code." He let go of her arm.

Elena jabbed the 3-1-2-9-4 code and pushed the door open. From the second desk drawer, she grabbed the CD she'd used to back up the formula.

Luciano pointed at her monitor. "Does this have an automatic backup to the server?"

"No, they're afraid of hackers. It doesn't have a server."

He reached under the desk and punched his hand into the tower. It shattered into bent metal and fragments of chips. He pulled out the hard drive and crammed its mangled bits into his pocket. "Where's the serum?"

Elena walked to the door that led into the small lab connecting to her office. She punched in the 1-4-9-5 code and opened the door. At the little refrigerator, she pulled out two racks of Immuno-X. Luciano took them from her hands and smashed them onto the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"We have what we need. It won't survive our trip, and we can't let them get it." Luciano grabbed her arm and moved her back toward the door. "They'll kill everyone if they get it. You, too."

Elena followed Luciano back outside.

"They're close." He released her and was at the Explorer faster than she could run to it.

She opened the door and hopped in, just in time to go speeding out of the parking lot.

"Hold on." He was looking in the rear view mirror.

When she looked back, a man in jeans and a red shirt was running after them. Luciano floored it, fishtailing as they turned the corner and sped away.

In less than a minute, they were on the freeway. Elena watched behind them, waiting for a car to follow. "Where are we going?"

"To my home. Where you'll be safe."

"I need clothes. Shoes would be nice." She pulled her cell phone from her pocket.

Luciano snatched it away.

"I left my car at the park!"

"It will be dealt with. We will have someone deliver it to your house."

"'We' who?"

He clinched his jaw and watched straight ahead. His hand fumbled for something in his pocket. He pulled out a cell phone of his own and punched two buttons, then put it to his ear.

In the quiet cab of the Explorer, she heard someone, a man with a deep voice, answer.

"This is Luciano ... yes. But we have reached an impasse ... We will arrive tomorrow after sunset ... Yes, I do have it ... I will have him call you."

The phone clicked shut again, and Luciano tucked both of them into his pocket. Not once did he glance at her.

* * * *

It was almost daybreak when Luciano steered the car into the parking lot of the Travel Inn. It was a remodeled dinosaur that advertised pay-per-view movies and cheap rooms. Of course, it was beneath him to stay in such a rat hole, but it was perfect for a quick getaway. The exit led straight onto the ramp to the interstate. Plus, there would be few credible witnesses if a problem arose.

He noticed that Elena kept glancing at him, but she kept quiet. She was a smart girl.

Luciano parked under the rusted canopy, went to her door, and took her hand when she stepped out. He laced their fingers, as lovers would. Jonas's feelings for the human swirled inside him. They were sickeningly sweet and distracting.

He winced and thought about unhooking her hand, but they needed to keep up appearances.

He opened the door for her and the round woman behind the desk looked at them. Her mouth fell open.

Oh my goodness, she thought.

Luciano immediately went to work on her thoughts, twisting them to how attractive he was, putting the image of Jonas in the woman's mind so that she didn't remember his appearance. "We would like two rooms, please."

The woman blinked at him, then nodded automatically. She handed him two keys.

"Thank you. I'm adding a little extra because I'm going to park under the canopy for the rest of the night. We would like our privacy, too. We're on our honeymoon." Luciano slid two hundred-dollar bills onto her appointment book and moved the can of Diet Coke on top of it so it didn't blow away before she regained her senses.

She nodded again and whispered, "All right, dear."

He walked back out of the office with Elena in tow, stopping only to grab the duffel bag out of the SUV and lock the doors. Jonas would have put extra ammo and anything else he needed in the bag, just as he always did in these situations.

Then he followed her to the second door in the long building that stretched from the office. Room 302 was the one they were staying in. 312 was too far away from the automobile.

Elena used the key to open the door, and took it inside with her. He followed, surprised that the room that looked

more like one of those bed-and-breakfasts that humans were so fond of. The wallpaper was an explosion of tiny flowers and the one king-sized bed had a fancy cover that looked like the ones they'd so long ago. The entire this looked too much like a Victorian boudoir.

Luciano shut the door behind them, sliding the chain into place before locking the dead bolt. It would only stop some humans and wouldn't deter Agents, but it might give them a second or two lead.

The human flopped onto the bed. "Well, at least it's clean."

"It's only the appearance of clean. I can smell the filth."

Speaking of smells. Jonas had been so wrapped up in the woman's scent that it made him curious. Luciano took a deep breath and the smell of the woman filled his nose. His teeth ached.

Elena did smell good. Too good, in fact. The change, the fight, and an Agent's bite, along with the burns on his hands, were starting to take their toll. If he didn't drink from her, they'd be out of commission all day.

The thought triggered something in his mind. Jonas was trying to come back.

It's probably best, Luciano thought as he turned to put his back to the door. He slid down the door, letting go in that way he always did to relinquish control to Jonas again.

* * * *

Jonas took a deep breath and caught Elena's scent. He heard her moving on the bed, but she was too sore to care.

The ache in his muscles from was from the Agent's venom, and it wouldn't leave soon.

He let his body slide into the corner, using the wall behind and beside him to hold him upright. He was going to fall asleep soon, and she might try to leave. Or they might try to come in. Either way, he had to be ready.

Elena gasped.

He glanced up to see her scooting back on the bed, her eyes wide. It was a reminder that he'd changed in front of her. Twice. Luciano had protected her, though. That was a surprise. He'd been eager to get at her since Jonas had met her at the club.

He glanced down. His hair was still long and his skin was paler than usual, drained from the energy he'd used.

"Jonas?"

He nodded and didn't hide the smile that forced itself across his lips. She'd said his name.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He tried to sit up straighter.

"What do you need?"

"You'd rather not know."

She swallowed hard enough for him to hear it across the room. "What can I do to help you?" She pointed to his shoulder. "You're bleeding now."

"I know. Just stay in the room if I fall asleep." He tried not to sound weak. "Please trust me."

"Okay." She hopped from the bed to the floor and disappeared into the bathroom.

As water began to run, Jonas tried to right himself again and noticed a wound opening on his ribs. He was bleeding from the ugly bite on his shoulder, small cuts on both his arms, and now the large gash on his chest. He needed to sleep. And to feed.

The water turned off again and Elena emerged from the little room with hand towels, an ice bucket, and a washrag.

"You don't need to." But she was already there, kneeling between his legs.

"I don't have disinfectant, but we can still clean you up. If anyone sees you, they'll think we ki—" She hesitated. "It just wouldn't be good."

The smell of her salty skin and perfume mingled in his nose. His stomach twisted and his mouth began to water. Jonas closed his eyes. "You might be safer on the bed."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No."

"Then let me clean this up." The sound of water being squeezed into the ice bucket came just before her hand landed on his chest. "Your shirt is in shreds. We need to get it off you."

Jonas grabbed the shirt and pulled it over his head. Pain streaked through his torso with every moment. Still, he managed to toss it over her head and lean back again.

The wounds oozed faster.

"You need to see a doctor."

"You think a doctor won't notice I'm different?"

She laughed, wiping the wound on his chest with the warm washrag. "How different are you?"

"What do you think, Elena?"

"I don't know."

How do you tell a human that the monsters in her world are real? He'd never actually had to do that. People either found out or didn't. Elizabeth had always known because of Michael. And now, looking at Elena as she tended his wound, he didn't want to be the one to take away her security. Her life would never been the same after he said the next sentence. She would always resent him for it too if she was as smart as he thought.

"Do you have any bandages in that huge bag?"

"Center pocket on the front."

She disappeared to the bag, but was back quickly, bandaging his wound with tape and gauze.

"I have to tell you something."

She looked up at him for a second, then moved to the bite on his shoulder. "I've watched enough sci-fi to know you're not human."

"No. Not exactly."

"Just tell me and get it over with."

He cringed as she prodded the wound a little too hard, then focused hard. Jonas felt nothing to indicate fear from her. She was guarded, cautious, curious, and something that felt like amorous, but that emotion had no place in this moment.

"Sorry." She worked in softer touches.

"Don't yell at me when I tell you. You'll draw attention."

"Okay." She started cleaning again. "Have you been watching me?"

"Yes. Only to protect you."

"For how long?"

"Since the night of your speech. They assigned me to you after we met at the club."

"You've been in my house, haven't you."

"How do you know?"

"I just felt it." She bandaged the shoulder carefully. "Are you really a vampire?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No." The idea that she believed he might made Jonas's heart ache.

"Can you read minds?"

It was his turn to swallow hard. How in the hell did she know that? It didn't matter. She knew it either way. If he lied, it would probably bite him in the ass later. "Yes."

Elena stopped to look up at him. Her eyes narrowed. "Can you control dreams?"

He didn't answer.

Humiliation radiated from her, morphing quickly to anger. "You saw it all?"

"I'm sorry if that embarrasses you, but I don't regret it."

She rocked back onto her heels, grabbing the towels. "I don't like being used."

"I'm not using you."

"Then why did you make me dream that? Don't you know how wrong that is? You can't just go into somebody's head and make them feel like that."

"I didn't intend for you to know." Jonas caught her hand before she could walk away and looked straight into her eyes.

"It wasn't a lie."

"But you're not exactly going to stick around with me, are you?"

He let her go. Elena was right.

She left, then came back into the room and sat cross-legged in front of him. "Tell me this ... how many are there?"

"What? Vampires?"

Elena nodded.

"A lot. They're everywhere."

"Organized, I suppose, since you're *assigned* to me."

"There is a hierarchy, yes. Something like the Italian *mafioso*."

"So, you're criminals?"

"Sort of. By the current human laws in America, anyway."

"Are they going to kill me since I know about them?"

"No. That's not necessary. They can make you forget."

"Is that supposed to make me feel good?"

Jonas shrugged.

"Do they all have a Mr. Hyde?"

"That particular gift is a part of my genetic mixture and the way I was changed. Luciano was necessary."

"He doesn't like me."

Luciano's whisper of disappointment floated through Jonas's mind. He did like her. Too much, in fact—which made her more of a liability. "He does like you, Elena. I'm just afraid he might hurt you."

Something about the statement seemed to touch a nerve and it showed in her face. "He seemed to think that, too."

What had Luciano done or said? "You're smart to believe him if he says that."

Elena was quiet, studying him for a few minutes. "Is it a virus that makes you a vampire?"

"That's what our scientists say."

"I bet they know a lot more than we do."

"They have advantages over human science and medicine. Most of the major human discoveries have been ones that we made first and then made sure that humans found them."

"Like?"

"Immunizations."

"Wow." She scratched the side of her head. "So you're *not* all mindless leeches."

He laughed, then cringed with the pain that came from moving his ribs. "No. Just my friend Gregory."

A wave of fatigue crashed over him. The sun peeked over the horizon, making a light glow under the drapes that covered the window. "I have to sleep to heal because I haven't fed while I've been watching after you. It's hard for us to heal from sunburns and Agent's bites anyway."

"Oh, that's what those werewolves were."

"Yeah." He leaned up against the wall and let his eyes slip shut.

"Sleep on the bed. It'll be easier for you."

"You're sleeping there."

"I'm not afraid of you. And there's plenty of room."

"I don't want to take a chance that you'll leave the room."

"I'm not going to leave, Jonas. If you were going to kill me, you've had plenty of chances. The way I see it, my only chance is to do what you say because I can't protect myself against those things."

He nodded and crawled to his feet. When he started forward, his knees almost gave way. Elena grabbed his arm and helped him over to the bed. She eased him down on the side closest to the door. "If you need blood, you can bite me."

The simple statement made him stop.

He wanted her blood so much that it literally hurt, but he wasn't sure he would be able to break free if he started drinking her. He needed a lot. And she smelled so good. "I think I'll pass."

"Why?"

"I need too much."

"Can't you just take a little? I mean, you don't have to drink me dry, do you?"

"We can drink and heal the wounds. I don't know if I can stop right now. It's like starving and having someone hand you a bag of chips, telling you that you can only eat three."

"What if I just cut myself and bled into a cup?"

He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. All the discussion of blood made his attention turn to her scent and his mouth started to water again. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Don't be stubborn."

"Do you have a death wish I need to know about?"

"No," she said. "I'm just being logical. I deal with diseases all the time. You have a need for my blood because of a

problem in your own body, like antibiotics for an infection. Right?"

"I guess."

"Well, then, what's wrong with letting you medicate yourself under the circumstances?"

"Under the circumstances, doc, I think we're both better off if we don't go there." He put his uninjured arm over his eyes. "I'm going to sleep before we both regret it."

Elena climbed onto the bed beside Jonas and watched him trying to go to sleep.

"You should get some rest," he finally said.

"I'm not tired." She propped her head on her hand.

"Running from werewolves with a vampire sort of has a way of making me wired."

He laughed again and the sound made her heart float, just as it had every time he made that sound since she'd had time to really listen. "If you lie down, you'll probably realize you're exhausted. Besides, we'll be leaving at sunset again, unless they find us first."

"Do you think they will?"

"Probably not. Just don't use the phone."

"Okay."

Jonas's voice trailed off. "And don't answer the door."

"I won't. I'll just take a shower and watch television."

"Okay," he whispered.

Within minutes, he was completely motionless. If he was breathing, it was so shallow that she couldn't tell. She lay down beside him and watched to see if he was breathing. He was. It was the tiniest, almost imperceptible motion of his

wonderfully muscled chest. But he was breathing. It made her want to drape an arm over his chest and snuggle into him like she had in her dream.

He was even more beautiful than in her dream, especially with the longer hair. Her imagination hadn't done him justice. In reality though, he was much colder. His skin was harder. And now she was here, in a motel room alone with him—a real vampire—and he wouldn't even consider biting her. Boy, could she pick 'em.

He wasn't interested in her. He'd made that clear. Would he be the same in her dreams? She smiled. There was only one way to find out.

* * * *

Elena woke, sitting straight up in bed. Her heart was pounding. Sweat rolled down her face and her hand was gripping the bed. She looked down to see Jonas lying in the same position he'd been in when she fell asleep. It had been a dream, a bad one where he wasn't there to protect her. He hadn't been in her dream at all.

Behind him, the clock on the nightstand read three-twelve. In less than three hours, they'd be on their way to his vampire coven, or whatever they called it. She needed a bath.

She stood and walked to the bathroom, closing the door only partially so she could hear if someone tried to get into the room. She stripped inside the shower, tossing her clothes onto the floor near the wall, then showered quickly with the

tiny soap and little shampoo, leaving enough for him to use if he needed it.

In the sink, she scrubbed her underwear and sports bra, then hung them up to drip. In an hour or so, she'd use the hair dryer to dry them.

She grabbed the tiny bottle of lotion off the sink and walked back into the room with a towel wrapped around her. Jonas's arm had finally moved, but he didn't speak or indicate that he was awake. Elena sat on the bed as softly as she could and started to rub the lotion on her legs, glad to have shaved the night before.

"Sleep well?" His voice was soft and sleepy.

She put her leg down and glanced up at the mirror in front of her. Jonas was leaning up, watching her as she pushed her towel shut where it had fallen open at her thigh. "I had nightmares."

His brow wrinkled. "Sorry." He sat up slowly, cringing as he went. "Thank you for not leaving. I don't want to have to chase you again."

Elena laughed and held her towel in place while she stood and walked to his side. "How's the healing?"

He reached up for the bandage on his shoulder and his brows knitted.

"If you don't mind, I'll get that. Since you're sore."

He shrugged and watched as she pulled the edge of the tape back. The teeth marks had thick scabs and the skin around them was bruised and swollen. The wound was healing, but slowly. Like a human would.

She pulled the bandage off the rest of the way, then reached toward the one on his ribs. He leaned back, making the muscles on his abdomen and sides ripple. The wound had been replaced with shiny scar tissue. The other, smaller cuts and scrapes were all gone now. "You *do* heal fast. It's amazing."

"I never really think about it. I guess it is."

"The serum makes us heal like this," she said.

"That's what I was told."

"To have this ability naturally would be ... like a superhero."

Jonas laughed. "I don't feel like a superhero right now."

"How long will it take for this to heal?" She pointed at the bite mark.

"If I don't feed, days or weeks. If I feed, maybe forty-eight hours."

"I don't understand why you won't bite me."

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Chapter Nine

"If you keep offering, you might find out just how hard it is for me to resist. What if I killed you?"

Jonas swallowed back all of the extra saliva that appeared at her urging him to drink again. He wanted to. He wanted to drink every drop of her. Especially when she was bending over him with nothing but a towel and that sweet perfume of her clean hair to separate them. She looked so soft and clean—and real.

Elena's voice was so calm. "You wouldn't."

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. "I just trust you."

He cringed and nodded. "You really shouldn't. Your curiosity is going to get you killed."

"You think you're so scary, but you're not. I know you could kill me, but you could have done that several other times. Stop being such a—"

Jonas growled and grabbed her around the waist. He rolled her onto the bed, trapping her under his weight. That mouth was open, fangs at her throat.

Elena didn't move, only arched her neck toward him and took a shaky breath. He could feel her arousal. The human was far more turned on than scared. At best, she was nervous.

He grunted and bit down harder, almost punching through her skin.

"Do it," she whispered, rubbing his back with her hand. The peaceful calm of acceptance swept through her.

Jonas screamed inside him. Her anticipation was heavy, almost choking him. The hunger and Luciano roared, making Jonas's body shake. Her skin tasted so good and her blood smelled delicious and sweet. Yeah, he could bite her, drink a little, then heal her up. But if he couldn't stop, she'd die. He would kill her because she trusted him.

"It's okay," she whispered, this time pushing her neck against his teeth.

The skin broke under the pressure, puncturing her with his top teeth.

Drops of Elena's warm blood bubbled into his mouth.

He was lost.

Jonas bit down, popping her thin flesh. She let out a small cry that turned into a groan as he pulled his teeth out of her skin. She didn't feel the pain and fear than he'd anticipated, but a wicked dose of lust. Elena's hands went to his hips, and she arched her back underneath him. Her soft body felt so good writhing under his grip. Without forcing her mind, Elena reveled in his bite. It only made him want her more.

The blood flowed freely, pumping out as with her heartbeat. She was every bit as sweet and strong as he'd imagined.

Luciano roared and stretched inside him, reveling in the taste of her as much as he was.

It was a wondrous bliss of blood and sex that he hadn't experienced before. Jonas was sure he could stay there, drinking her in until she was completely inside him.

He pushed back at the thought. It would be bad if he didn't seal the wounds before it went too far.

He flicked his tongue across his fang, opening the flesh of his tongue, then snaked it across each hole. His blood contained the magic to seal her wound. When it was closed, he swallowed the last of her, sucking the remains off her skin before he licked her clean.

She moaned so loud. And her body was still warm beneath him. He could smell the moisture pooling between her legs, flaring that other hunger inside him that had nothing to do with being a vampire.

Jonas reached between their bodies and yanked the towel open.

Elena's satisfaction filled the room and made his skin prickle.

His nerves crackled with it when he slid down to take one nipple into his mouth, sucking and then teasing her with his fang before he moved to the other. He gripped her waist and licked a long line down to the clean-shaven skin between her legs. She was flushed, ready for him to show her what real men did in dark rooms with sexy women.

Jonas was so hard that it hurt.

He slipped his tongue down the little slit. She was sweeter here, like peach syrup. Her thighs shook beside his head and one of her legs hooked over his shoulder.

When she moaned, he pushed harder, licking her in long strokes, then swirling his tongue over her nub.

Elena gasped again. She arched her back so hard that he thought she'd come straight off the bed. Her pleasure flowed

through the room, filling it with her scent and making his mind feel charged. Her need was building inside his mind, doubling his own.

This had never happened before.

He couldn't wait to get inside her, but he'd finish this first.

He stroked and teased her until she was panting. Then he slipped one finger inside, stroking her into an orgasm that had her heel buried into his back. She thrust against his face in a wild rhythm.

When Jonas was sure she'd peaked, he stood and pushed off his pants so fast that the threads cracked and popped. His eyes never left her swollen breasts or the hand that she used to cup and tease the left one.

Elena looked down at him, wide eyed. "Not everything was a figment of my imagination."

He smirked and crawled on top of her. "No. It's very real."

"Wait. Do we need—"

"We're okay. I can't get you pregnant or carry the human diseases. And I can't give you the virus this way."

She nodded.

Jonas centered himself and devoured her mouth. He pushed into her, a little at a time, loving the way she gasped against his lips with each inch that he gained. She writhed and arched under him, shoving him even farther.

When he was buried all the way inside her, he pulled back and thrust into her again. Elena's legs hooked around his hips and drove him into her harder. Jonas slid in and out, pumping harder and faster as they neared another peak.

Her hands went to his back, scoring him with her nails. The pain shot through him, detonating that explosion of an orgasm.

Jonas pumped through it, her body milking him as her second orgasm came. Elena's hands caught his face and pulled him to her. She ate at his mouth until her body stopped squeezing him, and her nipples softened.

When she was spent, Jonas collapsed on top of her, trying to keep his weight on his elbows.

Jonas moved to her side, pulling her into his arms. Her satisfied smile was infectious. "Better than a dream?"

She let out a shaky laugh. "So much better."

He kissed her forehead. If they weren't being chased by the Bureau and looking at the very real possibility that he would never see her again after the Council got her, he'd promise to give them to her whenever she liked. But that was their reality. Not the dream.

Jonas's chest had a hollow ache that was all emotion. He'd gone too far, but he couldn't make himself regret it. The afterglow that warmed him now was worth every second of it. He'd suffer through whatever happened, and he'd do his damndest to keep her safe. He owed her that. There had been two women with whom he'd ever share a bed. The other had died centuries ago.

And she'd never brought him without blood.

* * * *

"I wish we had more time." Jonas squeezed her once again. It was probably the twentieth time he'd done it in the

hour in which they lay there. "It's time to get on the road again."

Elena nodded. A nervous vibe radiated from her.

"What's wrong?"

"What if they decide to kill me?"

He knew she meant the others, his *cosca*, the *vampiro* and all the other dangers he was taking her to. "They won't." He gave her a chaste kiss. "They need you to much."

She kissed him back. "I hope you're right."

Her legs untangled from his before Elena slipped off the bed. She grabbed the towel and wrapped it around her again.

Jonas sneered. "I was enjoying that view."

She smiled and disappeared into the bathroom. The blow dryer started its loud buzz.

Jonas dug through his bag and then threw on a pair of jeans and the black T-shirt with the gray dragon that looked almost like the tattoo on his arm that was his father's mark. The Viking had given him the warrior's tattoo, but it was so much more. Luciano was tied to that mark.

"I can't go yet."

He turned to see Elena. She was still in a towel, holding her clothes. "My clothes were stinky and I can't get my top to dry before we go."

He grabbed the smallest T-shirt in his bag, the red one with the crosses and random swirls and patterns that cascaded down one side. "Put this on."

"I don't have a bra."

"I won't complain."

"You're hopeless." Elena laughed and slipped back into the bathroom.

Jonas put on his shitkickers, then tossed the bag on the bed. He pulled his pistol from the leg holster where it had been since the night before. With the clip popped out, he reloaded it with ammo from the bag. They would probably see more problems before the night was over.

He slipped on the shoulder holster and fastened it into place, then checked the 9mm inside. It had a full clip.

Jonas put the other pistol in the holster on his other side, then stood and rolled his shoulders, getting comfortable. He tossed the leg holster into the bag and grabbed his bracelets. It wasn't the same, fighting without them. The thin black leather band with Luciano's mark on it had been a present from Christine for his last birthday. It became a part of his regular collection when she died. The silver bracelet with the cross on it was a replica, a replacement for the one he'd lost the night Elizabeth died. Michael had given him the replacement when they started talking again in 1927.

It was great for cramming in the mouth of any agent that thought he'd make a tasty meal. That always stunned them and gave them a nasty burn in the mouth. He should have been wearing it last night. But he'd relaxed, caught up in the dreams and his attraction to Elena. He couldn't get too relaxed again.

And now they had to get past Michael. He was going to be pissed about her new status as a *senza vincolo*.

The way he saw it, she was collateral damage at this point. She'd just been caught in the crossfire. Nothing he could do about it.

Riiiiight.

"I'm ready when you are," Elena said, flipping the light switch in the bathroom.

He threw the duffel's strap over his shoulder, then turned to see her. The shirt came to the middle of her thigh. It was sexy as hell.

He shook his head to clear away the temptation already fogging his mind. They couldn't do that right now. "Leave the keys on the nightstand. We're going straight for the Explorer, then we're driving straight home. No stops. Sure you don't need to..."

She shook her head. "I'm okay. Already went."

Jonas's cell phone went off. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced at the little screen. It was Michael.

He held up his finger to Elena, to hush her, and mashed the little green button. "Yeah?"

"You on your way in?" Michael's voice was sharp.

"Yeah."

"Your other half said you'd call. You better have a good fucking reason why you didn't."

"We didn't stop until sunrise and Elena had to help me. One of those fuckers bit me."

"So she's seen it all?"

"Pretty much."

"After I realized she was with Luciano, I thought she might be a bit more panicked. He didn't freak her out?"

"No. Seemed to do pretty well, actually." He glanced up at Elena, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed.

"She's either unbalanced or the shock hasn't set in yet."

"Maybe."

"Are you actually driving?"

"No. We're about to walk out of the room."

"Get going. Don't let me slow you down."

"All right."

"You know the rules," Michael said. "She can't know where we sleep."

"Understood."

"When she gets here, we'll lock her in the main house."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Really," Michael said. "Why?"

At that moment, Jonas would have given anything to be able to communicate telepathically with Michael, to let him see how he felt about her. But that might not have been a good idea. He wouldn't want Jonas getting mixed up with someone about to become one of the Council's pawns. "It might be overkill."

"I guess you want her to stay with you?"

How to answer that...

Michael cleared his throat. "I don't need to tell you what you're asking for by getting involved here."

"You're right. You don't."

Michael let out a little growl. "Don't forget who the *padrone* is here."

Jonas smirked. "No problem there."

"Just get her here."

The phone went dead, and Jonas tucked it back into his pocket. There would probably be hell to pay when he got home, but he had a few hours yet before that happened.

"Let's go."

He glanced through the peephole, then opened the door and looked around. Elena was close behind him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in a quick walk to the Explorer, tugging his keys from his pocket on the way. In seconds, they were in the vehicle and barreling down the road.

* * * *

The drive to Collins Bay had been filled with small talk. Elena seemed happy to keep watch behind them, talking about random things. She was nervous. When they were close enough to the city, Jonas glanced at her, then back to the road. "When we get close, I have to alter your thoughts so you don't know where our home is."

"I don't think I like you playing around in my head."

"I don't want to do it either."

"Can't you blindfold me?"

"No. It's too easy for you to piece it together."

"What if I go to sleep?"

"If you go to sleep soon, you could be in REM sleep before we get there. You'll never know I did anything. You'll just have a good dream."

A mischievous grin turned up the corners of her mouth.

"Not *that* good, El."

"All right. Let me finish the fruit and I'll go to sleep." She scarfed down the last of the fruit that came with the chicken sandwich he'd stopped to get her for dinner.

Then she leaned back against the seat, closing her eyes. She didn't ask questions or doubt him further, just slipped into sleep.

No one had ever trusted him this much.

He wasn't sure that it was smart, even now as he looked down at her relaxed face and the spill of chocolate hair.

Miles down the road, the slender hand perched on the end of the armrest twitched a little. When he was sure that she was out, he picked up her hand carefully and wrapped it in his. It was warm and soft, and it made him feel strangely protective. As much as he hated to admit it, she'd grown on him.

Elena was a light in the darkness that he'd become so fond of during the last few centuries. She made him want to let her in, to trust her as much she trusted him.

It was wrong, just as he'd known it was wrong with Elizabeth.

When Michael pursued Tori, bringing her into the full knowledge of their kind, they had all known it was a mistake. He'd even fought the *fratello* on it. But he couldn't help the way he felt any more than Michael had been able to.

He wasn't sure he wanted to.

That warmth in his chest that grew every time he looked at her made it impossible. As much as he'd like to deny it, there wasn't a chance. Jonas could never go back to his old life. He had to have her.

No matter what the Council thought.
He was so fucked.

* * * *

Jonas tuned in to Elena's emotions when they neared the house, in case she'd awakened and was trying to hide it. He turned off the main road and drove down the winding narrow road into the estate. Once they were safely in the gates, he pulled up to the garage, but didn't park inside it.

He killed the engine and leaned down to Elena. He kissed her on the cheek. She didn't move.

"It's time to wake, Elena. We're home," he whispered. He kissed her again and this time she stirred.

Elena leaned up, stretching and arching her back as she yawned. She glanced around at the estate, then cut her eyes to him. "You live here?"

He laughed and got out of the vehicle, grabbing the keys and his bag as he went. He went to her door, expecting to open it, but she was too fast, piling out before he reached it.

Jonas glanced up at the house. The lights were on, but Michael's car wasn't in front. He and Tori were probably out. "Come on. You can stay in the pool house with me, unless you want to stay in the main house with them."

"With you."

He motioned toward the wrought-iron gate that lead toward the back yard, but walked ahead of Elena, opening and closing the gate for her.

"This is some house. Have you always lived here?"

"No. We recently inherited it."

"Did you have a rich uncle or something?"

"Or something."

Elena eyed him suspiciously while they walked around the kidney-shaped pool toward the pool house that was actually the size of a small regular house.

"Does anyone stay out here with you?"

"It's just me. I like a little privacy." Jonas opened the door to the pool house and held it open for her. "While you're here, there are a few things you need to know."

"Go ahead," she said, stopping in front of the fireplace.

"Don't be too curious. They'll be suspicious. Never, ever talk about what we are in public. You're not supposed to know. All the humans that do either have masters or are dead."

Elena's brows went up.

"Stick close to me. Any vampire outside of this is definitely not looking for anything but your neck. Don't trust any of them." He tossed the duffel bag onto the pool table.

"Got it."

"Don't tell anyone where you are. Don't make phone calls without permission. I'll get you a secure line if you need it."

"Anything else?"

Jonas walked over to stand in front of her, grabbing her by the hips. He looked down into those eyes. There were tons of things he wanted to say, so many dangers to tell her about. But they didn't have time to go over all of them. "Just stick close to me," he repeated.

Elena nodded and stood on her toes.

He met her, giving her a deep kiss. She wavered a little; he caught her in his arms and held her close.

There was a little knock and the front door opened. "Are you in here?"

It was Tori.

Elena raised a brow at the voice, and Jonas's stomach twisted. "We're in the den."

Tori's face appeared in the doorway; her dark curls were down the way he always liked to see them. She smiled. "Is she okay?"

For the first time in years, the sight of her didn't make Jonas want to steal her away. There was no infatuated high with her presence. No nervous energy making him think too fast about what it would be like to have her beneath him. Nothing.

Well ... that wasn't exactly true.

He felt guilty for what he'd done in that room.

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Chapter Ten

Elena leaned her head up to see what the woman looked like. She was beautiful, but in a very human way. She was a petite thing with dark hair and eyes. The cropped T-shirt and leather pants showed off her tiny waist and not-so-tiny breasts. The olive skin that peeked out everywhere made her look almost Italian.

Jonas watched her with a mix of affection and admiration in her eyes.

Elena was so out of her league.

She'd known there had to be someone else, and here she was. She didn't look like a vampire. Jonas had this—this unnatural beauty that made him even more gorgeous. But there was nothing surreal to this woman. She looked like any other hot body on some teen guy's bedroom wall. And she had a hard edge to her, like she'd seen the worst of life and lived through it.

"Michael wants you to come inside for a minute. Needs to talk to you about the club, I think."

"Will you stay here with her?" Jonas glanced between them.

"Sure," the woman said, sliding into the oversized chair across near the window.

Jonas squeezed Elena's hand. "I'll be right back."

"All right."

Tori curled her legs under her, watching him with a little gleam in her eye that Elena could see, even in the almost dark.

Jonas kissed her on the cheek and disappeared. Elena watched the door close, then walked over to the chair across from the woman.

"I'm Tori, by the way."

"Elena Jensen," she said, sliding into the chair.

"A scientist, Michael said."

"Immunohematologist."

"Has he told you why you're here?"

"Basically, those werewolves are trying to get me."

Tori's eyes went wide. "I've never actually seen the Agents. Is that really what they look like—like werewolves?"

"Like something out of a movie. They're huge."

Tori laughed. "I guess that explains why you got to meet Luciano."

The image of Jonas's alternate flashed through Elena's mind. A shiver ran down her spine. "Yeah."

"I've been around for years and I've never seen him. You should probably count yourself as lucky. Most people who see him don't live to talk about it." Tori leaned forward, whispering. "What does he look like?"

"Sort of like Jonas." She thought for a minute. There was no easy way to describe him. "Only whiter. And scarier."

"Michael told me Jonas was the best fighter in the *cosca*. I just couldn't see it."

"I'm not doubting that right now." Elena let out a laugh. "He's not someone I'd want to piss off."

"I don't think *you* can piss him off."

Elena shrugged and played with the hem of her shirt.

"That's overstating it."

"Have you noticed how he looks at you?"

Tori's voice had a sharp edge to it. Something was—off.

"Are you and he..." Elena didn't want to finish that. It would hurt too much if the answer was yes.

"Me and Jonas?" Tori laughed. "No, no, no. I am Michael's *compagna*. Jonas is like his brother."

"I just thought that—"

"No." She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the chair. "I'm Michael's *compagna*."

"What does that mean?"

"His blood binds me to him. Like magic. It's sort of halfway between vampire and human. I get the benefits, like extra strength, without the side effects."

"You can fight like them?"

"No. Not even close. But I can take the average man."

"Do you heal faster, too?"

"Not as fast as them, but fast."

"Why didn't he just turn you?" Elena asked.

"I don't want to be one of them."

"Why?"

"I've seen too much of their lifestyle. Most of them are monsters. Michael works hard to be fair and tries to keep them from corrupting themselves too much. But even he's a murderer."

"They can feed without killing people."

Tori's eyes widened. "Yeah." She stared at Elena for a heartbeat, then added, "But they still deal with people in their own way. There is no court system in their world. You break the rules, you die."

"Are they going to kill me for knowing?"

"I don't think so. The Council wants you and that Immuno-X you've been working on. They'll probably put you to work for them. Or they'll wipe your memory and put you somewhere safe. Worst-case scenario would be changing you."

"Wipe my memory? They can do that?"

"Yeah." Tori adjusted in the chair, propping her head against the side. "Like Mr. Clean."

Elena wondered if Jonas had done that to her. What would it feel like? They might have done any number of things, but she wasn't missing any time that she could remember. And he could have just wiped her memory of the park if he was going to. "Have they done it to you?"

"I don't think so. But I honestly don't know. I've seen it done. Spooky." Tori let out a deep breath. "I guess you're probably scared. Aren't you?"

"A little."

"Of Jonas?"

"No. Of the rest."

"You like Jonas, though. Right?"

Elena watched Tori, gauging her interest in the subject. "Yeah. Why?"

"I just get the feeling he's into you. And that's a first. I don't want to see him hurt if this goes badly."

"You can't stop it if it does, can you?"

"I might have a little pull with Michael." Tori smiled. "He bit you, didn't he?"

Elena blushed a little and nodded.

"Are you hungry?" Tori asked.

"Starving."

"It always happens to me, too. Come on." Tori slid out of her seat. "We'll go inside and eat. I'm kind of hungry, too."

Elena stood and followed her toward the door. Her stomach knotted. She took a deep breath. In seconds, she'd be face to face with whatever vampires were inside. She could do this. Right? It wasn't like they'd devour her on sight.

* * * *

Jonas paced in front of the big north-facing picture window, out onto the front lawn of the estate. It was still weird that they were living in the house Castillo had owned. At least he'd kept the house somewhat normal. The dungeon in the basement of the pool house and the medical exam room down the hall were the only things that remained to indicate his fetishes.

"Yes. I understand," Michael said into the phone, sitting on the edge of that dinosaur of a mahogany desk on the west wall. "We will keep her safe until then."

Jonas shook his head. They weren't going to take Elena. It wasn't an option. He didn't know how he'd manage to stop the entire Council, but he would.

The phone clicked shut. Jonas turned and opened his mouth, but Michael held up a hand. "Let me tell you what we're doing, first."

Jonas sighed and started pacing again.

"That was Khalil," Michael said. "He says the council is undecided about whether to turn her or to keep her human and put her in a lab. I'm pushing for human since she won't have a say in the decision. Then, if she wants to do it later, I'm sure they'll let her."

A growl started low in his chest; Jonas fought to keep it down. He gritted his teeth, and his hands shook. "This isn't fair, Michael."

The *padrone* arched a brow. "Why do you care?"

He swallowed hard, fighting back the beast inside him. He wasn't going to answer that. He didn't have to.

"You're involved with her. A human?" Michael folded his arms over his chest. "Isn't that a little fragile for your taste, Jonas?"

"Fuck you."

Michael jabbed his finger at him. "Watch it!"

The *padrone* let out a long breath. His hand moved to his face, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "You know what I mean, Jonas. I have to be so careful with Tori. And you live for that dungeon. Can she handle that?"

Probably not. "I don't know."

"Is this about Tori?"

"It's not about Tori." He sighed. "I tried to avoid her. If I'd have known she was the scientist, I wouldn't have gone."

"You already knew her?"

"From the club."

"It was only open two nights."

"Yeah." Jonas turned to look out the window again. "I can't let them take her, Michael."

"You're not going to have a choice." Michael was suddenly behind him, clamping a hand on his shoulder. "They'll kill you. You can't do her any good if you're dead."

It was almost like Michael was reading his mind now. "I didn't get it before."

"What?"

"Why you were willing to go down this road again. With another human."

Michael laughed. "Wasn't a choice."

Jonas nodded.

"It's not like with Elizabeth." Michael got quiet. "I smell your human. She's in the house."

Jonas stiffened.

"Go on. I'll let you know if anything changes on this end. I'll see what I can do on my end. Khalil owes me."

"All right." He turned and walked to the door. As he opened it, he turned back to Michael again. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet."

* * * *

Jonas stepped into the massive Tuscan-style kitchen. It still amazed him that they had a gourmet kitchen in a house where only one person ate.

Elena had her back to him, sitting at the long bar on the end of the island.

Tori stood to her right, gnawing on a slice of pizza. She glanced at him. "You survived."

He nodded and darted up to Elena, standing behind her before she could turn around completely. She yelped.

"Oh. Don't do that to her. You don't know how creepy that is." Tori took another bite of her pizza.

"Yes, I do." He squeezed El around the shoulders. "You're eating again?"

She took the last bite of her pizza and pushed her plate forward. "Yep."

Tori smirked. "If you're gonna use her as a Slurpee, you've gotta feed her."

Jonas kissed the top of Elena's head. She still smelled wonderful. "If you're done, why don't we go to the pool house?"

"I want to talk to her before you go." It was Michael, walking up to Tori. He kissed her on the cheek.

Jonas groaned. He kept his hand on Elena's shoulder. "Okay. Let's go."

"I need to talk to her privately."

Jonas took a step back, allowing Elena to stand. "I need to be in there."

"No, you don't." Michael glared at him.

Elena put a hand on his chest, instantly deflating the anger that was building in his chest. "It's okay, Jonas."

"Is this going to take a while?"

"I don't know." Michael motioned toward the door. "We'll talk in my office."

Jonas pulled her to him and gave her a long kiss. Michael cleared his throat, but Jonas didn't stop. He kissed her for a moment longer before pulling back. Elena blinked a few times before she focused on him again.

"Are you done?" Michael said.

"I'll follow you." Elena gave Jonas's hand a quick squeeze.

She wasn't going to let a strange vampire have her back. Michael wouldn't hurt her, at least not in front of him, but she couldn't take anything for granted. Especially now. She was smart, he had to give her that.

The two disappeared. Jonas stiffened and leaned against the counter. There wasn't one good reason that he couldn't be in there. Michael was probably going to talk to her about him and Luciano. And how she couldn't trust him.

That was how they all felt, after all. No one had to tell him that. He could feel the barriers Michael put between them. He couldn't really blame them. Luciano was dangerous.

Jonas could listen, but it would probably just piss him off. Michael would confront him, and he didn't know if he could hold Luciano back anymore tonight. If he came out, someone would get hurt. With two humans in the house, they'd probably be cannon fodder.

"He won't hurt her. You know that." Tori moved to stand beside him, patting him on the arm. He'd forgotten she was in the room.

"I know."

"Everything's weird since Michael took over. He's trying to do the right thing. Just trust him."

"Don't talk to me like I don't know, Tori."

"J. We're not the enemy."

She was right. What the hell was wrong with him? Elena was making him crazy. He took a long breath and let the exhale drain the stress from him. "Maybe she does need to go."

"Why?"

"She's making me..."

"Crazy?"

"Yeah."

Tori laughed. "You're in love with her."

He smirked. Lust and infatuation were more likely. Those gorgeous curves and that wonderful smell drove him crazy. That was all. "I doubt it."

"Then why do you look like you're going to steamroll anyone who gets near her?"

"I don't."

"Keep thinkin' that and you'll lose her. She won't be around long."

He glanced down at the little detective. Her dark eyes smiled when her lips did. She was the same attractive woman, but now she just didn't hold the same fascination as Elena. Her face was a little too narrow, her body a little too small. Even her scent paled in comparison.

He was so whipped.

"Why don't you go take a shower?"

"Huh?"

"You've still got a little..." Tori pointed to his neck.

Jonas rubbed it with his hand and felt something crusted on his skin.

She snarled. "I think it's blood."

"Probably."

"Whose?"

He shrugged.

She shook her head and laughed. "You definitely need a shower."

"I think I'll wait until she's done. She shouldn't be alone."

"Go. I'll wait for her."

"Bring her to the pool house when she's out." Jonas pushed away from the counter. "But I'd feel better if you were in there with them."

"I don't think Michael will let me."

"Try."

"Yes, *Garante*." She gave him a mock salute.

Jonas smiled and motioned. "Start walkin'."

* * * *

Elena followed the vampire into his office, careful to keep her eye on him the whole time. She even turned to watch him close the door behind her. Without Jonas, the idea of being in a room with a vampire alone suddenly seemed dangerous. It just didn't feel that way with him. This vampire, however, was a predator. Everything, from the way he walked to the way his voice made her shiver, was strangely alarming.

"Thank you for agreeing to this." Michael motioned to the chair in front of a gigantic desk. "I don't think Jonas would have reacted well if you would have protested."

That made her smile.

Michael sat in the big chair behind the desk. "He surprises me with you."

"Why?"

"He doesn't get attached quickly." He leaned back in his chair and stared at her with those cold eyes. "Is it serious between you?"

"I don't know."

He smiled. "Has he explained what's happening?"

"I think so."

"Well, let's clarify it then."

Michael recapped the basics of what was happening to her, who the Agents were, and who the *vampiro cosca* is. She listened, taking it in slowly. They were everything she'd imagined that real vampires would be. Less of the Gothic drama and more of the clear-cut survival that ancient beings would have to have. Their leader, the one sitting across from her, was beautiful and menacing at the same time. Like Jonas, he was a perfect weapon. It was the most fascinating thing that had ever happened to her.

"Are you not frightened?" Michael's brows were a little high.

"No more than I should be, I suppose."

"You seem completely unshaken. Even in our existence."

"I've always believed there was a world I wasn't seeing. Now I just have proof."

"I don't think you realize how much danger you're in."

"I saw those werewolves who tried to kill me. I understand perfectly well. I'm not in denial. I've accepted it and I'm going

to do what I can to survive. Right now, I feel that I'm safe. So there's no need for me to be upset."

"You're a survivor. Very logical."

Elena nodded.

"What happened?"

She looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"To make you that way."

Had she been that transparent? She didn't think so.

Michael smiled, and she could see his little fangs.

"How did you..."

"Don't ask a magician to reveal his secrets."

"Fair enough." He could probably read minds, too. She sank further into the chair, getting comfortable. "I didn't have a great home life. I grew up quickly, then I was attacked. At sixteen. A group of guys..."

He held up a hand. "Enough said. I shouldn't have pried."

"I'm okay with talking about it. Really."

"It feels to me—as a man—wrong to ask you to relive that for my benefit. One humiliation was enough. Telling a stranger only makes it worse, I would think."

"Thank you."

"Let me at least ask you this." He seemed lost, unable to find the perfect words.

"Just say it," she encouraged. "I'd prefer it if you're blunt."

Michael smiled. "Are you okay with Jonas's—about Luciano, I mean."

"It's a part of him."

"Yes, I guess it is." He glanced toward the door.

Tori peered around the door and smiled. "Can I come in? Jonas went for a shower."

Michael nodded, then turned his attention back to Elena. "I want you to know that what Jonas did, revealing himself to you, risked his life. He went against the most important of our laws. Only to protect you. By doing that, he put you in more danger. You're unclaimed by any *vampiro*. Someone will have to claim you eventually, or you will be killed."

"Great," she said sarcastically.

"For now, the Council knows the situation. Jonas will be punished, but you will remain human and unmarked until you choose a *dominatore*."

"Why will he be punished?"

Michael's brows went up. "I'm telling you that you have to bind yourself to a vampire for life—and you're worried about Jonas?"

"I'm not afraid of what that means for me." That wasn't exactly true. She was worried, but it wasn't like she could change things now. They were going to kill her or take her. He'd done nothing wrong. "Okay, I am afraid. But I don't want him to be hurt. He saved my life. Wasn't he sent to watch over me?"

Michael gave her a slight nod. "He will suffer a punishment of my choice. I don't want to do it, but I have to. I haven't decided what it will be yet."

Elena jumped to her feet and leaned toward him. "He had to do it because they were right there! Don't you get it? They came out of nowhere. I thought they were going to kill him."

Tori's voice came from behind her. "Elena, he'll be fine. I promise."

Michael's jaw flexed and he stared at her. It was almost enough for her to back down. She wanted to, but she wanted to protect Jonas worse.

"I'll keep that in mind." Michael stood and motioned toward the door. "There's nothing else for us to discuss tonight. Tori will take you back to the pool house. I will let you know what the Council decides tomorrow."

"All right." She headed out the door with Tori's footsteps close behind her. They weren't going to hurt Jonas. Not because of her. It wasn't fair for them to punish him for doing his job.

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Chapter Eleven

Jonas stepped out of the shower and wrapped an off-white towel around his hips, tucking it in place. Tori had been right. He'd needed the shower. There was just too much about Elena that made him want to do dangerous things.

Luciano was one of those things. He was waiting on the edge, waiting on his chance to pounce and take the woman himself. To break her.

But that could never happen.

Luciano would hurt her. He didn't have sex; he took what he wanted and left the women to suffer the consequences. That's why they had to be tied. And blindfolded. It had worked as long as he'd chosen women who enjoyed that.

Elena wasn't that type of woman. She was smart. A lady.

He walked over to the mirror and wiped away the moisture. His face was paler than normal and his eyes darker. He needed to eat. But not right now. Elena couldn't handle that again, and he wasn't going to leave her here alone.

He walked through the bedroom to the closet. The door to the pool house opened with its tiny squeak.

Tori was whispering, "Enjoy tonight. You can't control what happens tomorrow."

"Thanks," Elena said.

There was the sound of movement, and the door closing.

Jonas walked into the hallway and watched from the shadows as Elena wandered through the den and toward the kitchen. He walked toward her, careful not to make a sound.

It was too easy to sneak up on her; she was always so deep in thought. She looked different when she thought no one was watching. Almost like a kid.

He stood outside the kitchen entry as Elena flipped through the cabinets overhead. She gave up whatever she was looking for and opened the refrigerator door on the big side-by-side. She pulled out a bottle of water and a pack of strawberries. Someone must have stocked the refrigerator before they'd arrived.

She walked to the sink and washed a handful of strawberries, putting each on a paper towel when she was done. She was so precise, so careful, as if someone besides her would see the finished product.

Elena leaned against the counter. She took a red berry in hand, looked at it, then lifted the thing to her lips. Her mouth took part of it, biting off the end. It was a slow and deliberate movement, as if she knew he was watching.

It was a delicious torture.

Would her mouth look exactly like that if she were on her knees in front of him? Would her teeth scrape across his skin before her tongue slid under his tip?

Luciano roared to life at the thought. He pushed him back, but couldn't stop the erection that made his skin ache with each bite that Elena took of the strawberries.

Just go in there. Fuck her on the tile.

He wasn't sure if the thoughts were his or Luciano's, but they were strong. He put his hand on the wall to brace himself against the urge to stride in there.

He looked up.

Elena licked the red juice off her bottom lip before starting another.

Jonas strode forward.

Fuck. He should stop now. Before he made her leaving harder than it had to be.

Elena's eyes cut to him just before he slid a hand around her neck and took her mouth. He pressed against her, pushing her to the counter. He was careful not to push too hard, trying not to be stronger than a human man.

Her mouth fell open and her body molded to his. Jonas kissed her, slow and deep, taking the strawberry taste into his mouth. Her heart was pounding in his ears; that irresistible thump-thump made his teeth ache.

Elena pulled back, gasping for air.

Jonas caught her mouth again, probing her. His hand slid to her breast.

Her nipple was a tight little nub under his hand, begging to be licked. Happy to indulge it, he pulled her up onto the counter and pushed her shirt up over those full, round breasts. They were beautiful and warm.

And when he took one of her nipples into his mouth, she gasped for him.

Elena ran her fingers through his hair.

You should tie her up, that voice inside him said.

No.

He pushed back, holding Luciano in that place where he had to stay. Then Jonas moved to the other nipple, taking that warm bit of salty skin into his mouth. Raking his fang across it carefully, he forced her skin to pucker even tighter.

She sighed again.

Jonas's hands started to shake. His whole body started to shake so hard that it rattled his teeth.

Fuck. Luciano wasn't going to stay out of it.

"I'm sorry." He pulled back from Elena, trying to get control of himself. He took another step back, closing his eyes.

She pulled the shirt back into place and slid down to stand between him and the counter. Her body was so close, so warm.

He looked down at her rounded hips. She was so wet, he could sm—

He had to get out of here. Now.

Jonas walked out of the kitchen. When he turned the corner toward the bedroom, he heard Elena mutter, "Dammit."

* * * *

Elena turned back to her strawberries, but they weren't as inviting as before. She picked up another and took a bite.

What the hell had she done wrong? All she'd done was kiss Jonas back. He'd started. One minute they were practically humping on the counter. The next, he was gone. He'd acted like it was a mistake.

Maybe it was.

She had no business with him. He was dangerous. No, he was a killer. And he *had* kidnapped her. Maybe this was what Stockholm syndrome felt like.

She took another bite of a strawberry.

What had she been thinking? She was a scientist—one with a very important discovery that was just taken by what equated to vampire terrorists. She was too prominent to stay missing. Someone would have seen them at the park and told about Jonas. It was just a matter of time until they figured out who his vehicle belonged to.

She should be trying to call the cops or escape.

But there was a cop here. If she tried to escape, she was pretty sure they'd kill her. Actually, she knew they would.

"I'm going out." Jonas stood almost shadowed outside the kitchen doorway in black leather pants and a blood-red shirt. His ash blond hair was tied back in a low ponytail. "I have to check on the club." He looked as if there was something else to say, but then he shook his head. "I'll tell Tori. No one will bother you in here."

"Thanks."

He hesitated, then walked away.

Elena turned back to the strawberries. She only managed two more before she put them back into the refrigerator. He might be her kidnapper, but his leaving made her feel nauseated again. She really was losing her mind.

* * * *

Jonas strode into the family room of the mansion. The room was filled with every tech device known to man. There was only one possibility.

Blane had been shopping.

The *fratello* craned his head around the side of a chair parked in front the seventy-two-inch television he'd been

babbling about since he'd found out they were moving into the mansion. "We thought you'd be with her all night."

Jonas folded his arms over his chest. "Where's Tori?"

"Here." She waved from the other chair and swiveled around.

"Blane finally wrangled you into a game?"

She smiled. "What do you want?"

"I'm going to the club. Watch her."

Tori raised an eyebrow, then nodded slowly. He didn't have to read her mind to know all the things she was wondering. It didn't matter. He didn't need her opinion.

"Will you?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Good." He turned and toward the front door. In less than a second, he was outside. In a second more, he was in the Fastback, revving the engine. Just a few more nights and she'd be gone. Then he wouldn't have to be tempted. He'd settle for a quick fuck and a drink with one of the girls, just like he always had before. His heart ached in his chest.

* * * *

Elena walked over to a tall chest. She hated to look through Jonas's drawers, but she needed something to sleep in. Maybe he wouldn't mind.

She slid the top one out. Her mouth fell open. Inside it was a collection of handcuffs, knives, and even one of those extendable nightsticks. She closed the drawer and went to the next one. Inside were three neat stacks of tees. She grabbed the top one, a gray one with no design, and closed

the door. It was much larger than the one she had on, perfect for sleeping. She'd just wear the pants she had on and this shirt.

Elena opened the door to a massive bathroom. The room was a wide rectangle with dark tile. Modern fixtures hung from the ceiling over bowl sinks to her left. On the right was a shower the size of a walk-in closet, followed by a Jacuzzi that would easily seat three. There would have to be a long soak in that tub before she left.

She changed shirts and walked back into Jonas's bedroom. The room was modern and clean enough. On the bed was a piece of paper with her name on it in a scratchy script. She opened the note:

E,

Take the bed. The windows and doors are reinforced. No one will hurt you.

I won't be back until dawn.

It's best for both of us. We're just making this harder than it has to be.

Sorry.

J

A hole ripped inside her chest. She crumpled the note and tossed it into the trash beside the bed. Fuck him. He didn't have the right to decide for them both. Even if he *was* right.

She was an idiot.

He wasn't thinking about himself. Jonas knew she was getting too close, and he didn't care about her any more than he probably did about every victim. Besides, he wasn't exactly the relationship type.

What was it that Vanessa had said about him? That he knew how to *party*?

I bet he does.

Elena pulled the cover back on the bed. It was newly made and looked clean. She leaned forward and smelled the sheets. They were fresh.

But he'd still probably fucked someone else on the bed.

The thought turned her stomach. Elena grabbed a pillow and the comforter from the bed, bundled them into her arms, and walked straight out the door. In the den, she tossed her pillow on the couch and lay down, pulling the comforter over her.

She stared out the window at the moonlit palms that swayed with the breeze. What was she doing here? All of the lust and sex and drama of the last twenty-four hours made him seem so much less like a captor and more like a lover.

Her breath came out with a shudder. Jonas wasn't her lover. Not really. It was clear in the way he'd looked at her. He needed more than that. He needed one of his own kind, someone who could handle his needs. She was food. To all of them. Who wanted to fall in love with their steak?

Elena's closed her eyes. She would get some sleep. Then, when the sun was up, she would call Vanessa and tell them where to find her. An estate this size couldn't be too hard to find in a city like Collins Bay.

They would go straight to the police. But that wouldn't help. Tori was one of them.

She would talk to Michael. He seemed to be at least partially reasonable. If she could convince them she wouldn't

tell, they might let her live a normal life. Maybe she could work in Orlando. There had to be vampires there who could protect her and the formula.

There had to be some way out of it. She couldn't live here. Not with Jonas around. It was probably foolish, even childish, for her to have such an infatuation with him. She'd only really spent one night with him.

But she did. And she couldn't help it.

She turned over and buried her head in the pillow. She did what she always did on those nights when every shadow looked like a ghost in her room when she was little. She replayed the movie *The Wizard of Oz* in her head.

* * * *

Jonas stood at the bar, watching Jude wipe the thing down. "I mean it. Everything's fine, Jonas. Go home and rest." She glanced up at him. "I heard you were jumped."

"Yeah."

"So go home for the night."

"It's okay. I'm meeting someone here."

She perked up a brow, but continued to clean. "You mean *Tammy*." She mimicked the human's annoyingly perky voice with its deep Southern twang. Some of those accents were hot as hell, but Tammy's was too exaggerated to be real.

"Can it."

"I didn't say anything."

"Yet."

"She's already back there. She sent for two of your drink."

"Did you send them back?"

"Already done."

"Good." Maybe she was already wasted. Wiping her memory would be so much faster that way.

"I'm going back there, then. I probably won't stop by on my way out."

"No problem." She stopped wiping. "Oh, we got word from Tampa. You scared those thugs that were in here opening night. They actually sent Michael an apology and an offer to assist."

He smirked. "Good."

Jonas took a deep breath and walked toward the private rooms. He'd done this dozens of times, taking Tammy like this. It wasn't that he particularly liked the girl, but she was clean and ready, with a body that was perfect for Luciano's needs.

Plus, she always seemed eager to do whatever he asked. She didn't think too deeply or expect too much. She got to pretend that the owner of the club was her lover. He got blood and sex whenever he needed it. Theirs was a clean relationship.

He opened the door marked *Private* and closed it quickly behind him. Inside the black-and-red room was every implement of bondage and discipline that Luciano could want. On the table, where he'd fucked her so many times before, sat the bleached blonde in the black Latex dress he'd demanded. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, too, like he'd wanted. He half wished that she would have neglected something.

"Did you drink your drinks?"

"Yes, sir." She slipped off the table so that the skinny black heels clicked the floor.

"Take off the dress."

She did as he asked. Just like she always did.

"Put on the blindfold."

Again, she did as he asked without uttering a single sound. Jonas groaned. He wanted her to argue. Just this once.

He grabbed her arm, spun her to face him, then backed her up to the table. She slid up onto it easy enough and held her hands over her head to be cuffed into place. She knew the drill too well.

He secured her arms, then stared at her. She was a perfectly attractive woman. There was no flaw in her tanned skin. No scar. Not even a hair. She knew exactly what he wanted and kept her body in perfect condition.

But nothing happened.

Not even a hint of an erection.

Jonas closed his eyes and waited for Luciano. That's what *he* wanted, a woman to use. It's what he always wanted. But nothing happened.

We need her. Luciano's voice echoed in his head.

Jonas knew which "her" Luciano meant. *Get the fuck over it.*

Luciano burst into his body so fast that Jonas went to his knees. He growled a low rumble and felt his entire body shake with rage. Jonas looked down at his hands. They were ash white. Fuck. What the hell was wrong with him? Luciano had never done this. They'd never occupied the control

position together before. It was either one or the other, but never both.

I need her now.

He watched his body stand. He walked over to the woman and took a long whiff of her.

You see, she doesn't smell a fraction as good.

Luciano went up to Tammy's wrist. He lifted it as far as he could in the handcuffs and licked her skin. The taste made his stomach tighten a little, but it didn't feel as strong. She didn't taste as good as Elena's skin.

Their teeth sunk into the flesh and that thick, hot liquid poured into his mouth. He drank her down, but the taste was unsatisfying, like eating a piece of bread when you really want cake.

They continued, filling the need that was left when Elena couldn't give enough blood. He could feel the wounds on his shoulder healing up, the ache leaving.

With teeth clear of the skin, they closed the wound and released the woman's hand.

It will always be this way, Luciano said in their mind. They will never be enough now.

"All right," Jonas said, but it was his alternate's menacing voice that echoed in the room. Jonas wanted not to feel it, not to know the unsatisfied cavity that was left in his chest. He'd tasted the blood of what should be his *compagna*. Now, he could only feed his body. He'd never stop the need for something he couldn't have.

Jonas managed to turn their body toward the mirror. He stared back at the white face and black eyes. It was him, but

a dead version. This is what he really looked like, the monster inside him. How had he let Elena see this?

She wasn't afraid.

Why the hell not? Jonas wanted to scream the words, but keep it silent.

She sees me as a part of you. Not the monster that you see.

You won't be a part of her life.

I already am.

We can only hurt her.

We can protect her.

Luciano turned them back toward the woman. Her brows were furrowed with worry. "Jonas?" she said.

He grumbled at Jonas. *Finish this and go home. Or I will. But I don't suggest that option.*

We're not going home yet.

Yes, we are.

Luciano faded as quickly as he'd come, leaving Jonas alone in front of the woman on the table. He couldn't do this. In fact, he wanted to fuck her about as much as he wanted to put his dick in a light socket.

He walked over to the table and opened his mind, letting theirs connect. Her thoughts were a jumble of insecure babble about why he wasn't having sex with her yet and what they'd done to her arm that hurt so much. He wound the thought and the memory of the bite into a memory and pulled it from her. Then, he added a nice copy of the sex memory he'd given her the last time.

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Chapter Twelve

Jonas opened the door to the pool house, careful not to let it slam shut behind him. Elena had to be asleep. He couldn't hear her thoughts, even though he was open to them now. There was only a general feeling of unrest as he moved deeper inside the room. And the house smelled like her now. It made his teeth ache like he hadn't just gorged himself on that girl. He tried not to breathe as he walked to the bedroom.

Of course, he wasn't going to sleep in there. He'd stay downstairs, but he needed a pillow.

He put his hand on the doorknob and paused. That was a lie. He was lying to himself if he thought he didn't just want to see her sleeping again.

Jonas shook his head and opened the door anyway. The bed was missing its cover and a pillow.

He flipped on the light. Elena wasn't in here.

A mix of panic and anger rolled through him. Tori talked her into staying in the main house. Didn't she know that he didn't want her in there with Blane and Gregory? Jonas turned and headed back up the hallway. If one of those fuckers laid a hand on her, he'd rip their fangs out with a pair of rusty pliers.

Something moved on the couch in the den and the sound echoed through the quiet house. He veered left and peered around the corner. Elena was curled on her side, facing the

back of the couch. She was almost lost in the puff of fabric that she had pulled up to her chin and over part of her head.

He walked over to her and looked down. She was out cold. Her eyes moved in that rapid jerking that meant she was in REM sleep. She was there, just waiting, and he could slip into her dream to spend a few hours doing all the things that he wanted to do in reality.

But that would fuck it all up even more.

She didn't need him fumbling around in her head and giving her false hopes. Elena would be gone in a day or two, and that was that. No need to make it messier than it already was. Jonas would let her go to find her own life. She was property of the Vampire Council now and getting involved would only risk both of their necks. He didn't mind telling them all to kiss his ass, but she didn't have that luxury. They'd kill her, quick and messy, if she didn't do exactly what they wanted.

They might do it anyway; that was something he couldn't be involved with.

Elena turned again and groaned. Her brows bunched and made a wrinkle above her nose. She looked so innocent, even in the middle of a bad dream. He couldn't let her sleep here. If she was going to deal with all this shit in the next few days, the least he could do was give her a comfortable night's rest on a real bed.

Jonas leaned over and scooped her up into his arms. The pillow stayed behind, and Elena groaned, trying to find a comfortable spot against his chest. He wished, for the first time, that he wasn't hard as stone.

He walked toward the bedroom, trying not to let that sweet smell fill his nose. One step after another, moving her toward the room.

But Elena's arm went around his neck, and she snuggled her head into his chest.

Jonas clenched his jaw. Just a few more steps, and he'd be free.

He swung her through the door, careful not to let her hit the frame and walked to the bed. He eased her down and pulled his arm from beneath her legs. When he started to pull the one from behind her neck, Elena let out a contented sigh. The arm around his neck pulled, trying to pull him to her.

* * * *

Elena wasn't quite sure where she was. It was dark, but she could feel a bed beneath her and a man's strong arm holding her head up. Her arm was around his, like he'd been carrying her. She breathed deep and smelled the warm scent that Jonas always brought.

Thank the heavens; she was having another one of those dreams about Jonas.

She pulled him toward her, but he stopped inches from her face. Elena groaned. In the real world, they might be damned. But in the dream world, she was going to make the most of it.

Elena pushed forward, catching his lips. They were warmer than she'd ever felt them, but still hard against hers. There was no softness. No yielding to her silent request. Her heart

almost stopped dead in her chest. This wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare.

She pulled back, letting her lips leave his. She didn't want to break the kiss, but she couldn't stand touching those hardened lips. "I'm sorry. I thought that you—"

Jonas caught her mouth, stopping her in mid-sentence. His lips slid over hers, and his hand held her head to him.

Elena's hand went to his chest. He was shaking, trembling so hard that she was almost afraid he'd fall on her.

He pulled back, letting her head gently fall to the bed. "I can't. I'm sorry."

She caught his shirt and pulled. He could break away, and she knew it, but he'd have to hurt the shirt. The weight of his hip pressed against hers. If she were strong enough, she could pull him down onto her. She didn't even try.

Luckily, he must have liked the shirt.

"Don't leave me again." She stared up into those mysterious eyes, barely able to see him in the dark room. If the door hadn't been open, it would have been impossible.

"You don't understand. I can't control myself."

"Then don't."

"I'll hurt you."

"No, you won't."

Jonas's shoulders drooped. "Luciano is going to come out. He wants you as much as I do."

"Is that why you keep leaving?"

"Partially."

"We don't have long together." Elena kissed his chin and felt that tremor roll through him again. "I'd rather enjoy it."

He nodded, letting his eyes slide shut.

Elena kissed one of his eyelids. "Can you feel me if he does take over?"

"Maybe."

"I don't think he'll hurt me."

"Elena, you don't understand."

"He didn't hurt me before."

"But in sex ... he's very ... dominating."

"Rough?"

"Yes."

"Let me try."

"I can't take that chance."

Elena put her hands on his cheeks. "Look at me."

Jonas opened his eyes.

"Luciano is another part of you, and I know that you won't hurt me. Just trust yourself."

He shook his head slowly.

"Please."

He let her pull him down, almost on top of her. His straightened his arms and one of his legs went between hers so that he was on all fours above her. "I couldn't live with it if he hurt you."

"He won't."

"How do you know? You haven't seen what he does."

"If he was that bad, he would have done it when we were in that motel with no chance of anyone finding out. Right?"

"Maybe."

"Jonas, we're doing this." Elena leaned forward, almost letting her lips touch his neck. "I love you. I want this part of

you, too." She planted her lips squarely on Jonas's pulse. In that moment, she wanted to be one of them, to do whatever it was that vampires did in the dark together. Since she couldn't, she sucked hard and let her teeth scrape across his skin the way she'd wanted to feel his ever since he'd bitten her.

Jonas's body trembled. He stiffened against her, gripping the bed. He was fighting it.

Elena's hand snaked up to the other side of his neck, in case he tried to pull back. She couldn't stop him, but it might give her a second longer. Her leg stroked up his, rubbing up and down in a slow pace that almost matched the sucking at his neck.

Jonas shook even harder. "Elena ... I..."

She bit him. Not hard enough to break the skin, but harder than she normally would have bitten anyone else.

Jonas jolted hard. His skin turned so cold that it radiated an iciness that made her nipples harden. A low growl rumbled in his chest and then rolled out over his lips. She didn't have to open her eyes to know that the change had happened. No, it was enough to feel the spine-stiffening aura that came off Luciano, almost like standing with your back to a dark room, knowing that something menacing was creeping up behind you but not having the guts to turn around and see what it was.

Luciano balanced on one arm before the cascade of his hair fell around her, washing her in that wonderful smell. He arched his neck toward her and let out a dark laugh. "You are eager, *ragazza*."

Elena nipped at him again.

He grabbed her hands and slammed them back on the bed, forcing her flat. "Are you so sure that is wise?"

A tremble shook him for a moment. Elena imagined Jonas was fighting him back.

"Yes, he's with us."

Shit. Luciano could read her mind, too.

He laughed again. "Don't be so surprised."

Those black eyes glanced down the length between them, then back to her face, cutting back to her under those brows. They were frightening and intoxicating at the same time.

"You're not afraid now, are you?"

"No."

"Not smart, *ragazza*."

Luciano smiled that sharp-toothed smile, and she knew he was trying to frighten her.

It was working.

She swallowed down the little fear that made her throat tighten and closed her eyes. Jonas was there, in that body, and he wasn't going to hurt her. Luciano didn't want to hurt her either, not really, but he was a predator and fear was part of the game for him. If that's what it took to help Jonas accept this part of himself, it was the least she could do for the man who'd saved her life.

"I'd tie you down in my playroom—" He paused, letting a shiver roll through him again. His voice was strained. "But we wouldn't get to finish our fun before he came back."

Jonas was fighting. If she didn't do something, this was going to go all wrong. He would stop this or Luciano would

give up. Either way, Jonas would never trust himself with her again. She kissed his chin softly. "What if I tie you up instead?"

He laughed. "I don't *get* tied up. I do the tying."

Elena imagined being tied up, stretched out nude with Luciano touching her. Her stomach tightened, and her core began to throb softly. Something about it appealed to her. The danger, perhaps.

Holding her hands above her, Luciano slid down so his face was closer to hers. His cheek almost pressed to hers, making her skin cold. He whispered, "I saw that. And we'll get to that soon enough." He let out a long purr. "I don't think you'd mind that, would you, *ragazza*?"

She answered him with a stroke of her foot up his leg. Strangely, the idea did turn her on. She'd never considered herself to be kinky, but Luciano was sure pushing her in that direction. Fast.

Like a memory, she saw herself sitting in Luciano's lap. Both of them were nude, but she wore a crimson blindfold. Her hands were lashed with a length of red fabric behind her back. They were rocking, grinding slowly atop the mattress in a candlelit room. He pulled her head to one side, gave her a quick kiss on the neck, then plunged his teeth down into the same spot.

Elena gasped. She could feel her skin burning and her body throbbing. Moisture pooled between her legs.

"You are right," Luciano whispered. "Pain is not what I want from you."

He pushed her legs apart with his and ground his erection against her core. "I want so much more than that."

She let the feel of his teasing bring a moan from her lips. God, he was turning her on.

"I will do nothing unless you ask me to. We *apparently* need your *permission*." He spat the last words out as if they left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Jonas?"

Luciano gave her a jerky nod, then kissed her jaw.

"Can he speak to me?"

"I'm here, Elena," Jonas's voice, the softer version of the two, whispered against her skin. The skin was still cold, but he gripped her hands harder and a hard breath came out.

"You smell so ... good."

She tried to push her head back against the bed, to look at him, but Jonas shoved her face to the side with his own and buried his head into the bend of her neck. She breathed out, letting the words drain out with the last of her inhibition. "I ... want ... this."

When he spoke back, his lips brushed her skin. The voice changed to a blend of their two. Together, the sound was both exotic and frightening, like the eyes. "So do I."

The bed shifted and his hands grabbed her, hoisting her over onto her stomach. "And there's no going back now."

* * * *

Elena felt Luciano's cold hand strip her pants straight down her legs. He pulled her up onto her knees, then went for the shirt. He was rough, but somehow she had the sense that he

was trying to be gentle. After all, he did stop to let her get her own head and arms out before he jerked her back against his chest. She sat on his bent knees, loving the way his body molded around hers.

Luciano pulled her hair to one side. That hand slid across her shoulder and onto her chin. He pulled her chin up and her head to the side, angling her neck toward his mouth. His lips were hard and hungry as they explored the bend of her neck. That free hand plunged straight down to her core. His palm covered the front while his finger stroked her soaking folds

God, she was already so close. Elena's heart pounded in her chest. Her nipples ached.

"I can smell how much you want me." He raked his teeth hard across her skin.

She cringed.

Luciano jerked her chin back up. His fingers slid over her clit, making her thighs shake where they were stretched out over his.

She pushed forward.

He shoved her back into place and growled in her ear. The sound made her breath catch just before he slid two fingers inside her. Elena's back arched, pressing her neck farther into his mouth. She knew she was bleeding from a scratch on her neck. But she didn't care, even when his mouth clamped onto it and started to draw blood.

It added to the pleasure.

The pull of his mouth against her skin while his fingers worked her core was enough to push her over the edge. She

rode his hand and bucked against his chest while he pumped against her.

When she was spent, Luciano pulled the hand back and wiped the moisture on her inner thigh. "Turn around," he said in a thick, slow voice. "Sit in the center."

Elena fought her shaky thighs to turn around. He was already off the bed. But by the time she started to sit, he was in front of her, standing fully nude at the foot of the bed. That lovely tattoo stood out in stark contrast on his pale skin. Without the clothes, she could see it went from the side of his face, down his neck to his arm, where it turned into a thin, curling black dragon. And he was beautiful. He was exactly like Jonas, with the exceptions of skin tone and body decoration. Still he was somehow more fierce. An ancient god.

He cocked his head slightly, staring at her. Then the strangest expression crossed his face, like surprise, fear, and adoration had flicked through him too fast to register.

Luciano came at her so fast that she yelped against his mouth. He flattened her to the bed with his body but his mouth was gentle against hers. Careful. A playful laugh that sounded almost like Jonas came out between their lips.

She wasn't sure whether it was okay to touch him or not, but her hand went to his side anyway. He cringed a little, then centered himself and thrust forward, filling her in one hard slide that made her body ache and her head swim.

Elena pulled from his mouth, gasping for air as he plunged into her again. There was no tenderness in his urgency, only the need to fit every inch of him into her that he could.

The pain mixed with pleasure when her body began to climb toward that next explosion. It made her feel wild. Greedy.

She went for his neck again.

Luciano caught her hair and pulled her head back to expose her neck. There was a fraction of a moment where she felt the drunkenness of his power floating through her mind, taking her to another place.

His mouth clamped on her skin, and he grunted, stopping his teeth just before they pierced her skin.

"Do it," she cried out.

He hesitated, shaking.

She rolled her hips under him, driving him deeper inside her.

That was all it took. Luciano pierced her skin and the blood flowed freely.

* * * *

Damn, she tasted good.

Jonas could feel Elena's body squeezing his into an orgasm, her nails scoring his back, and how her body rolled under his. She was moaning so loud, he'd be surprised if no one inside the mansion heard it. He'd kill them all if they said anything.

He pumped into her hard and fast, trying not to hurt her. But she was so fragile, so soft beneath him. And for the first time, he and Luciano were one—feeling, thinking and doing the same things.

He gulped down another drink and felt that white-hot release explode inside him. It was like walking into the sunlight, letting it fall over his body without worrying about the burn that would come next. His skin warmed and his mind felt light, almost drunk.

It faded slowly, leaving him with his mouth clamped on her neck. He gulped down another drink and licked over the wounds to close them while he separated their bodies.

Elena was still, her breathing slower.

And she was cold.

"El?"

He leaned back to see her eyes partially closed.

Jonas listened for her heartbeat. It was faint and so slow that it probably wouldn't register her blood pressure on a cuff. Panic took his breath, but he managed to whisper. "Elena, please."

Jonas leaned her head up to him. She was mumbling something, but he couldn't make it out.

He'd taken too much fucking blood. He knew it! He knew Luciano would fuck it all up. *Dammit.*

There were two options. One: Call over to the house and ask Michael what to do. He would take her to the hospital—
Shit.

No hospitals for the hostages.

Okay, he'd have to just bond her. There was no way to save her except to perform the *vincolare* on her. They'd be blood bound and it would hurt like a bitch to let the Council take her away, but she'd be alive.

"El, I'm sorry. So fucking sorry. I took too much." He kissed her cheek. "I will have to feed you my blood."

"Vam ... vampire?"

He could feel the questions in her mind. "No. You won't be one. But you'll be tied to me, like magic."

"Turn ... me."

"I can't."

Her heart literally missed a beat.

Jonas bit into his wrist hard enough to get a good flow, then shoved it to her mouth. She opened immediately for him and started to gulp him down. The suction pulled the blood from him faster. His heart began to pound and erection ached in response, begging for another release.

He closed his eyes. The feel of Elena's mouth actually taking him in was—magical. He'd had other women bite him, but this was different. Intimate.

He never wanted it to end.

But it had to.

Jonas pulled his wrist from her mouth and replaced it with his lips. Elena met him with all the passion she'd put into feeding and grabbed the sides of his face in her hands, feeding from his mouth. She pushed up, against his body.

Jonas flipped them both, putting her on top. Elena straddled him and leaned back, taking his mouth with her so he had to prop on his elbows. Her body was wet and ready for him when she grabbed his shaft and guided it up to her opening.

She slid down onto him, her tight body spreading slow for his.

Jonas let his head fall back and his eyes close while her mouth went to his neck. Her teeth trapped scratched his skin while her body glided against his.

Elena didn't take all of him in. She couldn't. And it was all he could muster not grab her hips and force her down farther.

He sat up, wrapped his arms around her waist, and held her body as it went up and down on his. He trailed his lips over her pulse.

That sent her over.

She pushed farther down onto him and started to groan. Her body milked his, and her back arched, thrusting her tits into his chest.

Another explosion erupted in his body. Jonas gripped the sheets and let her ride through it.

A ripping sound filled the room.

Elena slowed, as did his body, until she collapsed on top of him, laughing.

Laughing immediately after orgasm wasn't normal. At least not from what he'd experienced. "What is it?"

"You broke the bed."

He glanced down to see the shreds of sheet and mattress on each side of him. Jonas laughed.

"Oh." She shuddered, then rose up quick, pulling off him. "Don't do that. It feels weird when you laugh."

He grabbed her and pulled her down beside him, spooning her soft form. "Didn't you learn not to tell me what to do?" He nibbled at her ear. "We don't like that."

She nodded her and laughed, pulling his arm around her.

Jonas snuggled his head against hers, letting the scent of her hair fill his nose. The sun was coming, and he hadn't realized how tired he really was. He closed his eyes and let the warmth of her body warm him. It had been centuries since he'd had a woman share his bed. He'd missed it.

He could feel her satisfaction even stronger than any time before. Her body seemed to connect with his on a different level now, deeper. Her thoughts were more brilliant, like they were his own. The *vincolo* changed everything.

Now, there was no chance that he would let her go.

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Chapter Thirteen

Elena woke up with Jonas's arm heavy around her waist. She glanced back over her shoulder to see his closed lids. He looked so peaceful.

She slipped from his grip and off the side of the bed. In the dim light, he was a pale mass of muscle with a sheet pulled up to his hips and his hair covering most of his face.

Her heart swelled at the sight of him.

But it was more than the attraction she'd felt before. More than the lust and the fascination. Stronger even than the infatuation that new lovers always brought. This was a calm, gentle undercurrent that made her lips part in an involuntary smile.

They weren't meant to be together. No. They'd probably have to go their separate ways sooner than she'd hoped. But she would always—always—be missing a part of her heart. It was as simple as that. She loved this vampire who had saved her life. And she couldn't imagine ever loving anyone else as much.

But she wouldn't tell him. It would only make life harder for both of them.

She turned and went into that huge bathroom.

Later, Elena stood in front of the large mirror wearing the shirt Jonas had left in the floor the night before. It smelled too good not to. In his closet, she'd found a pair of gray drawstring cotton shorts. Yeah, she'd raided his closet, but

he'd just have to be okay with that. She needed something to wear into the big house if she was going to talk to Michael.

That's where she found her cell phone. She'd grabbed it and decided she would call Vanessa. She had the perfect plan to smooth this whole thing over. Jonas wouldn't be happy when he woke up, but he would understand in the end.

She brushed her hair and couldn't help but glance at the huge hickey on her neck where he'd bitten her. But there was no bite mark. That was still amazing. The circles under her eyes were a little dark, and her skin was a little paler than normal, but she looked healthy otherwise.

Elena crept around the bed, stopping only briefly to look at the wide expanse of his back and the tattoo that showed a little there. God, he was hot.

It only took her a few seconds to reach the front door. Outside, it was still light. She glanced at the clock over the entrance to the kitchen behind her. It was almost two in the afternoon. There were still a few hours to talk Tori and Michael into letting her stay a little longer, if that was a possibility at all.

She opened the door and stepped out onto the stone patio that led past the sparkling blue pool to the back door of the house. In the sunlight, it was a gorgeous stone mansion. There had to be a gardener because the plants and palms and shrubs were immaculate. She walked past the pool, stopping beside the waterfall to let it flow over her hand. It was warm—heated, she supposed.

Everything was so quiet. Before this little extravaganza, she never would have guessed that a home so serene could

be the place of monsters. It was almost impossible to imagine being that naïve now.

At least the biggest monsters were there to protect her.

The thought made her smile. If Jonas hadn't been on that run with her, she might very well be dead. She laughed. She'd always thought that the lack of running would have been what would kill her.

Elena flipped open the phone and dialed Vanessa's number.

She picked up on the second ring. "El?"

"Yeah. It's me."

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"The cops are looking for you. Everyone's freaked out. What happened?"

"I just went for a run and decided I couldn't handle it anymore."

"What?"

"The job, the pressure, Bruce ... everything."

Vanessa's voice changed, almost scolding. "You couldn't leave a note?"

"I didn't have paper with me at the park."

"At the park? We thought you were last at home."

"Uh." Michael did say something about them taking her car home, didn't he? "Yeah. I meant the park was where I decided. I just went straight home and left from there. I was in a hurry."

"You need to come home and talk to the police."

"I don't want to come back there. I'll let them know, but I'm not coming home."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not telling."

Vanessa was silent but there was a whisper of something else. Another voice.

"Is someone with you?"

"No," the woman snapped.

"Look, I've got to go. I'll call later."

"No. I need to talk to you some more." Vanessa's voice was demanding now.

She didn't know what was going on there at Vanessa's end, but she was up to something. Bruce was probably listening, if she had to guess. "Bye, Van."

Elena clicked the phone shut.

Something moved in the bushes at the end of the house. Elena stuffed the phone in her pocket and glanced over to see what looked like a shadow darting from one tree to the next.

Her heart squeezed with a panicked jolt.

She turned and darted toward the pool house.

Footsteps pounded the rocks behind her. Elena glanced over her shoulder. A mass of black fur was running at her. An Agent.

She screamed and dug in deeper, pounding toward the safety of the pool house and Jonas. No one was awake. They couldn't help anyway, out here in the sunlight. No one could—

"Tori!"

It was closer. She could hear it breathing almost in her ear.

She screamed again and reached for the doorknob. Her hand wrapped around it and—

It grabbed her around the waist and yanked her back so hard that her neck cracked. Another dose of panic shot through her. The thing clamped its hand over her mouth and dragged her to the shadowed edge of the tree line so fast that she didn't have time to fight back. Every breath she pulled in brought with it the scent of wet dog mixed with a hint of bad meat. Her stomach rolled, but she was too panicked to be nauseous.

At the trees, it uncovered her mouth for a second.

Something cold landed on her arm just before it let go of her. Elena yelled out, "Somebod—"

A loud, buzzing zap like an electrical short came and her body jolted. Her muscles contracted painfully, and she went down, curling onto her side as what felt like a seizure ripped through her body. She could hear herself babbling a sort of pitiful yell.

The buzzing stopped, and she tried to focus but she couldn't control anything, including her mind. The thing, now a dark-haired man, had something black in its hand. But all she could focus on was breathing and trying to keep him from touching her again. He was reaching down, but she couldn't move. Her body wouldn't work.

"Get ready for the ride, *sista*."

Something sharp jabbed into the crook of her elbow.

She managed to look down and see a syringe sticking out of her arm. The plunger was pressed down.

The world tilted a little more before the man pulled out the needle. He tossed her over his shoulder and bounded through the brush. Elena stared down at the man's feet and bare ass as he ran.

Everything was getting darker.

And then it was gone.

* * * *

Elena was awake, but only her ears were doing their job, and even that was shoddy. Everything seemed to be coming down a long tunnel with strange echoes and weird pitches. She managed to force her eyelids open. To her right, two seats held two men. Both white. They were in a car of some sort. And it was light outside. They were talking but she couldn't quite understand them. Their voices were jumbled, alien to her ears.

She looked straight ahead. She was probably lying in the back seat. She had to be, because right there in front of her was a roof. A perfectly nice roof with beige fabric on it.

No. It was sand.

She blinked and looked harder.

Maybe it wasn't sand.

"I gave her ketamine."

That explained the way that her body felt foreign, too heavy. And the sand roof.

"She'll be out for hours," the same man added. He sounded vaguely fam—

The memory slapped her straight in the face. The werewolf. Oh. Shit. She'd been kidnapped from Jonas's house.

Elena closed her eyes and tried to look sedated.

She'd been talking to Vanessa. Unless they checked her pockets, she'd stuffed the phone in her pocket before he grabbed her. Now, she just had to get away from them.

"Good, I've got to piss. We're only about thirty minutes away, but I can't wait. We'll stop at the next store."

"All right."

She had to focus. If they stopped, she had to try and get away. But they'd given her ketamine, the man said. If this worked like when her surgeon had given it to her, she'd be lucky to climb out of the car. But he said she should be out for hours. Maybe she shouldn't be awake yet, but she had no way of knowing how long she'd been out.

Hadn't Tori mentioned she healed faster because she was bound to Michael? If that was true, maybe all of Elena's body processes were faster now, too. If Jonas did the same thing to her last night, maybe that was why she was already awake.

A clicking sound filled the chamber. The car turned left, paused in what she presumed was a median, then went faster over a flat surface that had to be lanes of a road before they hit a dip and started up a slightly raised surface. She cracked her lids and could see the green and yellow canopy of a BP station through the window.

"You sure she's out?" the driver said. That voice was familiar. "I don't want Elena panicking as soon as she wakes up."

She almost gasped. It was Bruce.

"She's out. Go piss." The other man said. "Make sure you stuff that serum under the seat. It's the last of it. If you screw it up this time, we won't get our bonuses."

The driver's side door opened and shut. Then the passenger's side. The doors locked as the horn beeped once.

Dear God in heaven. Bruce was working with the Agents.

What was he thinking? They were trying to kill her. Or at the very least, steal her *and* the formula for evil takeover and world-domination type stuff. Had they convinced him it was for some other purpose?

Run, a voice inside her screamed.

Elena cracked her eyes again. No one was there.

She leaned up slightly, letting the world settle into one spot. The big man was in the store with his back to her. Bruce was nowhere to be seen.

She scrambled to get the serum from under Bruce's seat. There was something hard and plastic. She pulled it out to see a small black case and opened it for a quick peek. It was a little vial of the serum and four loaded syringes in a cooled compartment. She tucked it under her arm, unlocked and carefully opened the door. The alarm didn't go off.

She was unsteady, wobbly on her knees, but she managed to click the door shut and sneak to the side of the building. She palmed her pocket as she rounded the gas station. Her cell phone was in there.

Elena walked as fast and as casually as she could to the edge of a pine and palm thicket. She glanced over her

shoulder. They were on an interstate. One that she wasn't sure she knew, but it didn't matter. She had to keep moving.

Elena went as fast as she could, using the trees to support her unstable body. She needed to call someone.

In the thicket, she slowed enough to open her phone and started to press the—

Shit. She didn't know Jonas's number.

The police! That was it. Tori worked for the Collins Bay Police Department.

Elena dialed information and was patched through to the department.

"Collins Bay Police Department. Roberts speaking," said a soothing male voice on the other end.

"Um." Dammit. She didn't know Tori's last name either. "Tori, please." She could barely breathe to speak. Her voice sounded panicked. "It's an emergency."

Okay, so a last name would have helped.

"Yeah. Hang on."

The voice came back on. "Look, this is Danny Roberts. I'm a *friend* of Tori's—and Jonas's. You the doc?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know. They took—"

"Hang on." There was a brief silence. "I've got your number. Tori will call you right back. Now's not the time."

He hung up. He actually fucking hung up.

Elena kept walking until she stumbled into the edge of the trees. They bordered a large shopping center that centered around a Wal-Mart. The parking lot was full of cars. If she

went out there, she'd be exposed, but she had to make a run for it. She needed a vehicle. There was no other way. The police would find her and take her home, where the Agents would get her. If the Agents didn't find her first.

She had to get back to Collins.

Elena made her way into the parking lot and started with the oldest vehicles in the first row. If they didn't have keys, she could hotwire them. Most of them were locked, but in the third vehicle was unlocked. It was a '70s model Ford, brown and white with rust all over.

She glanced around and hopped in.

The keys were in the ignition, which made her smile. Surprised, she fired the engine up and tucked the case safely beside her in the seat. She backed up, then peeled out when she popped the clutch. It had been a while since she'd driven a stick.

Elena drove quickly to the shopping center's exit. She stopped, debating on directions, but decided to go right, back in the direction they'd come. With her foot firmly on the pedal, she floored it past the convenience store. She stole a glance at the store to see Bruce and the man scouring the parking lot. Surely the wolf would smell her. But she'd be gone by then.

She didn't know where she was, or how they'd gotten there, but this felt right. Like she had an internal homing beacon that was leading her toward Jonas.

Elena grabbed her phone and glanced at the clock. Four-fourteen. She'd been out for roughly two hours. That could put her anywhere. But the sun was above the horizon, so she

was heading west. If they were driving east, they'd been heading to Orlando. That would put this road as Highway 112. If she stayed on it and drove straight through, she could be in Collins Bay just after sunset.

God, she hoped they followed her back. Bruce and Jonas needed to meet—and then Jonas could rip his head off.

Her phone rang. The sound made her jump.

She shifted gears and glanced down to see all zeros on the phone, but she answered it anyway, trying to mask her voice. "Hello?"

"Elena?" It was Tori.

"Thank God!"

"Where are you?"

"On 112, I think. Close to Orlando." She shifted again.

"What happened?"

"I was fucking kidnapped."

"The guys are stuck until after dark. I looked all over the place, but the only thing I found was a footprint near the back fence. Did Agents get in?"

She couldn't believe that they were this lost. "Yeah. They kidnapped me. Out by the pool."

"Damn. They're good." Tori paused. "Okay, tell me about your surroundings. I'll come get you."

She glanced around, but the road was a repetitive collage of palms, pines, and unimpressive homes. Nothing stuck out.

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know." She shifted once more.

"Shit. Your phone is breaking up. Call back on my phone."
Tori called the numbers out twice.

"Dammit," Elena said just as the phone beeped. She looked at the screen, which read *Call Lost*.

She said the numbers Tori had given her aloud, sure that they'd stick. Then she put the phone beside her leg and glanced at the gas needle. She had a full tank, so she pressed the pedal a little harder. She was sure that the speed limit was fifty-five just like most of this highway, but she'd chance the ticket to get back faster.

* * * *

Elena dialed the number Tori had given her. It had taken a full hour to get phone service back. Either the cell company was in serious need of additional coverage or a tower was out.

The phone rang and rang until a luscious male voice, Jonas's voice, said, "Leave me a message."

Elena spoke after the beep and tried not to sound scared. "It's me. Bruce is working with the Agents. They kidnapped me. I'm on the 112, I think, just east of Collins Bay. In about forty-five minutes I'll be at the mall. I had to steal a truck."

She sucked in a breath. "I'm going to leave it there and go to your club since it's the only place I know how to find. And it's close. They may find me. They know where you live."

She sucked in another breath. "I love you."

The phone beeped, ending the message. She wasn't sure if it all made it on, but she pressed the red button and closed the phone.

* * * *

Jonas's brain kicked into gear at the sound of the annoying chime from his phone. Over and over, it sang into the dark. He groaned and tried to wake up. He'd been dreaming. No. He'd been having a nightmare. It was the first one he'd had in years, but he couldn't quite remember what it was about. Something to do with the Agents.

He stretched a little, reaching for Elena, for the comfort that her skin would bring. But nothing was there.

He opened his eyes and glanced around, listening to the silence between the rings. She wasn't here. He could hear that much. But he could feel something—wrong.

A tightening started in his chest, almost suffocating. It was removed, distance compared to what his other senses normally showed him. Different, but it was there. He'd never bonded himself to anyone before, but he'd felt the panic that others felt. If he was right, the fear was more hers than his.

He jerked upright in the bed and grabbed the phone. Her number showed on the screen, just like he'd programmed it after he'd swiped the thing the after the park.

Fuck.

He punched in the code and listened to the recording, waiting to hear her voice. He listened to Elena's shaky message and gripped his hand into a fist. If those fuckers put so much as a scratch on her, he was going to rip their arms right out of their friggin' sockets.

Jonas punched off the phone and jumped out of the bed. He had to get to the mall. They'd be right behind her. She

wouldn't be hard to follow because she smelled like him now, because they'd been together. But stronger since she was now bonded to him.

He grabbed a pair of black fatigues and the black wife-beater from the closet, the fighting clothes he always wore when he intended to make an impression. The shirt he'd picked specifically because of the nice quote on the front, his favorite line from *Paradise Lost*: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

Those words were true, every last one of them. He'd served before and gotten nothing from it. With Michael as the leader, it had been different. He was an equal on many issues, a friend. The fact that he was allowed to be who he was, without hiding, was a bonus he'd never anticipated. If he'd done this, what he'd done with Elena, under anyone else's power—they'd both be dead.

The words also had another meaning, one that had taken him longer to figure out. As a human, he'd been a loyal worshiper, a good boy. He'd obeyed all of those laws, the ones that normal people in the white houses with two-point-five kids, but it didn't change his fate. So, he might be going to hell for everything he'd done in this long life, but he was going to reign there too if he did. He wouldn't be a victim, no matter what happened.

Jonas stuffed his feet into his shitkickers, tied them, and started arming himself. The shoulder holster and pistols went on first, then the boot knife. It was the big combat knife Blane had given him for his birthday. The *fratello* had altered it with silver so that it did some real damage instead of just

stuck a hole in the dogs. He really didn't need all the weapons. He'd been aching to get his hands on one of those furry bastards ever since they jumped her in the park.

Now, someone was going to fucking pay. Big time.

He stormed to the front door, but didn't go outside. It was still too light outside. Jonas screamed out his frustration and grabbed the cell again, dialing the house phone.

"You all right out there, *fratello*?" It was Blane.

"No. I'm fucking pissed. Where the hell is Michael?"

"We're all in here waiting for dusk."

"Where's Tori?"

"She's waiting at the station for word from us. She's going to cover for us if things go wrong."

"Why the fuck didn't you wake me?"

"I called you like fifteen times. And I wasn't going to get my ass fried to tell you. Too close to sunset."

"Goddammit!"

"J." It was Michael now. "Just stay inside. A few more minutes and we'll meet in the back."

"How the hell did this happen? I can't believe those fuckers just took her."

"Tori said they took her from the back yard. I don't know why they didn't try to destroy us, too."

"She talked to Elena?"

"Yeah." Michael cleared his throat. "How did you know?"

"Instinct."

There was a long pause. "The *vincolo*."

"Yeah."

Michael sighed. "That only complicates things."

"Back off."

"For now."

Jonas looked at the phone, trying to decide whether to crush it or not. He settled for putting it back to his ear. "How the hell did they find her?"

"We still haven't figured that out exactly."

His chest vibrated with an enraged growl. "That bastard Bruce. I knew something was wrong with him."

"Who is he?"

"Her ex. A prick."

Jonas moved to the window and watched that last rays of sunlight dimming in the yard. "You might not want to go with me on this one."

"Why?"

"I can't promise to behave. Not over this."

"You are in my territory with my permission to do whatever is necessary to enforce order here. It is your job as *garante*. No one will question you."

"What about Luciano?"

Michael was quiet again. "We'll handle whatever we need to."

The light was suddenly gone. A storm cloud blocked the remaining sun and wind fluttered the trees. Jonas grunted. "It's dark."

He clicked the phone shut and threw open the door.

The guys were already beside the pool, watching him. Blane pulled down those damned shades he liked to wear and watching him over the top.

Gregory flicked open his lighter, stopping to let out a long whistle. "Man, what the hell?"

"What?" He didn't have time for games and pointed toward the garage. "Let's go."

"Stop." Michael scratched his temple. "Have you—What happened?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Michael darted in front of him, not standing in his way. "Have you looked in a mirror?"

That stopped him. "Huh?"

"You're half changed." Gregory blew out a long puff of smoke. "You *are* Jonas, right?"

"Yeah." Jonas glanced to his shoulder. The tattoo was there. The full one. And his skin was a little paler. His hair was still that long ash white because he'd never cut it. "My face?"

Michael opened the fence gate and motioned him through. "Come on. We'll figure it out on the way."

* * * *

Elena weaved the old truck between traffic, looking in the storm-clouded distance for the sign to the mall she'd seen when they were here for Vanessa's bachelorette party. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She'd been so naïve about so many things. How could she have ever trusted Bruce? He'd been an ass up front. Still, she'd stuck around. Had it been loneliness that kept her with him? She didn't think so. She'd never needed a man around before, not in that way. It didn't make sense now.

A tall sign with double white poles loomed next to the road. The Collins Bay Galleria was just ahead on the right. She weaved through the traffic to the turning lane, then drove to the far side of the building. Parking next to the road, she grabbed her phone and the case, then took a few minutes to wipe her prints from the door, seat, radio, shifter, and steering wheel with edge of her shirt. It probably wouldn't work, but she didn't need a theft charge on top of all the other problems she had right now.

Elena strode across the grass that bordered the road, then darted across the crosswalk that toward the park. If she remembered correctly, Jonas's club was just on the other side of that city park. The trees and palms swayed with the cool wind of the coming storm. It would be a shortcut, and the trees might give her a little cover in case the agents found her first.

A car honked and tires squealed behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder. They ran a car off the road as they steered into the mall's parking lot, driving straight toward the truck. Bruce was driving the same car with the Agent. How could they have found her so fast?

She darted up the sidewalk and inside the fence that surrounded the park. With any luck, she could lose them in the trees.

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Chapter Fourteen

Jonas floored the Explorer's gas pedal, darted across three lanes of traffic and turned on the red light to get onto State Street. They were just minutes from the mall, and he could feel her pulling him like a gravitational force. In fact, he could almost smell her, and it was a little distracting. His brain couldn't decide between full on rage and lust.

"Dude, slow down." Blane was gripping the oh-shit handle in the SUV. "If we all crash on the way—"

"Shut up, Blane," Gregory snapped from the back. "Don't be a puss."

"Well, he drives like Luciano." Blane cracked the window.

Jonas had the strangest feeling that he was making him carsick. "I'm not him right now. Damn. How many times do I have to say that?"

"You have to admit the difference." Michael was watching him in the rear view.

Jonas lifted his chin once, acknowledging it. He was right. It was a perfect blend of the two beings, him and Luciano. The tats were there in full force, but his skin was midway between the two, and only the irises and pupils of his eyes were black. It was easy not to notice in low light.

"There!" Blane pointed at a couple of men running across the road into the park. Bruce was at the lead.

Jonas steered into the lot behind the men, but they were already gone. He slammed on the brakes, throwing Blane

forward toward the dash, and threw the thing into park in the middle of the lot. He jumped out and left it running.

"Don't go alone," Michael said from behind him.

Jonas took off on foot, chasing the scent of the wolves. He could hear the guys behind him, shutting off the vehicle and piling out. They'd catch up.

He cut onto the running path, moving toward where that ache in his chest said to go. Rain started to fall through the canopy of leaves overhead and the wind blew stronger, muffling the sound of the Agents and Elena's footsteps. At least it would make it hard for them to follow her scent with all the wind.

He glanced around once, checking for humans before he dug in and let his natural speed take over, propelling him down the winding, darkened track.

* * * *

Elena ran at a steady pace, her feet slapping the paved walking track while she held the little black case of serum tucked safely under her arm. If she was right, the warehouse was just off to the right of the half-mile point. She could see the lights from the parking area almost directly across from there. That put her about halfway there.

A howl erupted from the thicket somewhere behind her.

A jolt of fear ran through her. She used that to drive her onward, running just off the side of the path where her footfalls were quieted by the patchy grass that bordered the tree line that separated the track from the open meadow that lay just in front of the soccer fields.

Another howl came ahead of her. It was ear-piercing loud and made her skin ripple with chills. Then the rain started.

Elena darted into the trees and slowed. She couldn't hear anything but the thunder of feet running up the path behind her and rain battering the leaves over her head. She was out of time and the club was too far for her to make it before the Agent ahead of her boxed her in.

Shit, shit, shit. What to do?

She glanced around and saw a small bridge on the path ahead. Beneath it flowed a murky creek. She could hide under there and maybe stay in the water. But there were probably snakes. Maybe alligators. God only knew what kind of insects and toxins.

She looked left. Across the meadow, bordering the soccer fields was a small beige painted block building with two entrances. It had to be bathrooms. They'd probably see her going toward it, but there was a chance they wouldn't notice. Plus, it offered more protection than the open.

Elena took a deep breath and stood, running flat out across the twenty-five or so yards of open grass. She heard a howl and then another as she jerked the door open and ran inside. Her heart pounded in her ears and the blood gushed through them so fast that she couldn't hear anything else. Her hands were shaking, but she had to keep moving. Standing with her back to the door would definitely not keep them out.

There had to be something for a weapon. Anything.

Elena kicked open stall doors.

Nothing.

Behind the door was a push broom. It was an industrial type with a heavy metal handle. She grabbed it and twisted it out of the broom head, then went to the middle stall. She didn't close the door. That would be too obvious. She pushed it almost shut, which seemed to be the natural resting position for the doors. Then she climbed up on the toilet seat and crouched with the broom handle in her hands like a staff. It wasn't much, but she might manage to stab one of them before they grabbed her.

Maybe, if she were lucky, she'd they'd just kill her and get it over with.

Her heart sank at the alternative. She wasn't going to be one of them, not if it meant that she and Jonas would become enemies. It would be worse than dying. She'd stay alive if she could, but that probably wouldn't happen. If she had their speed and abilities, she might—

That was it! Elena glanced down at the case again. She could heal quickly, like they did, if she used the serum. With enough, she might even fight off the wolf virus, assuming that was what caused their shifting abilities.

Elena opened the case and pulled out two syringes. One at a time, she found the vein in the bend of her arm and shot up the stuff. It was a double dose for her weight, but she'd heal like Superman at this rate. She'd probably be a freak, but it was better than dying or becoming a werewolf.

The searing started up her arm. She screamed and tried to stay standing. It wasn't like the tiny dose she'd taken during testing. This was like liquid fire, what she'd imagined Drano might feel like in the veins.

* * * *

Another howl ripped through the park and Jonas saw the shadowed hulks diving between the trees. Bruce was still in human form, but he could smell him. His money was on the fact that Bruce was the leader of this little squad.

Something light and small darted across the clearing just ahead and to the left. He focused in to see through the rain, falling heavier now. It was Elena.

Shit.

Jonas went to the trees, darting between them as he tried to track the Agents. The guys were close too, just behind him on the path.

Elena ducked into a building.

A wolf cut through the path toward the building. Bruce passed it, running faster than any Agent he'd seen before.

Jonas started out of the tree line, running toward the two as he pulled a 9mm from his shoulder holster.

Something hit him hard in the back, launching him forward onto the grass. His face buried up in the sand and the pistol spilled out of his hand. He tumbled across the muddy earth with a massive brown wolf that growled and snapped at his neck.

Bruce and the other one stopped, but then continued toward the building. They'd noticed Elena and were going after her, but Jonas was committed, holding the thing's face away from his own by inches. It was hard to grip the thing by its wet fur.

The Agent's dog breath blew with each snort. Its claws dug into his shoulders. "God, you stink," Jonas said.

It growled at him, then snapped wildly.

There was another howl on the path. Someone emptied a pistol. The guys were probably busy, too.

The thing hesitated, glancing behind before it went for his throat again. Jonas tried to buck the thing off him, but its claws ripped into his skin further with each attempt.

He took a breath and tried to let Luciano out, but nothing happened.

Dammit. What had he done? Was bonding to Elena the end of his dual personas?

Elena screamed.

That untamed rage erupted from his center the way it always did, shaking his bones. But he didn't really change. It was the same was with Elena. His skin was white and Luciano was there, but so was he. They were together. United.

A cold, wicked laugh rolled from his mouth.

The wolf cocked its head, watching him with its snarl fading.

"That's right, pup." Luciano's dark voice had a humorous ring to it. "You fucked with the wrong guy tonight."

His hands gripped the thing's head at the ears and twisted so hard and fast that he damn near twisted its head off. It fell limp.

Jonas shoved the furry corpse to the ground, then grabbed up the pistol and popped a shot in the thing's head and heart.

* * * *

Elena heard the door to the building creak open. She raised the metal rod into a good stabbing position, careful not to keep it below the top of the stall, and waited. The wolf would find her. She'd heard them outside the door during the minutes it took her to recover from the injection, but they never came inside.

"Elena. Honey, come on out." It was Bruce and he was using that sweet tone he always did to manipulate her. It had always worked, too.

Not now.

There was no tug at her heart, no overwhelming guilt at not adhering to his order, and no uncontrollable urge to run into his arms. Weird.

"I know you're in here. I won't hurt you."

She gripped the pole tight and stayed put. There wasn't one good reason to leave her hiding spot. Gunshot were going off outside. If she was lucky, Jonas was out there, fighting to get to her. The thought made her smile.

His voice was angrier this time. "Dammit, El. Get out here." His anger rolled through the room like an acidic fog. "Don't make me drag you out of that damned stall. I don't *want* to hurt you."

But he would. That unspoken warning, she didn't miss. She was not going to be threatened. He could do it or not, but he wasn't going to talk down to her. Not after all the shit she'd put up with from him over the years. "Try it."

He growled. "Get her out of there."

A furred hand pushed the door open to her stall. She was startled by the lack of sound and the speed at which they'd

moved, but she didn't yell. She didn't wait to see the face either before she thrust the pole forward with all her strength.

It connected just as she saw the wolf standing upright through the open stall door. The rod sank into the thing's upper chest a few inches. Blood spurted out and the wolf yelped, falling backwards onto the little white tiles. Elena kicked the door shut, grabbed the tank lid off the back of the toilet she was standing on and waited for the next opener.

She heard the pole bounce on the tiles, freed from its victim. The door started open again, and she raised the porcelain lid over her head. As the door opened, she swung at head height.

A hand—a human hand—caught the lid.

Bruce tossed the lid onto the floor behind him. He grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the stall. "I told you to stop!"

She slid across the tiles and bounced off the opposite walls. Her shoulder hit the wall first and a burst of pain flared inside her skin.

"Why do you want to do this the hard way? You want to make me hurt you?" Bruce stalked toward her while she nursed the shoulder. Water dripping off his drenched clothes, mixing with the blood on the dirty white tiles.

He stopped and glared at her, sniffing the air. Then his face turned red, his eyes widened. "You've been with that—thing."

He didn't wait for an answer. His hand reached down and grabbed her hair. "After all the money I sent your way and all the time I spent making those morons see how brilliant you

were." He dragged her toward the door. "You backstabbing little cunt. I thought there might be a place for you with us."

Elena held onto his wrist, trying to keep him from pulling the hair right out of her head when he dragged her toward the door. There was nothing left to do but scream and hope someone heard her. She did that, screaming as loud as she could while sinking her nails into Bruce's wrist.

"You *are* going to be with me." He grunted and pulled her, hissing words at her as he dragged over the threshold of the building, into the pouring rain. "And you can spend the next decade making amends for fucking that leech."

She kicked, trying to keep up with him as Bruce dragged her across the path. The gravel dug into her back, scratching her wet skin.

A loud, lion like roar ripped through the air. Her pulse sped up and that natural flight response kicked in at the sound. Bruce stopped. Elena craned her head toward it.

It was Jonas—and Luciano—in one person, crouched into a fighting stance. The tattoos and hair were the same, but the eyes and skin were a blend, like he was stuck somewhere between the two personalities. Still, he was—fascinating. Before, he'd been more attractive than most models. Now, he was surreal and the sight of him made her heart feel like it would explode.

"*Dayum*," someone said, breaking her eyes away from him. Behind him was a huge guy with dark hair that boasted bright green tips. The vampire took a step back from Jonas, eyeing him carefully.

"Let go of her. Now," Jonas said. The voice was all that blend of both, predator and man, like she'd heard last night with Luciano, but Jonas's soft edge was gone. The sound made her skin tingle.

Bruce dragged her toward him. Elena screamed again at the fresh pain in her scalp, but the sound was covered by a clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning that streaked from the sky.

"What are you, vampire?" He sniffed loudly, as if there was no reason to feel the slightest intimidation by Jonas. "You're not the same as them."

Luciano's dark laugh echoed off the building.

Something in the air changed, and it was suddenly heavy. Electricity rolled over Elena's skin and drew her attention to its sheer creepiness.

Bruce dropped her. She rolled quickly onto her stomach and saw him running toward where Jonas had been standing. Feet pounded against the ground so hard and fast that she almost couldn't hear the angry shouts and howls.

There was a flurry of motion she couldn't make out. They were moving too fast and it was raining too hard. When the lightning flashed, she saw them in strange flashes that let her know that Jonas and Bruce were fighting.

Suddenly Jonas was standing with a giant wolf that had to be Bruce, in his hands. He let out a defiant laugh. "Let me know when you are ready to stop this game."

There was another growl. The wolf slammed into the other side of the restroom building. A shower of blocks and cement

fell to the ground on top of the thing. Jonas stalked toward it, laughing.

Elena jumped to her feet, shaken from her fascination with the fight. She glanced around for somewhere to hide, then started toward Michael and the other vampires. They were standing, watching the two creatures fight behind her with blank looks on their faces.

Something caught her around the waist from behind. Elena screamed and saw Michael's eyes cut to her. She looked over her shoulder to see who'd grabbed her. The other wolf, the one she'd stabbed, was behind her, dragging her toward the tree line.

* * * *

Jonas glanced up at the sound of Elena's scream. Another wolf had her, dragging her toward the trees. But Michael and Blane were right behind them. They'd have to stop him. He wanted to finish Bruce himself—after a little playtime.

Bruce slammed into him, knocking him to the ground so hard that it shook the earth beneath them. He dodged a bite and kicked that furry asshole off him. The thing came at him again. This time, Jonas sidestepped it enough to miss the front claw extended toward him.

As it passed, he stomped down on the back leg, snapping it the bone in half. The wolf let out a yelp and swiped back, catching Jonas's leg. It ripped through his black fatigues, slicing deep into his leg.

Jonas met it as it spun around, landing a hard fist in the side of its head. The wolf fell sideways, dazed.

He went toward it but stumbled. His leg didn't work right. He looked down to see blood pouring out of a huge gash on his leg. He wobbled toward it and smirked, "Get up. I'm not done with you yet."

Bruce leapt at him but this time. There was no warning before the movement. He just leapt straight off the ground without so much as a glance. Jonas wasn't quite fast enough. The wolf snapped and caught his neck. It didn't hold, but blood gushed from the wound. He could feel it flowing down his chest, soaking his shirt.

Shit. He had to finish this and tend the wound. It probably wouldn't heal quickly.

He felt his body moving, barely thinking before the action happened, the way he always did when he used his full speed. He knocked the wolf back with a swift punch, swept down to his ankle and came up with a knife fast enough to catch the wolf on his return leap. The knife sank to the hilt. Bruce let out a loud yelp that turned to a scream as Jonas ripped the knife up to the thing's sternum, hitting bone. He sank it deep so he could use it like a handle, and drove the wolf to the ground. In front of him.

It spit its toxic blood from its mouth and whimpered. The eyes rolled up in its head and the fur started turning to skin.

But it wasn't over. Not even close.

That damned thing had taken Elena and threatened the first peace he'd had in years. It had to pay. Dying wasn't enough.

* * * *

Elena kicked as the wolf bounded into the trees with her in its arms.

Michael was close. Almost on them. "Shoot it, Blane."

"I can't get a clear shot!"

The wolf sped up, darting between trees so fast that her eyes wouldn't focus. Her stomach started to feel queasy.

It darted behind a tree and shifted her so fast that she only knew that she was suddenly facing its snarling face.

"They'll torture me if I don't get you back to Orlando." The thing's voice was almost a growl. "You're not staying here—either way."

Then its mouth full of jagged teeth opened and clamped down on her shoulder.

Elena let out a pained shriek. It was nothing like Jonas's bite. The teeth ground into her skin with a dull rip, then pulled out to leave the venom to work in her system as it threw her over its shoulder.

The fire in her arm started to grow. It was like alcohol and salt poured into all the holes that its teeth left. She screamed and clawed at the wound, trying to pull out the pain. Then it hit her bloodstream and streaked down her arm and up her neck, scorching everything inside her as it went.

Shots fired behind them, and the wolf jerked under her. Elena fell to the ground, curling onto her side as the acid in her veins went up her face. She heard herself screaming now, but the sound was removed. She was deeper than the pain, somewhere deep inside it where she could

When someone approached, she only noticed long enough to see Blane throw the wolf into a tree, cracking it in two. More shots sounded somewhere.

Then Michael had her. He grabbed her up from the ground. She couldn't make out everything he was saying, but she did hear, "She's bit."

* * * *

Jonas had the wolf on the ground. He'd diced the thing's abdomen before it could fight back. The blood flowed in streams with the rain and made large dark puddles around them. He stabbed it in the heart. The knife's silver would be like poking a white-hot iron into his chest. The wolf howled in pain, grabbing at the knife.

"You're not going to go fast." Jonas pulled out his 9 mm and popped the wolf in the lungs a few times. The silver would travel slowly. Good. He'd wanted it to suffer.

"Fuck. You," the wolf screeched.

Luciano stood and stumbled back. When he caught himself, the world kept moving. He tried to stand straight, to lock his legs, but they wobbled.

"Jonas?" Blane was looking at him weirdly. He grabbed Jonas's arm. "Sit down. Now."

"Get your goddamn hands off me." He jerked away and almost fell over. *Shit*. He'd lost too much blood. They'd have to grab a bite on the way home.

Michael appeared. Elena was stretched over his arms. His face was somber and she was crying, clawing at her neck.

She was bleeding in places other than she scratches. Even through the rain and blood, he could see that it was deep.

He looked back to Michael's face, his lips drawn tight.

"It got her, J."

Oh. God, no. Not her, too. Jonas's legs shook and fell to his knees. A heavy hole opened in his chest. This was it. She was going to be like Elizabeth. He'd killed her, too.

"Get him in here," Michael said, striding through the rain toward the bathroom with Elena crying louder.

"Come on." Blane dragged him up to his feet, then walked him into the building.

Blane propped him up against the wall where he could see Michael laying her onto the dirty white tiles. The *padrone* held her chin and looked down at her, rain falling from his soaked hair onto her face. "Elena, we've got to change you. If we can. I'm sorry, but you don't have a choice. The Council won't allow anything else."

"I. Want. To," she said through jagged breaths that echoed in the cold room.

Michael motioned Jonas over. He crawled to her other side and saw her look up at him, her mouth turning up at the corners. It only made the hole in his chest bigger. He was her *compagno*. He was supposed to protect her, to know when she was in that kind of danger. He shouldn't have let the rage take over. "I'm sorry. I should have made sure that you were safe."

Elena grabbed his hand, but her grip was weak.

"Change her, Jonas." Michael's voice was flat. "You don't have much time. She's going to take you down with her."

"He's lost too much blood," Blane said from behind him. Jonas felt the full weakness of his body. It was dead weight. Cold again.

Michael pulled his head to one side, but Jonas kept his eyes on Elena. "Do you want me to do it alone?"

He cut his eyes to the *padrone*. That possessiveness he'd heard Michael talk about blew up inside him. "No. Don't touch her."

"It's going to take two of us either way." Michael reached up and came back with a knife that Blane usually used. "We've got to bleed her out."

Jonas reached out to stop him, but Michael was too fast. He sliced her neck quick, just above the wound. Blood poured out, filling the block building with her sweet scent. It was mixed now with that putrid Agent smell. The venom was advancing fast.

Jonas growled and reached for her head. He pulled her sobbing, almost unconscious face toward him.

Michael stopped him. "If you drain her, you'll be too weak to finish it. You're too weak now."

Jonas stopped. He didn't have the blood to change her; he'd lost too much. He'd have to drain her and let the *padrone* turn her.

She'd be his then.

No, that beast roared inside him, but he couldn't think of a solution. His mind was cloudy more and more by the minute. She really was taking him into death.

"Jonas, you don't have the blood to do it." Michael was urgent now. "Let me drain her. You take from my wrist while I do it. Then you can feed her. She'll still be yours."

Jonas looked up at him. No straight male, especially Michael, wanted another man drinking from him. And he didn't want to drink from the *padrone*.

"She's fading." He held his wrist out to Jonas and grabbed Elena's head with the other hand. "And I owe it to you."

Michael had refused to allow him to see Elizabeth, even after they'd broken off the affair. The night the Agents turned her, it was his angry words that had driven her out into the night. Still, he'd been the one to blame Jonas for her death.

Michael growled, "Just do it already."

"All right." Jonas grabbed Michael's wrist and waited for him to start. That would make it easier.

Jonas watched as his head bent and his teeth sunk into her wrist, away from the venom. He fought back at every part of his soul that wanted to rip the *padrone* into shreds. The sounds of him drinking her down were torture. And the moans coming from her lips were almost unbearable. He knew what Michael could do with his bite. He had a way, a gift, for easing the pain by making it the most sensual experience you could imagine. This must have been how Michael felt about the affair with Elizabeth.

Jonas growled and bit hard into Michael's wrist.

It had been centuries since he'd tasted Michael. So long that he'd forgotten how smooth and powerful the *fratello's* blood was. Now, it was all coming back to him. The night that he'd stumbled onto the *vampiro* in that alley in Rome where

he was draining that prostitute. Jonas, a soldier through and through, had picked the fight. Michael had only answered it.

He toyed with him until Jonas was bloodied and crawling over the dirty ground toward him, still trying to fight. He didn't know how to quit, even with both his legs broken. That had been the deciding factor; Michael had said later that his sheer stubbornness had saved him from death. It was decades later before he found out that the stubborn will that Michael was so fond of was the mark of his unknown father, a Viking, as was Luciano and—

"Jonas. Stop!" Blane's voice pulled him back to the cold bathroom.

He sealed the wound and pulled his mouth away. He put his hand to the wound on his neck, where the Agent had bit him, and it was gone. That was one of the benefits of having the power that Michael did. He could taste it in the blood that remained on his lips when he licked them and feel it pulsing through him. One day, his would be as strong. He wondered, only for a moment, if his would be as strong to her.

Michael broke away from Elena, too. He laid her carefully on the tile again and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Let her heart stop, then feed her. We've got to get out of here."

Michael handed him the knife. He was breathing hard even as he turned to Jonas. His skin was flushed, human looking. "Is her blood always so strong? I feel drugged."

"Not like that. She tastes good, but ... not like that." Jonas leaned close to her looking at her pale face and listening to

the slowing beat in her chest as more blood leaked onto the tiles from her neck.

Blane was lifting her legs, trying to make the blood drain faster.

Michael laughed and sounded downright giddy. "Oh, I think you'd have noticed this." He looked down at his arms. His face lit up. "I feel stronger."

A twinge of jealousy struck him, but he didn't have time to react. Her heart stuttered twice, then stopped.

"Do it now."

Jonas cut into his wrist. He pulled Elena's mouth open and pushed the cut to her mouth. The blood flowed freely at first, moving to a slow trickle as his body healed the wound. But it was enough. Her mouth was full, overflowing, and the crimson liquid trickled down her cheek in a slow stream.

She didn't move.

"Come on. Drink it." Jonas gripped her shoulder over the bite.

"It takes a second for it to soak in and reanimate her." Michael moved back, getting to his feet. "But when it does, she'll be on you. Fast."

"We need a human," Blane said.

Michael laughed. "Her first meal doesn't need to be a murder."

Someone pushed the door open. Blane bolted toward it, slamming it shut.

"Guys," Tori said. "It's me. Open up."

Blane laughed. "Here's the human."

Michael growled, then said, "Let her in."

She walked inside and stopped still behind Jonas. He knew he was staring down at them. He looked up to see her mouth hanging open, then back down to Elena. She still wasn't moving.

"What the hell happened?" Tori didn't walk closer. "Is she dead?"

"For the moment," Michael said, walking toward her. "You shouldn't be in here right now."

"I wanna watch." She folded her arms over her chest. "You owe me. I just covered for you when there were calls coming in about gunshots in the park."

"What did you say?"

"That I'd check it out, but I think I convinced them it was thunder."

Jonas owed her for that one. He'd have to remember to do something nice for her when this was all over with.

Elena's throat moved. Just a little, but he was sure she swallowed. Then she swallowed one full gulp that drained her mouth. Then another. Her lungs sucked in a breath.

"Here we go." Blane shifted.

Michael move behind Jonas, probably guarding Tori.

The *fratello* had been right. Elena was up and on top of him before he had time to react. He barely managed to throw his arm up between their chests to hold her back.

Jonas stared up at the face of his love. Only now, she was a pale, snarling beast that looked remarkably like Luciano. She was just as vicious.

Her eyes rolled up toward Tori.

"Oh, fuck," Blane muttered.

"Stop her, Jonas, or I will." Michael's voice was flat, serious.

"Elena," Jonas said, but she kept snarling, looking at Tori. Her body moved into more of a crouch. "Elena. Look at me."

She didn't move, and she still didn't look at him.

He threw his free arm in front of her face, his wrist inches from her mouth.

Elena sniffed once, then latched onto him, chomping down on his skin. Jonas yelled out and heard Tori gasp from a distance. There was no skill to the bite, no pleasure, just the razor-sharp new fangs digging into bone and muscle as she suckled at his wrist

She leaning back to sit on his abdomen, cradling her new food.

"Dammit," Jonas grumbled as she started to writhe on top of him, reveling in her first drink. He remembered how that felt, that first taste of what would be the best meal of her life. His had ended too quickly, a frail human woman whom Michael had picked for him.

Elena's drinking slowed.

Jonas watched her skin, slowly taking on that ashen olive tint that his had now, since he'd merged with Luciano. Something streaked under her skin, around her neck and on top of where the wound had been. It kept growing and darkening until—

"Holy shit," Blane said behind them.

It was Luciano's tattoo. Only this one was thinner and streaked down under her shirt. Jonas tugged at the arm.

She let him pull it away and her eyes popped open. They were streaked with swirls of black now, giving them a marble look.

Shit.

"Uh ... does that always happen?" Tori whispered behind him.

"No," Michael answered.

"Elena?" Jonas stared up at her, wondering if she'd attack him again.

She looked down at him. Her eyes were haunting, dead.

His chest ached. They'd turned her into a monster.

Elena's lips parted into a wicked grin and she slammed into Jonas, crushing his lips with hers. She was very much the old Elena.

"We need to go," Michael said quietly. "Before the pain kicks in."

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Chapter Fifteen

Elena looked up at Michael, then back down to Jonas. He looked different now. More attractive and—sharper, somehow. It was almost like all the world was suddenly in high definition. The way his eyelashes moved when he blinked, and how his tattoo almost seemed to hover above his skin and shiver whenever she took a breath.

"Elena. We need to go."

She nodded and slid off him, trying not to be too caught up again in how his voice sounded, the musical tone of it and how the words rolled around in her head. Her legs felt unsteady, so she stayed on the floor as Jonas popped up onto his feet. He reached for her hand and she took it, letting him pull her up.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so." Oh. Her voice was different, too. It was softer, sexier. She smiled again. This was going to be fun. And she'd heal now like they did, even without the serum.

"Oh. Let me grab something." She walked to the stall she'd been in and grabbed the case with the serum from the toilet tank. "Can't leave this here."

"What is it?"

"Immuno-X. Bruce had it."

Michael narrowed his eyes at her. "Did you take some of that?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Before they attacked me. Why?"

"Your blood was..." He seemed lost for a moment. "Like a drug. I feel like I could take on the world."

Jonas wrapped an arm around her waist. "Let's go."

* * * *

Jonas heard Elena's breathing catch as Blane turned the SUV left onto the driveway that lead up to the estate. He cut his eyes to where she sat between him and Michael in the back seat. Her eyes were closed as if she was asleep, but he knew she wasn't.

Would she still look like this after the change? She was even more beautiful than before, but he'd save the compliments until after it was done. If she was still talking to him by then. The pain she was about to endure would decide their relationship. She would either be grateful for the change, which he sincerely doubted, or she'd hate him for not protecting her and putting her through this. He had, after all, been charged with guarding her and ensuring she never found out about them.

He'd failed. Miserably. Now she would pay for it.

Michael reached across and laid a hand on her arm, but she didn't stir. He looked up to meet Jonas's eyes. "Blane, drive faster."

Blane floored it up the driveway toward the house.

"Can you read her thoughts?" Michael put his hand to her forehead. "She's losing temperature fast."

Jonas looked at him. If she was losing it fast, they were closer than any of them had expected to the change. It

shouldn't happen for at least another half-hour, when her organs started to shut down and go through the metamorphosis that would make her fully one of them.

He shook his head and tried to focus. He let the walls that he'd put up to give her privacy fall away and concentrated on—

A wave of confusion and pain hit him. Jonas gasped and threw the walls back up. "It's happening."

He looked around the seat. The house was coming into view. Just a few more—

Elena let out an earsplitting scream and jolted into a full-bodied convulsion. Jonas grabbed her arm on his side. Michael grabbed the other. If they could just keep her from hurting herself, they could get her into the house, and Jonas could make her safe.

"Get as close to the pool house as you can. We'll have a few seconds to get her inside." Michael was leaning forward, getting ready to bail out.

Blane drove through the yard and around to the side of the house. Elena was still shaking and moaning when they piled out. Jonas pulled her out, threw her over his shoulder, and carried her into the house.

Michael came in behind him. "You got this?"

"Yeah."

"I'll keep my phone with me." Michael closed the door and was gone.

Jonas carried Elena's shaking body to his bed and laid her on it carefully. He stripped the bloodied clothes off her body, then grabbed an empty trash can from the corner. Most

people were sickened in the early stages of the change, when their bodies expelled the last of their human meals.

Her body started to shake harder.

He pulled off his own shoes, pants, and torn shirt, then slid into the bed beside her. Elena's body stilled beside him. He remembered that feeling. How Michael's closeness to him in those early days had eased the pain and calmed every cell in his body, as if the new blood recognized its owner through the magic that animated them. They'd never been this close in the early days, and he hoped that it would help her even more.

He pushed her hair back out of her face. Those dark eyes opened and looked up at him. "Elena?"

She nodded, then groaned and rolled onto her side, burying his face in his chest. "Is this normal?"

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

* * * *

"Its—" Another round of shaking started, and Elena stuttered through it. "O-o-o-k-kay."

"It will get worse. I'm here with you."

She could hear his voice. It echoed over the distance that the pain had pulled her, down into a dark hole punctuated by flashes of red, intense agony in her bones.

"It's going to get worse?"

Her body jerked hard, bending her almost in half.

Jonas sighed. "I wish we hadn't done this now."

"I-I-I—" Elena swallowed hard. She was cold. So cold that her teeth were starting to chatter. But she had to tell him. He couldn't feel guilty about this. It was what she wanted. Not to be one of those Agents. "N-n-not w-w-wolf."

She heard the sound of his lips parting into a smile, that little smack of skin. She imagined those pointed teeth glistening. The thought actually comforted her.

"We couldn't let you be one of them. I don't think I could handle having a furry woman."

A dull ache started in her feet and moved slowly up her body. Her stomach started to flip and twist as if her body had just had a sudden and fully formed case of the food poisoning. Elena's heart started to ache, and her veins were burning. She could hear herself speaking all the words forming in her mind, but there was a disconnection, as if someone else were speaking through her. "Make it stop. Oh. God. Help me."

He held her tight.

The burning in her veins reached her heart and it felt like something exploded in her chest. It thundered, pounding faster than she'd ever felt it. The pain in her bones grew brighter, worsening beyond anything she'd experienced. And someone was with her, inside her mind. A dark presence was there that she couldn't see or hear, only sense and wonder if it was waiting to take her at her weakest moment.

* * * *

Jonas glanced at the clock. It was just after midnight and Elena was calm for the first time in hours, her skin that dead

cool that his was when he was hungry. Since she seemed to be sleeping, he let the walls down again that had been in place to block him from her pain and reached out toward her mind.

The weight of her presence pushed down at him. No, it was someone else. But Elena was there too, weary from a long fight.

He closed his eyes to focus harder. *Elena?*

Her consciousness stirred toward him, and then something happened. The weight became another entity that seemed to envelop her. They seemed to battle back and forth for a moment, and then there was only one. The two merged under a mix of confusion, hunger, and a lust that burned stronger than anything he'd ever felt in any mind but a—succubus.

Jonas opened his eyes and looked down at Elena's physical body. Her skin was smooth as porcelain, and her features were even more perfect than they had been before. Those dark eyes were open, staring at him with a direct predatory gaze. "Elena?"

Her hand slid up his chest. She let out a low purr.

Inside his mind, that hunger for her body grew and threatened to overtake him. He slammed his protective barriers back into place. That emotion wasn't his. No, this was something else. He'd felt it before when Michael hunted.

Jonas smiled.

Elena had inherited Michael's ability through that genetic roll of the dice that happened each time one of them was changed. God help them all.

He pushed back at it, trying to hold back the need her new power was drawing out of him. "Elena. Get control of this."

She wrapped her leg over his hip, planting his body right between her legs. Her mouth went toward his neck.

Jonas pulled back his chin and tried to hold her still.
"Elena!"

"But I'm hungry," she crooned, then kissed the corner of his mouth. Her chest pressed against his, reminding him just how full and round her breasts were.

Jonas kept his hands still, stopped them from roaming down her back and tried not to smell that floral scent that started to come off her skin. He refused to breathe. He'd fed her a little at the park, but not enough to make him weak. If he lost himself in her sensuality, he'd be her first victim. He couldn't let that happen.

The responsible thing would be to go feed, but that would leave her alone with one of the guys. Tori was too weak to fend her off, but her power would work best on the *fratello*.

"I want you," she said in a whispered voice. Elena slid her leg up and down his, moving her body against his growing erection. She snapped toward his neck.

Jonas managed to move fast enough to keep her teeth from sinking in. He leapt off the bed and stood at the edge, watching her crawl on all fours toward him. Her breasts moved as she went, keeping the same sway as her hips. Her eyes were dark, sultry and caught him, drawing him toward her like some helpless human.

This wasn't all Elena. As Luciano was his fighter side, this woman was Elena's dark side.

She stopped just in front of his zipper and smiled that carnal smile. Her eyes glanced at it, then up to him. "Don't you want me anymore?"

She rose up onto her knees, trailing a hand up her thigh to her navel, then up the soft plane of her belly to the cleft of her breasts. "Am I not pretty enough now?"

"There's nothing wrong with the way you look, Elena." Even knowing what she was., she was irresistible.

Her hands went to his chest, then slid up to his shoulders. "I need you." The words rolled down his spine with a new attempt at pushing down the walls of his resistance.

This time, it worked.

Jonas wrapped his arms around her and jerked her to him. *No*, his brain said, but everything else inside him fell into the rapture of her.

Elena caught his mouth and gave him a ravenous kiss. Her hands worked up to his face. She was working toward his neck and he knew it, but he didn't care. He only wanted her pinned to the bed beneath him and gasping as he thrust inside her. He wanted to hear yelling, saying his name.

"Jonas," she breathed out the word.

Jonas shivered, then pulled back. Had she read his mind? Elena kissed his chest and let her hands explore his sides. He rolled his head back and felt the thought fade away.

She leapt onto him, rocking him back when she went for his jugular. Her arms went around his shoulders and her legs around his hips.

Panic streaked through him just before Luciano burst out of him. He roared and caught her by the hair, jerking her

head backward while his other hand held her hips to his.
"That's enough, you minx."

Elena tried to lean forward, pulling her hair. "Jonas," she breathed out the word in that sexy way again.

Jonas, under Luciano's direction, pulled her neck up to his mouth and scraped his teeth down her skin. He held her tight in his grasp, allowing her to struggle only a little. "You haven't earned that privilege, *ragazza*."

"Please," Elena whispered, rolling her hips to grind his erection into her.

He laughed that chilling sound that only Luciano could make. "That won't work."

Elena screamed out her frustration and tried to slap at him, but he held her still.

"That's right, *ragazza*. Let the truth of yourself out." Luciano seemed sure of his ability to stop her even in the face of her surprising strength and intoxicating charm. It was as if he'd been designed for her. And then a chilling thought occurred to Jonas; perhaps he'd designed her for him somehow.

* * * *

Elena was suddenly hoisted, totally nude, onto Jonas's shoulder. That hunger that had been so important seconds before took a back seat to having her bare ass thrust into the air.

"Jonas?" Her heart sped up. "What are you doing?"

"Don't ask questions, *ragazza*."

She tried to see in the dim light of the darkened house. They moved into the hallway, then down a set of darkened stairs. To a basement. Luciano's playroom, she presumed.

At the bottom, he steadied her on her feet and moved away. She was completely immersed in darkness, even with these new eyes. The silence made the room feel like a massive cave. Her nerves were on end, but the moisture between her legs was somehow pooling faster. It must have been her heart rate.

"Amazing what can happen when the senses are deprived. Even the lack of sight heightens the others." That strange new version of Luciano's voice fell softly through the room. He was close. She could feel the cold radiating onto her back.

"Put your hands in front of you." he said.

"No."

There was no response. She reached for him but didn't find him. "I'm not doing that until I get something to eat. I'm hungry, Jonas."

The coldness at her back began to fade. Then his icy hand landed on hers and popped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists. The clicking sound as they locked in place sent a thrill through her abdomen. She felt stronger than when she was human. She could break them.

Elena tugged her wrists apart, trying to destroy the cuffs.

His hand looped around the center of the cuffs and he tugged her forward. "They're specially made. Knock yourself out." They stopped walking. "Step up."

She took another step forward then up, onto a platform. Her hips pressed against something cold and firm, like the

arm of a leather chair, only her knees hit nothing. Her hands were wrenched upward and slightly forward so she bent just a little, pushing out her bare ass, but not far enough to need something to support her upper body. There was a clinking of metal as he fumbled with it. Then he moved his hands. Her cuffs were securely in front of her, leaving enough room for her arms to bend and keep her breathing freely.

"There's nothing to stop me from draining you right now." The voice was deeper, more Luciano.

Her nipples tightened and her breathing sped up.

Those hands met her skin, grabbing her rib cage. But he was warmer. He pushed down farther, gripping her hips. "Do you still want me, *ragazza*?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes when those strong fingers ran down her sides. She pushed toward him, trying to move into his body, but the cuffs caught her.

He let out an approving groan and slid down her ass, then moved to her left leg. They moved steadily downward until he gripped her ankle. "Spread your legs. Just a little."

She lifted the leg to have him move it outward and wrap something wide and leathery around it. He fastened it and moved to the other so fast that she barely felt him secure the other leg.

He let out a grunt and ran one hand up and over her left cheek, coming dangerously close to the cleft of her ass. He disappeared, then was suddenly in her face, taking her mouth. He pressed into her, stretching her arms over his shoulders a little. His tongue explored her mouth while he palmed her breast and aching nipple.

Her body ached with that familiar craving. She wanted him between her legs, putting all that slick moisture to use that was starting to seep out.

Luciano pulled back. "Soon enough." He disappeared again.

He'd read her mind again, but she didn't care. He was about to drive her insane with all this teasing. Elena hung her head between her arms. Her clit throbbed so hard that she'd give anything to have him there to ease the ache.

Something pinched her nipple softly. His fingers. It sent a shot of pain straight to her clit.

"Oh." She bit her lip to keep from yelling, nicking herself with her new fangs.

"Mmm. Now you're making me hungry." He pinched it again.

Elena moaned and shook in the restraints. Her pulse pounded between her legs. She should have just pushed him into fucking her upstairs. She smirked. Like she could *make* him do anything.

"Funny, huh?" He pinched harder.

"Dammit. That hurt," she hissed.

Luciano's hands slid down her waist to her hips. "You will work for my approval, and my blood, *ragazza*." He reached down, gliding just over the mound of her hip, then down the crease as his fingers reached for that moist skin between her legs. He slipped his finger between her folds, sliding across her clit before he pushed inside.

He pulled the finger back out before she could take in the full sensation.

His swollen tip pushed up, sliding toward her opening. "You've teased me, you minx. And now I expect what you offered."

Jonas grabbed her hips and shoved inside her, spreading her with mind numbing speed. It was almost equal parts pain with the pleasure that forced her to moan out her protest. He thrust into her, burying as much of him inside her as he could before pulling back and doing it again. Her mind couldn't wrap around it. She felt the joy of him filling her, then the pain of him pushing too far, but it was gone, replaced with that shivering sensation of his pulling out before doing it again. Elena jerked in her bonds, her body squeezed around him harder. She tried not to let that orgasm take hold.

"Don't you dare come yet," he growled, pumping into her.

That simple command pulled her back from the edge.

"I'm not nearly done with you." He gripped her nipple and gave it a hard twist. "And I haven't given you permission."

Jonas wrapped his hand in her hair and pulled her head back. Her throat got tighter, forcing her to focus on swallowing and breathing. She didn't have to breathe, she thought, but it felt wrong not to. The tactic worked, bringing her down off that orgasmic high.

He pounded her harder, stretching her farther than she had gone before. Elena let out a loud groan. That orgasmic ripple rolled through her again, squeezing around him and making the sensation of him sliding in and out of her even louder in her body.

Jonas's mouth was on her shoulder then, biting into her skin. He thrust against her, almost losing his rhythm as he

grew closer to it, then came, exploding warm fluid into her. The pain mixed with the pleasure his bite brought, rolling her into a crash of climax that made her stiffen. The pleasure flowed through her, from the center of her body outward, until she fell into her limp form again. The groan of metal in front of her mixed with her own cries.

Her high deflated a little. Jonas wasn't biting her now and he wasn't inside her.

A low, feral growl came out of his mouth, directly in front of hers. He was taking her hands down from the hook. "I didn't give you permission."

"I'm sorry."

He held her cuffs and stood in front of her, smiling wickedly. "Don't apologize. You'll make it up to me." He held her hands in front of her and used his other hand to pull her face to him. He kissed her, slow and deep, but pulled away before her appetite for his taste could be sated.

Jonas's new voice came back this time, almost laughing as he said, "I could keep you tied up here all day as punishment."

Elena growled and jerked at her cuffs, trying to balance against the support at her hips on her shaky legs.

"Whoa, girl." He let go of her head and put his wrist to his face. He bit, then put it to her face. "You can take from me tonight. Tomorrow we'll go to the club for your first hunt."

The smell of him, that spicy male scent wafted toward her mixed with the smell of his blood. Elena clamped her mouth over his wrist and used her tongue to lick off the initial blood. She drew harder, wanting to bite him, but it somehow

seemed wrong. He'd cut his skin for her. To bite him now seemed greedy and might invoke another punishment that wasn't so pleasant. So she settled for the slow flow that her suckling brought.

She fed for what seemed like both an eternity and an instant before he pulled the wrist away. He licked the wound, then took her mouth again, using his tongue to transfer the last drops of blood to her mouth.

When Jonas pulled back, she heard him smile. "I need to see who that is."

"What?"

"Someone knocked upstairs."

"Get me out of this first." She wasn't ashamed of enjoying kinky sex with him, but she didn't want an audience.

He laughed and went to work on her ankles, releasing her quickly. He grabbed the cuffs again. "Can I trust you not to seduce the next man who walks through that door?"

Hmmm. She didn't know. She hadn't planned to try to seduce him. That new, dark part of her had just taken over, like flipping a switch. It was only Luciano's dark control that held her in her place. She shrugged.

Jonas laughed and took off the cuffs. "I'll have to kill them if you do, just so you know." He flipped on the lights, grabbed a black terry robe, and then handed it to her.

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Chapter Sixteen

Jonas opened the door to Michael and Blane standing there, with Michael slightly in front. By the stance, they were here on official business. Jonas motioned them inside, toward the den.

"I'm assuming everything is all right," Michael said, walking inside.

"I feel great," Elena said, holding her robe closed.

Michael stopped and stared at her.

A jealous twinge twisted Jonas's through him. Michael was looking at her strangely, staring too hard. He was the *padrone*, but he had his own woman. Elena was *his*.

"May I?" Michael reached for her hand.

Jonas started forward.

Blane reached a hand out to put it on his chest. He shook his head sharply.

Elena nodded and Michael lifted her hand to his mouth. He kissed the inside of her wrist and sniffed.

"What?" Jonas pushed Blane's hand away.

"She is a succubus?"

"Apparently."

"Interesting." Michael patted her hand, and then reached toward her face. He pushed away her hair to reveal the points of a tattoo that peeked out from her hair at the temple, then ran down from her hairline and disappeared under the shoulder of her robe. Jonas knew the rest matched his own.

He smiled like a proud new dad. "So she inherited my abilities *and* yours."

"It seems so." Jonas walked over and put his arm around her. The growl that came next was only in his head, and he hoped he could keep it there. "Is there something you needed? We were going to bed."

Michael arched a brow at him. "Yes. I spoke with the Council."

"And?"

"Khalil has agreed to say he authorized her change since it was illegal. She will fall under the special circumstances clause as an asset who sought us out. No one outside of this room will know you bound her before this conversation."

"Thank you," Elena said.

"You've been proven dead. Your assets were sold. Some of your personal items, like your photos and sentimental things, are being brought here. Everything else is being sold by your attorney."

"I don't have one."

"You do now. It will run in the paper tomorrow that terrorists raided your lab while you were there. You destroyed the formula and are presumed to have been killed because your car was found in a swamp with your blood in the upholstery."

"How did you—"

"It's better that you don't know all of the details." Michael folded his arms over his chest. "And I suggest steering clear of your colleagues. We have done what we can with the blonde's memory of speaking to you. You won't be easy to

recognize. You've changed more than most. But you shouldn't take the chance."

She glanced up at Jonas. "I think I need to look in the mirror."

He smiled and nodded. She would be surprised when she saw.

Michael continued, "They've agreed to let her set up her lab here to work on reproducing the formula. I will need your help with the details, Elena." He glanced to Jonas and back to her. "You will have to take on a new name. Choose one by tomorrow. We will announce you at Jonas's chastening."

Shit. He'd forgotten about that.

He looked at Jonas. "Khalil demanded the *Scarico* as your penance."

Jonas sighed and tried to swallow back the disgust that rose in his chest. His hands tightened into fists. He had to let this happen. Michael wouldn't do more than he had to, he thought, but he might drag it out to get back at him for all he'd done with Tori. If he'd figured out what had happened.

"What does that mean?" Elena said, looking up at him.

Michael answered. "I will feed from you. It's not done to someone else's *compagna* unless it's a punishment or an insult."

No, because doing it get your friggin' skull crushed.

Elena glanced up to Jonas. "It's okay?"

He watched the *padrone*, trying not to snarl. "Do you need anything else?"

Michael's eyes widened, then a smile broke across his face. He laughed. "Are you trying to kick me out of my own pool house?"

Jonas shook his head.

"I didn't think so." Michael glanced at Blane. "We need to visit Jack Knife about the location of that other Agent before dawn." He headed toward the door, not turning back as he spoke. "Jonas, I will be at the club tomorrow night at eleven. We will do it in the VIP area."

Jonas swallowed down another growl. They were almost out of the danger. This last test of his will would make Elena safe. *If* he could manage not to lose his friggin' mind. And *if* Michael could resist making this even more humiliating than it had to be. Refusing would forfeit his own life by the *Alleanza*. He swallowed again. At least it wasn't one of the Council members coming here to perform it.

* * * *

Elena stood in a dark corner of the VIP section at Jonas's club, watching Michael, Tori, Blane and Gregory filing in through the side door. There were others, vampires whom she didn't know, who sat at the tables and booths, chatting and drinking.

"His bite is like yours. That ability to ... he's very..." Jonas looked lost for the first time since she'd known him.

Elena knew what he meant. She'd felt what was possible and knew she could make the men do whatever she wanted. She could only imagine what it felt like on the receiving end. "I'll try not to let it affect me."

"He knows what he's doing."

"Just don't get upset. Don't watch if you have to. We're almost done."

"You just don't get it."

"I understand perfectly." She kissed his cheek and felt his jaw tighten. "But I'm not the least bit interested in him. Anything that might happen will be fake."

He nodded. "When this is done, you're going to be hungry. We'll go into the back for your first."

"Mmmm. Sounds like you've already picked someone."

"I have." He kissed her forehead and his face lit up. "I think you'll like my choice."

"I can't wait."

Michael cleared his throat behind her, "Are we ready?"

Elena turned to see Michael and Tori, who was glaring at her through narrowed eyes. "Uh. I think so."

"What name have you chosen?"

"Iuliana," Jonas said with an Italian accent.

Michael smiled. "You've returned to the old names?"

Jonas nodded. "I'm going to use my real name from now on. She wanted something suitable to match it."

He nodded, "Then Luciano and Iuliana it is." Michael's hand reached for hers. "Let's go."

Jonas clinched his jaw. Elena kissed it and felt him soften a little. "I'll be right back."

She followed Michael, holding on to his surprisingly warm hand as he led her to the center of the open floor. The others all watched. The music went low, and Gregory, Blane and a

few others stood in front of the doors to keep anyone from coming in—or leaving.

Michael smiled down at her. "Tonight, I announce the newest member of our *cosca*, Iuliana. She is the *neonato* and *compagna* of Luciano." He patted her hand. "And my grandchild. She is also one of the Council's Specialists. I expect all of the privileges and honors due to her through this title. Any offense on her is an offense on your *padrone*." He turned toward her. "Kneel, *sorella*."

Elena, now officially Iuliana, went to her knee. Jonas had told her what this would be like, but doing it in front of so many strangers made it awkward.

Michael cut his wrist with his own teeth and held it to her. The wound had already sealed, stopping the flow of blood before he turned it to her. "The blood you take will bind you to me as your *padrone*. Each of your brothers and sisters has done the same before you. Know that what you take now will seal your death if you betray us."

Elena nodded, and Michael nodded to her in return. She discreetly licked a slow line up the trail of blood, taking it in. It burned and sparked in her mouth. This blood was stronger than Jonas's and could easily be a drug of its own. The potent taste of it sparked something in her mind. A warm electricity flowed from the top of her head down. Her breath flowed out as a chill covered her skin. It was more than she'd expected, even with last night's warning that taking Michael's blood would bind her metaphysically to him, creating a loyalty beyond what she could imagine. It could only be rivaled by the one she shared with her mate.

She looked up at the *padrone* and knew Jonas was right. She would never betray him. God help her if she ever had to choose between him and Jonas. It would be easier to end her own life.

Michael pulled her to her feet. "Now, on a separate subject. Luciano breached the Alleanza during his last assignment."

Elena watched as Gregory and Blane went to stand in front of him. He looked pained, his brows furrowed.

"He allowed a human to know of our existence and our secrets." Michael stopped, waiting for the hisses to end. "For this, the Council has decided that the *Scarico* will be an appropriate penance for the transgression." Jonas's head hung as Michael continued. "Since Iuliana is his new *compagna*, she will be the payment for his mistake."

Elena took a breath she didn't need, but it helped settle the new butterflies in her belly.

Michael held his arms out to her.

Oh shit. He wanted her neck. She glanced toward Jonas. He was already trying to get past Gregory and Blane, snarling. *It's going to be okay*, she said silently but didn't convince herself.

Stepping into Michael's arms and smelling that different but equally intoxicating scent confirmed it. That succubus inside her cackled. She wanted Michael, to push him to the ground and fuck him in front of everyone.

La, la, la, la, la. She couldn't let Jonas know what she felt. He roared from behind her.

Too late.

Michael smirked and whispered so low in her ear. "He'll be fine. Just be good to him afterward. He had this coming to him."

She closed her eyes and surrendered her neck. Michael pulled her hair back and hovered just above her skin, but his aura was mixing with her, rousing her so close to an orgasm already. Whatever strange power she'd inherited from him recognized its origin and blazed to life inside her. Suddenly, it was almost impossible not to touch him, not to slide her hands inside his shirt.

Michael swallowed down a groan, but she caught the first bit and hoped that Jonas didn't. He sniffed her slowly, "Is this what I smell like to them?"

He was obviously not talking to her, but she couldn't stop herself from saying, "Yes."

"Try not to react."

He slid a hand around her waist and pulled her hard against him. Too close. She could feel every inch of him conforming to her curves.

Then he bit her.

His lips were soft on her skin, warm and inviting. His teeth slid into her with a cold precision that brought no pain that wasn't coupled with an equal or great pleasure. It launched her immediately into a soft, pink orgasm. She bit her lip so that no sound escaped, then tried not to hold onto him too hard and to keep both feet on the ground.

Her brain went to mush. The only sound in the room was that of Michael breathing against her skin. That dark vixen inside her cackled with sadistic pleasure.

Michael pulled his teeth from her skin and licked closed the wounds.

Elena stiffened against her body's attempt to shiver, then opened her eyes. Her heart was pounding but her body felt weak. *Please let me be able to stand.*

He whispered again, "It is a rare thing for two such powers collide. I think that increased my power when you were created. Since we share this ability, it is possible we are stronger together." He pulled back to face her, his eyes almost glowing. He smiled, obviously trying not to let anyone know when he said through his teeth, "Never speak of this."

"Oh." She laughed. "Don't worry." There wasn't a chance in hell that this would ever be brought up again. It was all magic and blood, a mind trick, and she wasn't going to risk what she had with Jonas for that.

He turned toward her Jonas, who was in full Luciano mode. Michael smirked. "Do I need to send someone with you? I don't trust Luciano."

"He won't hurt me."

"You're very sure of yourself."

"Yes, I am."

He laughed as she started toward Jonas. With the wave of his hand, the guys to let her mate free.

Luciano came at her in a deadly stride, stopping only for a second to sweep her onto his shoulder. They were already in the back room before she could protest. "I would have walked."

Jonas slid her to her feet, pulling her mouth to his in a crushing kiss.

When he released her, he turned her toward the room. Cade, the guy from that first night at the club, strapped down to a chair, his mouth gagged, eyes covered with a blindfold. "What is he—"

Her mouth was attacked by Jonas's while his hands went immediately to her skirt. His hands pushed it up as he backed her into the wall behind her. She hit it with a thud, fighting to keep up with his hungry mouth. His hands wrapped around her panties just before she heard the fabric rip. Then those strong hands left her body for a second just before he caught her hips and hoisted her up the wall. He broke the kiss only to shove his face into the crook of her neck. One hand wrapped in her hair and the other her thigh.

That evil inside her laughed, and the sound rolled from her lips.

Jonas's tip found her center. He groaned. "Already wet?" A low rumble sounded from his chest. "You're *mine, ragazza*." He hissed out the words, then impaled her, thrusting into her so hard that she wondered if he'd break her hips against the wall. His fangs took her neck, penetrating her skin as he pushed his body deeper into hers.

Elena yelled out and let the other woman take over. Her hands went to his back, ripping into his shirt while he drank deeply, pounding her into an orgasm that trumped the one that Michael had forced through her moments before.

As he approached climax, he broke the sheetrock behind her, denting her hips into the wall. Elena put out her elbow to catch the wood keep them from going through. Her body flexed around his again, thrown into another orgasm by

the swelling flesh inside her. He groaned and pushed farther, shoving into her while his body shuddered an explosion that filled her with the warmth of his fluid.

They remained there, connected for a quiet moment. He pulled his teeth from her and sealed the wound. Then he caught her mouth again for a moment.

When she looked at him, she could see Jonas had returned. He kissed her forehead. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Her legs shook as he let her side down, disconnecting their bodies. She suddenly felt hollow, lonely as the liquid that was starting to slide onto her thigh. But she was also complete. She had her mate, the perfect mate, forever. "Luciano."

"Yes?" He kissed her neck where he'd bitten her, sliding his hands up her sides.

"I am yours," she whispered.

He kissed her skin again. "I love you."

She smiled. A warm glow bloomed in her chest. Her human life was officially over, and she couldn't be more excited to spend immortality with him. This was what she loved, this way that only he could make her feel. "I love you, too."

He pulled back to see her face. "I picked him because he was trying to get you into the back room to rape and drain you that night."

"He's a vampire?"

Jonas nodded.

She'd been so close, even then.

"He's also the one who leaked where you were. Apparently he's been working with the Quietus Agents for some time." Jonas fixed his clothes and walked toward the man, who was now jerking and trying to get loose. "The Council has ordered his execution." He batted the man in the head.

Elena's stomach twisted and her mouth watered. She was hungry, but murder wasn't exactly what she had in mind. "I don't know that I can—"

Jonas held up a hand. "Do whatever you like. It's usually illegal to drain one of our own, but this is the exception."

She licked her lips, feeling that dark woman inside her, aching to get free. "Are we in a hurry?"

Jonas smiled. "We have all night. Take your time."

* * * *

Jonas watched Elena wiping her mouth. She'd drank enough to make the *vampiro* weak, but he wasn't dead. She wouldn't take a life, he could feel it, and that was just another thing he loved about her. He, on the other hand, had no problem with it. If he didn't do it, someone else would. Plus, it was his job. "If you want to go in the bathroom there." He pointed to the small door. "I'll finish this up. Then we can go home."

Elena walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Are we going to play?"

He chuckled. "If you're a good girl."

"Oh, I think I can manage that." She kissed his chest. "As long as you promise to tie me up."

"I may tie you up and not let you go." He gripped her, teasing her lips with the threat of a kiss, then pulled away and smacked her on the ass. "Go clean up, you minx, before I take you again."

THE END
