



**Illicit Hunger**

**Dee Carney**

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## Blurb

Up until now, almost every part of her life has been dictated to her. When Lia Hampton, vampire *prima lux*, goes clubbing with her best friend, it's the last bit of rebellion against her arranged marriage she can muster. An attempt on her life was not part of that plan.

Jericho Taylor is placed in the enviable role of protecting the vampire community's first daughter. In a world where the werewolf is considered tainted, interaction with them almost forbidden, Lia must do the unthinkable—feed from Jericho—to save her own life.

What happens when she bites him sparks a whirlwind of events which threaten to rip their lives, community, and a growing love, apart.

## Chapter One

Not curling her lip in disgust took every ounce of strength and the last bit of patience Lia Hampton could muster. Bad enough they walked down an alley stinking of urine and stale blood. She in her newest designer shoes, no less. The stench was almost enough to cover the cloud of alcoholic vapors floating from Syler.

Almost.

He weaved next to her, each step threatening to take him down. Still, he persisted. In less than a week they wouldn't be able to do this any more. He figured they owed it to themselves to live it up while they could. As usual, she went along without protesting. What would be the use? What Syler wanted, he got.

Another wobbly step sent him crashing into her. The collision caught her unaware and she stumbled into the side of the brick building.

"Syler!" She cursed vehemently. "Watch yourself!" Lia inspected the new scuff mark on her black shoe, tamping down the bubbling anger directed at her best friend.

Shadow blocked the light as someone stepped toward her. A rich voice asked, "May I offer my assistance.*prima lux*?"

Without hesitation, she placed her hand into the one extended toward her. A small crackle of static electricity stung her fingertips. Startled, she pulled her hand away from the guard, finally raising her eyes to meet his. The frustration with Syler she planned on unleashing on the innocent guardsman died on her lips.

Have. Mercy.

A whole lot of good-looking male stood next to her.

They'd been out for two hours now and sad to say, this was her first really good look at the new guard under bright light. The men rotated so often she rarely got a chance to get to know them anyway. But for this one, she should have made an exception.

Clear gray eyes stared at her for a moment longer than propriety allowed, but long enough for her to be stunned by them. Lupine eyes, she recognized. That didn't matter. His coal black hair was pulled tight into a ponytail, ensuring a clear view of his rugged tanned face.

Everything about him, the off-center crook in his nose, the jagged lines of his jaw, the dark shadow of stubble screamed *masculinity*.

And every female part of her body responded.

“Hello!” Syler called. A giggle escaped his lips. “Gods be praised, I think the *prima lux* has finally discovered the opposite sex.”

She whirled on him as heat flared over her cheeks and down her neck. To her chagrin, Lia could only sputter her indignation. All of the smart assed come-backs she had in her arsenal fled like traitors.

Syler pushed past her, almost sending her into the side of the building again. She recovered her balance in time to watch him sashay toward the guard. The seductive sway of his slender hips meant she wasn’t the only one to ogle the handsome male this evening.

“Too little, too late, sistah,” he tossed over his shoulder at her. At least, that’s what she thought he said. He slurred a couple of the words so badly she had to replay them in her mind a few times before she could translate.

The guard caught her attention with his eyes before his gaze landed back on her approaching friend. She would have laughed at his panicked expression had she been sure he couldn’t handle Syler. Something about him suggested he knew exactly how to handle himself.

“Sire?” He took a step backward, maintaining a respectable distance.

Syler stumbled forward, perhaps on accident, but knowing him, probably not. The guard caught him before they both tumbled to the ground. He tried to upright the younger man, but Syler remained fastened to him. The guard held himself ramrod straight as the vampire inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of his neck.

“Hi ther—,” Syler started. He released an ear-piercing screech, followed by a hiss. Suddenly, he couldn’t back away from the guard fast enough.

“Tainted!” He spat. He turned back to Lia, fury radiating from him. All previous evidence of insobriety wiped clean away. “Why your family insists on using such filth as part of their protection, I’ll never know.”

“Syler, mind yourself. That is uncalled for.”

Years of training allowed Lia to keep her voice low, contained. He might not have cared

if the callous words affected anyone around him, but she did. The guard couldn't help being born a werewolf, the same as she couldn't help being born the daughter of the leading vampire in their community. Hell, there were some days she would have traded places with one of the lowborn in a heartbeat.

"I did not mean to offend, sire," the guard said. The *were* kept his gaze down as he spoke. Lia stared at him because the supplicant posture was all wrong. It just didn't fit him. The man probably never apologized for anything in his life. A minute passed before he glanced up, but she caught the defiance burning in his gray depths before he dropped his face again.

No. The man never needed to apologize before. She'd bet money on it.

"My apologies also if I have offended, *prima lux* ." Syler cut his blue eyed gaze to the guard for a moment. He sighed as he swooped down in a deep bow to her. "I sometimes forget my place."

His words and actions cut her to the bone. She wanted to scream at him that they were friends. He did not have to use her title or bow to her. Never had to apologize for his outrageous behavior. It was why she loved him, why she tolerated everything he did. He was one of the few people who didn't put on airs in her presence. One of the few people who made her forget her station, if only for a short time.

Now she had two men standing next to her, looking as if she spent the day horse-whipping them. How had the good time of the last two hours turn into this?

"Let's just keep going, okay? We still have hours to go before I have to return home." She grinned at Syler, knowing he wouldn't resist the call to a good time. "I plan on closing down the clubs this night!"

He returned her rueful smile, cocking a painted eyebrow. "You're right. I haven't had a human in a while. Might as well close down the end of this very sad era with a slow dance and an even slower fuck."

And just like that, her foul-mouthed, flamboyant friend was back.

She laughed and skipped ahead, but not before raking a heated look over the guard one last time. Her father's employee or not, he made breaking the rules tempting. He was nothing like Ross, the middle-aged vamp who'd been part of her father's guards, and their captain, for double-digit years now. Ross skulked behind the small party without commenting on the playful banter, his watchful eyes taking in their surroundings.

The new guard—she would have to remember to get his name later—stepped in place

beside the captain. Such a lesson in contrasts, the two men. One weathered but experienced; the other virile and hell, a knock-out. She wouldn't let his youth cloud her perception of him. The fact she'd been placed in the care of the younger guard spoke volumes of his capability as a warrior.

Syler brought her out of her mental musings when he linked his arm in hers and all but dragged her toward the entrance of the alleyway. The loud thumps vibrating the tinted windows of the buildings started to make rhythmic sense and he bumped hips with her as they stumbled toward the source.

By the time they actually reached the main street, she almost forgot that nights like this were drawing to a close. Next week she would marry her intended and the frivolity with Syler would come to an immediate halt as she assumed her responsibilities to her community. For tonight, though, Lia would party.

She and Syler slipped past the bouncers holding open a velveteen rope without slowing. They frequented the place enough to be recognized on sight. The VIP room would be cleared of anyone already in there by the time they climbed the stairs. The private bartenders would have chilled drinks ready and depending on the concierge on duty tonight, Syler might have one or two pieces of eye candy to scope. Not everything about her pampered life sucked.

It was only when they were halfway up the stairs she noticed the guards weren't directly behind them.

She looked down on the crowd of bodies gyrating to the pulsing beat. She couldn't spot them there, either. "Syler, wait!"

Where were they? Since the time she could walk it had been drilled into her to never go anywhere in public without her guards present. She could also count the number of times she broke that edict on one hand. Turning back around, she headed closer to the bottom of the stairs.

She relaxed when she spotted her escorts a moment later at the entrance to the club. The new guard apparently caused some hesitation for the bouncers. Though, something about that bugged her.

He wore her father's emblem, the blazing sun surrounded by four stars. That alone guaranteed him safe passage anywhere in the city. Anyone who saw it knew the *Lugh's* presence by virtue of his staff. They were to be treated with the utmost respect by members of the community, almost on pain of death, otherwise. Either the bouncers were being overly cautious or perhaps, they were new to her community.

She glanced up to see that Syler had already deserted her, probably to begin imbibing—again—on some drink of questionable legality. She could have laughed at that. He behaved as if

he were the one to be given away in marriage to someone he despised instead of she.

Lia watched the bouncer's animated gestures toward Ross. True to some unwritten bouncer protocol, he tensed as the older vampire leaned close, baring elongated canines. The bouncer puffed his chest, but then relaxed his stance when another bouncer joining the discussion backed him. Throughout the encounter, her new guardsman remained aloof. He kept his gaze solidly fixed in her general direction. Their eyes met twice during his visual sweep. The resultant spark of excitement at those moments made her inhale with a sharp breath.

She was in serious trouble if she kept letting his attractiveness distract her. What would her father say if he could hear the carnal thoughts racing through her mind whenever she looked at him? Thoughts that had her wondering just how firm his biceps truly were. Or what lay hidden beneath the second-skin of clothing he wore. Or thoughts that questioned whether what was said about werewolf virility were true.

Lia snorted. Gods, if only her father knew...

When the object of her fantasies looked at her again, his eyes narrowed. He started moving forward, almost as if he'd heard her thoughts. But that was impossible. At least, she thought it was impossible. Who could tell with *weres* ?

The bouncer put out an arm to block his way, but he brushed past it. The guard seemed to be yelling as he pushed through the crowd. The music cranked up in volume, the staircase turning into a conduit of rhythmic vibrations. Over the blaring speakers, she would have been hard pressed to hear a person standing only inches away. It would have been impossible to understand what he said without reading his lips. He was too far away and the room too dark, despite flashes of colorful lights, for that.

Lia glanced around, trying to gauge the reason for his apparent alarm, but nothing seemed amiss. On either side of her, party-goers danced in glittering garments that reflected the kaleidoscope of colors artificially provided by the overhead lights. Here and there, jewelry flashed, almost distracting away from the canines of writhing vamps. Soon enough, humans would be enticing those same euphoric men and women from their energy highs on the dance floor to backrooms where blood would be exchanged for money or sex.

No. Nothing seemed amiss at all.

Only now, the were guard pushed past patrons, shoving aside the cloak of his uniform and drawing his signature curved blade as he attempted to make his way toward her. Real fear sliced through her at the determined look on his face. Either he could see something she couldn't, or he might himself be coming to spill her blood. Yet another lesson from her father during his reign: betrayal comes easily from those on the inside.



That thought immobilized her for a moment. Then, when she saw Ross trailed behind him by several yards, she wasn't sure if it wasn't accurate. If the wolf intended her harm, the old guard would be a minute, two maybe, too late to save her.

Lia backed away from the railing, trying to remain calm yet at the same time assess the situation from all sides. She glanced toward the VIP room, hoping to see Syler waiting for her by the entrance. She couldn't see past the thick of people crowding the stairwell, much less the very top.

"Excuse me," she muttered to no one in particular. She just needed to get through to the relative safety of the room. Maybe if she got in there, it might buy Ross some time to catch up to the other guardsman.

She managed two small steps before being blocked again. All of these damned bodies everywhere, and none of them would move!

A glance behind her before she could go forward further helped her locate *he* at the bottom stair step now. He was no longer yelling, but he still gripped the weapon at his hip like a lifeline. His eyes were dark slits that made her flesh break out in goosebumps.

"Coming through!" she yelled as she whirled to face the top again. It didn't make a difference. Her words were lost to the air the second they left her mouth.

Gods. What to do?

As she shoved forward, she tried to think it through rationally. Why this sudden fear of a man whose body she wanted to jump only a few minutes ago? Maybe it was the intensity of his glare, the way it flamed over her when they visually connected. It could be the way just looking at him could make her pulse race, her heart pounding as it picked up breakneck speed. Or maybe it was just the way her father drilled into her time and time again the constant danger their statuses placed them.

She'd feel like an idiot if she was wrong. Although, an embarrassed prima lux was better than a dead prima lux. If she was wrong, she'd just apologize later.

The infuriating crowd refused to part despite the way Lia shoved. She peered over her shoulder again to see if the guard had gained on her. When she faced forward again, she stilled as pain spread over her chest like wildfire. She clutched a hand just above her abdomen only to pull it away again from the searing burn. Sticky fluid painted her hand red.

Chapter Two

Jericho's heart stilled as he watched the prima lux crumple against the crowd. When only moments ago the revelers wouldn't budge for her, they scattered like marbles as she fell among them.

*Damn it.* She'd run straight into the arms of the man who caught his attention. The man he'd planned on keeping close tabs on. The fair-haired vamp kept his sights on the beautiful heiress just a moment too long to suit Jericho. The man's focus, not to mention the stance of someone who tried a little too hard to fit in, tipped his hand. The moment Jericho watched him start heading in her direction, he went on alert. The bouncers trying to block his way were immediately ignored.

The glint of metal poorly hidden beneath a frayed duster made him forget about everything except getting to the prima lux.

He knew he was too late before he reached her. There was no mistaking the terror and then shock on her face after he'd struck. She'd turned enough for Jericho to see the look on her face. Despite having seen perhaps hundreds of men die before him, for the rest of his life, he would never forget the look in her eyes when the assassin attacked. The way the light from eyes the blue of the sky on a summer day dimmed.

Someone near her recognized what was happening and then the screaming began. Men and women, human and vampire alike, fled down the stairs. Frantically beat past him to leave the scene of a crime. Vamps with their wits still about them dematerialized into the air.

Hypersensitive hearing picked up Ross growling beside him. Over the din, the vampire shouted, "Get to the prima lux! That bastard is mine!"

Ross could have saved his breath. Jericho's attention remained fixed on her. How could he help it? From the moment she stepped into his line of sight hours earlier he couldn't help but look at her, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

The woman—the prima lux—was stunning. Out of sheer respect for her, he couldn't allow his mind to drift to images of entangling himself in her long legs, or tracing his hands over flawless skin or even kissing plump, pink lips. He settled for inhaling the soft jasmine scent trailing behind her. That somehow satisfied him in a way that made no sense.

By some miracle, she hadn't been trampled by the time he got to her, but she'd tumbled down a few stairs. His inner wolf howled in frustration at the new scent of her now. The acrid smell offended him. It reminded him almost of decaying flowers with the pungent copper of blood mixed into it.

He knelt beside her. So much blood everywhere. Spreading rapidly over her torso. She tried to sit up, but Jericho pressed a gentle hand to her shoulder. He eased her into his arms so he

held her close. “Easy,” he murmured.

Something was terribly wrong. An ordinary wound should have closed by now. Vampire metabolism should have begun repairing the damaged skin, sealed the bleeding vessels. Blood seeped from her, saturating her clothes and pooling on the ground beneath her.

He scanned the gaping area, grimacing as he recognized the cauterized edges. The attacker used silver. By itself, the metal wouldn’t kill her, but it could slow down her recovery significantly. Perhaps slow enough she would bleed to death before the wound closed. If she stood even a slim chance of survival, she needed immediate help.

“Oh, my gods, Lia!”

Jericho’s head snapped up at the sound of Syler’s frantic scream. He’d come out of the VIP room and stared down on them. Syler paled in the fluorescent lighting someone had the sense to turn on. Only a few humans remained in the building, most of them heading for the exits.

Without thinking, Jericho barked, “I need you to get her father’s healers. Bring them to her now!”

For a moment he wasn’t sure Syler heard. His eyes were glazed as he watched her in Jericho’s arms. He focused after a few seconds and his eyes slanted in accusation. “Where were you? Where were her guards?”

“Sire,” he said through rapidly rising anger. Biting back the words that came to him by instinct took his last measure of patience. “She needs her father’s healers. Will you bring them to her now?”

Syler’s attention shifted from his friend to Jericho in rapid succession. “If she dies, *were* , I will have your furry hide strung up on my wall.”

Jericho wanted to scream *she won’t die if you get help!* Wanted to lift the effeminate vampire by the scruff of his shirt and pin him to the wall. Maybe show him just who he dared to threaten, but he kept his silence. He released the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding when the vampire dematerialized.

He looked down again on the prima lux—Lia, as Syler called her. So much blood. She needed to feed, to slow down the seepage by fortifying herself. He should have thought of that before sending Syler away.

He glanced into her face and realized she stared back at him. She looked serene and he

was grateful at least she didn't seem to be in pain. "Prima lux?"

"It doesn't hurt," she said. "I thought dying would hurt more than this."

The calm way she spoke, the lack of emotion disconcerted him. He'd seen men twice her size and a dozen years battle-weary cry like babies when their end came. "Save your strength, prima lux. Your father's healers will be here soon."

Her cold hand clamped onto his. "No. I don't want them near me, please!"

"But—"

"Please, guard?"

He shook his head. This had to be a fear of death talking. Besides, her father would accept nothing less than his own death if she died. She'd been his charge and he failed her. "You need to feed, prima lux. You may not need them then."

She relaxed so suddenly, he thought she might have slipped away. But she nodded and eased his worry. He looked around and found a single wide-eyed human staring at them from across the room.

"Human! She needs to feed!"

The man in his early twenties froze for a minute, then took off at top speed for the exit. Not before Jericho saw the dark stain spreading across his crotch.

Shit. Stupid virgin.

What to do now? They were alone and she needed to feed. If there was any chance of saving her, she had to have blood. Already her skin paled to a shade of gray that swept cold fear down his spine. Her eyes dulled with each minute that passed. They'd lost perhaps only five minutes in time. She probably wouldn't live to see the end of another five.

Gods forgive him.

"Prima lux, you must feed from me."

Her breathing picked up speed, her breath coming on ragged gasps for air. She shook her head. "No—"

“You’ll die if you don’t!”

“No.”

Just saying the simple word seemed to take so much effort. He couldn’t let her die, not like this. A woman so young deserved better. If they had to break a taboo so she would live, he couldn’t hesitate to do it. His life was forfeit anyway.

In a soothing tone, he pleaded, “Prima lux, L-Lia, please. Your father, your community needs you.”

Her chest heaved as she struggled to breathe. The loose grip on his hand slackened. Her fingers slid away from his, leaving a red trail behind. Fierce determination still blazed in her eyes even as the light drifted away from them.

“Mustn’t,” she mumbled. Her eyes slipped closed before her head lolled to the side.

He didn’t stop to think. Jericho reached for the throwing knife in the side pocket of his pant leg. He used it to slice open the skin of his wrist. When he pressed the wound to her mouth, he prayed he wasn’t too late.

Nothing happened at first and his heart sank. Maybe he let too much time pass. He’d hoped her natural survival instinct would cause her to draw from him. To do whatever was necessary to live.

Just when he started to give up hope, her lips created suction on his wrist. A moment later, she reached up and gripped his arm, her hands cold and clammy to the touch. He winced as he felt her canines elongate and pierce his skin further. Then another sensation struck him like a fist.

Jericho’s cock hardened almost to the point of pain as a wave of pleasure washed over him. He slammed his eyes shut, tried to breathe through the assault on his senses. He could feel every heart beat, hear every time his pulse emptied his life’s blood into her mouth. Her hot, moist tongue on his wrist teased him to distraction.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head as the images he’d kept at bay before flooded his mind. She was beneath him, their bodies writhing as they sought pure unadulterated bliss together. Her soft moans encouraged him as he pumped into her body. Sought to fill her with his seed. Her nails raked his back, her hands traveling over his straining muscles.

He held her close to him. Breathed in her jasmine scent, inhaling over her hair, down her neck. Stopped to taste the pulse at the base of her neck. She arched into him, her breasts pressing into the curls on his chest. He withdrew long enough to pull the taut bud of her nipple into his mouth, before missing the comfort of her warmth.

“Lia,” he whispered as he pushed inside of her. She answered with a sigh that made his heart skip a beat. He couldn’t remember the last time a woman felt so good, so right next to him. Like he was meant to be with her on every level.

“Gods, Lia,” he moaned. When she rolled her hips beneath him, it was his undoing.

The orgasm rocketed through Jericho, seizing him until he could do nothing but give in to it. His body tensed as everything that he was poured out of him and into her. He could only shudder uncontrollably, each of her faint cries causing another wave of spasms to grip him. When he was finally drained, it was all he could do to press his lips against her cheek.

He opened his eyes to the sight of Lia pulling away from his wrist, her mouth glistening. She licked the openings on his wrist, the skin mending as she did. A sheen of perspiration covered her brow, her breath coming on quick breaths.

“What—what just happened?” she gasped.

Jericho looked into her startled eyes, then glanced about the room. They were both still fully clothed, surrounded by the vast emptiness of the club. He also noticed the wound on her chest had almost sealed shut, thank the gods. He waited a moment longer for it to completely mend before reflecting on her reaction and the significance of the bite.

Really, why was she so surprised? He didn’t know what to expect from her bite, but if this was what happened every time, sign him up for more.

The last time he’d come in his clothes was probably in his adolescent years, but the little bit of sticky discomfort now was well worth it. Her cheeks were as flushed as his own heated skin, so he had a feeling the orgasm might not have been one-sided. That sent satisfaction through him in ways which wasn’t quite decent. Only the look on her face kept a grin from growing on his face.

“Who are you?” she asked.

It struck him then. The reality of what just transpired. Not only had a vampire just fed from a werewolf, the second highest ranking vampire of their community had done so. The woman he was sworn to protect. On top of that, they exchanged something mere words could not express.

He scrambled away from her, dropping to a knee in supplication. His face cast downward, he replied, “Jericho Taylor, prima lux.”

\*

“You called me Lia before.” She watched his body stiffen, his hands curling into fists at his side. He started to lift his head, but must have thought better of it and it dropped again.

“I meant no offense, prima lux. If I have offended...”

“Don’t,” she interrupted softly. “Rise and look at me, Jericho.”

For a moment, she didn’t think he would comply, but she gave him almost no choice. On a professional level, he was duty bound to obey her every command. Even if it went against everything he’d been ever taught. On a personal level, well, they were still trying to figure that part out now, weren’t they?

In all the years of feeding—and that meant all of her twenty-seven years—she never before experienced something as intense as what just transpired. On a rare occasion she managed to derive a little erotic pleasure from feeding, but never, *never* to have it feel so tangible. To feel as if their two bodies were physically connected as they rushed toward ecstasy. When the orgasm struck, it was like a bolt of lightning hit her from the inside, spreading over every inch of her skin until she all but exploded from the crackling energy. Even now, she tingled from the remnants of their ethereal union.

And whose idea again was it to never feed from a werewolf? To think she missed out on this all these years...

He finally stood, but kept his gaze above her head. Gods, she’d been fortunate he’d been there. No one had to tell her how close to death she’d come. The cold darkness embraced her as she slipped away from this world. She shuddered just thinking about it.

“Jericho, what happened? Did you do that?”

His eyebrows knitted together. His gaze dropped to her before rising again. “Pri...”

“I think we’ve made it past formality. Look at me. Talk to me.” She’d never get any answers out of him if he insisted on using her title and kept his distance. Besides, she wanted to look into his eyes when they talked. Just like when they’d made love, if she could call it that. No matter what, if she could look into his eyes and they looked the same as that moment in time

when they'd been intimate, she'd know, really know something special happened between them.

He folded his arms across his chest. Although he no longer looked above her head, he kept his attention on the floor at his feet. "You felt it too? All of it, I mean?"

The tips of his ears turned beet-red. So maybe it wasn't formality keeping him aloof. Perhaps a bit of embarrassment had been tossed in for good measure. Lia smiled. "Oh yeah. I felt all of it, too."

"Doesn't that happen every time?"

She barked a nervous laugh. "No, it most certainly does not. I've never had anything like that happen to me before."

"What do you think it means?" he asked after a pause. He raised his eyes enough to study her face.

*It means we'll be doing it again if I have my way*, she thought. She said, "I don't really know."

His face tightened. "Alright. But what will happen if anyone finds out?"

That was the million-dollar question. He initiated feeding from his wrist to save her life. There was no denying that. But he did it against a rule generations old. Vampires did not drink from *weres*.

Ever.

She'd have to look at the law books to see when last the taboo had been broken and what might have been the consequences. It had to have been something dire, since no one dared risk it. Hell, no one even *talked* about risking it.

Not until now.

### Chapter Three

Jericho glanced past her, and then stiffened. He tilted his chin in the air, his attention now fixed above her head. Lia whirled to find Syler and her father standing a few feet behind her. Beyond them, one of the healers and a phalanx of vampire guards stood at the ready.



“Lia!” Syler called. He ran toward them and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. “I thought you were a goner, girl. I mean, that’s what I told your father. She’s a goner, I said.”

Crap. She looked past Syler at her father, then pulled away. She dipped in a curtsy, her head bowed.

Jason Hampton stood as regal as ever. Long silver hair hung past his shoulders over the soft, silken material of his coat. Their faces so similar in features, no one could ever mistake her as the daughter of anyone else.

She said, “I’m unharmed,*Lugh* . Thank you for seeing to my welfare.”

He raked her over with his gaze. “So it would seem.” His attention shifted to Jericho. “Is it true that you were attacked because your guard left you vulnerable?”

Straight to the point. She could expect nothing less.

Jericho’s jaw clenched before he spoke. “My *Lugh*...”

“*Lugh*, I am alive because my guard thought quickly. He found a human for me to feed from when I needed it the most.”

Jason walked to where she stood and cupped her face in his hands. Blue eyes, similar to her own, stared back at her. She leaned into his touch, treasuring a rare moment of intimacy with her father. His gentle voice whispered in her mind.

*You are alright, truly, Aurelia?*

*Yes, papa.*

*You seem... different.*

She almost looked away. Could he tell?*Perhaps a little shaken, but it’s fading. I’ll be fine.*

*Have my healers look at you just in case.*

She nodded.*Yes, papa. Thank you.*

*Tell me. Were you left unattended? Is this why you were attacked?*

This time she did look away, shame burning through her. *Please do not fault them. I left their care as you have so often advised against. The fault is solely mine, papa. The guard—he saved my life.*

“Then, I owe this guard a debt of gratitude, it seems.” Jason dropped his hands and walked to Jericho. He paused in front of him before saying anything. Loud enough for his words to be heard by all present, he said, “You are credited with saving the life of the prima lux. What reward would you have?”

Lia exchanged a look with Syler. It would be interesting to see what he asked for. A reward from the Lugh meant he could request almost anything and know he would get it.

Jericho remained at attention. A true credit to her father’s guardsmen. “I would humbly ask that my obligation to your service be satisfied in the time agreed upon and not extended for any reason. Other than that, my Lugh, the safety of the prima lux is all the reward I need.”

Her eyebrows shot up at his statement. Of all the things he could have requested, this would have never crossed her mind.

A hesitant smile crept onto her father’s face. He seemed as intrigued by the ‘reward’ as the rest of them. “Are you sure, guard? This is not the time to be humble.”

“Yes, Lugh. It’s all I need.”

“Then it is so.” He started to turn away, but turned back, resting his chin on two fingers. “But I will request a favor from you in the meanwhile.”

“Lugh?”

“Until my daughter marries a week from now, I would have you act as her personal guard...”

The steady drum of Lia’s heart stopped for a fraction of time. She might have even blacked out for a second or two, but couldn’t be certain.

“We’ll make other arrangements for her safety at that point,” the Lugh finished.

Jericho lost his composure just long enough to glance at her. He remembered himself, his spine stiffening. “It would be my honor, Lugh.”

“Oh, girl!” Syler squeaked. Gods, she’d almost forgotten he stood by. “You’re moving up in the world! Your own personal hunk for a guard. My life should be so fortunate.”

First, she lived in a station that allowed her almost no freedom. Then because of said station she would be auctioned off to the highest bidder to be his spouse. Finally, to top it all off, she earned her own private baby sitter until that time.

Yeah. Fortunate wasn’t the word she would have picked.

She looked at Jericho’s chiseled face again. This next week would prove to be very interesting.

\* \* \* \*

Shit. This was supposed to be an easy assignment. Just a bit of following the prima lux around and then he would be through. The duty to his family over. Duty to the Lugh over. After that, just a simple life alone with no responsibilities to weigh him down ever again.

All he wanted was to be left in peace. He didn’t want fame. Didn’t want fortune. Just a simple life. Was that really too much to ask? Although, maybe this wouldn’t be too bad. Just a single week. One week of following her around. The original plan still maintained with just a slight twist.

He could feel his inner wolf panting with excitement because it knew the truth as well as he did, no matter how much he didn’t want to face it.

How could he effectively protect a woman whose bed he wanted to slip into? If being with her came even remotely close to what he imagined when she fed from him, staying out of her bed would be an impossible task. What if it wasn’t imagined? What if...

Gods. No matter how he sliced it, he was screwed.

Her father asked too much. He couldn’t do this. What gave him the right to ask this of him? The fact he wore the title *Lugh* like a second skin?

Jericho’s shoulders slumped.

Yep. That would do it.

He stood inside her bedroom now, facing the closed door. The first time he stepped through the entrance and spotted the large bed, he almost whimpered. It seemed to take up all of

the floor space. If any other piece of furniture occupied the room, he'd be damned if he could find it. All he could see was that bed. Just sitting there all dressed up and calling to him. Turning his back to it seemed the only way he could tolerate its presence.

A silky voice said, "You don't have to just stand there, you know."

His pulse quickened at the voice. Her voice.

Without turning, he sighed. "Prima lux, I'm not comfortable with being in here at all. This is... inappropriate."

He could hear the rustle of her clothing as she walked across the room in some strapless number that left her back exposed. Although the skirts reached the floor, the top gave him a full-on erection. Beneath the layers of sheer material, he could see the outline of her nipples quite clearly. Thank the gods she wore a shawl over it when outside of her room and in the presence of others. But they weren't outside of her room right now.

"Jericho, we need to talk about what happened last night. In here is about the only place we're guaranteed privacy."

"But prima lux..."

"Would you just call me Lia, please? Out there, prima lux. In here, just Lia." Her harsh tone softened. "Please."

"We really have nothing to talk about. We did what was necessary. I would do it again if it would save your life, prima lux."

Something soft hit his back. Startled, he turned to find one of her small throw pillows on the floor. When he glanced up, he found himself staring into her angry face. The torrential force of it caught him by surprise.

"I have a name. It is Aurelia. Or Lia. Do you get that? Lia. Say it."

He arched an eyebrow and valiantly worked to hold his twitching mouth still. "Lia."

"Again." The look on her face defied him to say anything other than what she directed him to say. "Lia."

His lips curved into a rueful smile. So this was the prima lux? Correction, Lia. Not the dainty little thing he took her for at first, at all. The commands, the tone were impressive.

“Lia.”

She stabbed a finger in his direction. “Out there, prima lux. In here, Lia. Got that?”

He inclined his head. “As you wish, Lia.”

“You’re damn right,” she snapped.

Jericho couldn’t help himself. He laughed.

A few minutes later, he sat across from her in a small receiving room. He was saved from embarrassing himself when she draped her shoulders with the shawl. As they progressed with their conversation, he started to realize he might have been wrong about this assignment, after all.

The consummate hostess, she poured him hot coffee as they settled themselves at the table. That she would serve humbled him. He expected some servant of the family to shuffle in at any point and take over, but she seemed quite at ease with the task. If anyone outside heard of the vampire serving *awere*, the community would come to an immediate halt. And heads would roll.

Most likely, his.

“You’re not what I expected,” he said after taking a sip of the brew.

The smile she gave him lit her eyes. “And what did you expect?”

“I don’t know. You have all this.” He gestured to the room. “I just expected different from you pri—Lia.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, Jericho.”

She put down her cup and looked away. He took the opportunity to scrutinize her face. He was amazed to find her skin wasn’t the flawless porcelain he once took it for. An old scar ran a short distance along her jaw line. She also had a small smattering of freckles across her nose. Her large blue eyes drew him away from everything else, though. If she smiled, it gave her a glow that resonated from a beauty also found on the inside.

Her gaze remained fixed on the picture hanging next to them. “You know, I’m no virgin, but I’m at a loss as to how to begin this conversation.”

He coughed as he inhaled coffee down the wrong pipe. By the time he cleared his airway, a faint wheeze sounded from his lungs. "That's as good a start as any."

She chuckled. "I suppose it is. And I suppose I should approach the rest by just jumping in with both feet?"

"By all means."

"Okay, then. Well, I don't know how or why, but *we were intimate*, Jericho. I could feel you, or something that represented you, inside my body. That's never happened to me before, not while feeding."

Gods. Maybe both feet were a little too much. The erection he held at bay came roaring back with a vengeance.

He shrugged, the gesture an attempt to shift his entire body and hide his enthusiastic friend. "It was probably a result of your being so close to death. I wouldn't expect it to happen again."

"You think so?"

"It's possible and really, it doesn't matter. It's not something either of us plans on repeating, right?"

Jericho brought the cup to his mouth, poised to take another sip. When she didn't answer, he almost forgot he held it there. She nibbled on her thumbnail as she stared back at him. He could almost see a question forming in her mind.

"Lia?"

"I'm thinking."

He didn't know whether or not he was secretly thrilled at how long it was taking her to respond with a simple *no*. "Lia..."

"Wait. See, this is what I'm thinking..."

She didn't get to finish her sentence because Jericho went on alert. He put the cup down and raised his finger to his lips in a gesture for her silence. He couldn't be concerned as to whether or not she would be offended because he had other things on his mind.

Someone outside was listening at the door.

## Chapter Four

“What is it?” she asked when Jericho started to rise.

While keeping one hand raised for her to remain silent, his other hand drifted to the weapon on his hip. He maneuvered to place himself between Lia and the door, ready for anything. With the attack on her life the previous night, the reason for which had never been explained, he couldn't be too careful.

The faint scent of vampire drifted to him, but put him only a little at ease. The man last night had been a vampire too. It would be difficult to gain access to the inside of the complex for just anyone, but that didn't make it impossible. Even if the person belonged, their hesitation outside of the door lasted far too long for his comfort.

Just as he placed a hand on the doorknob, it turned. As the door opened, he stepped behind it, flattening himself against the wall. The move allowed the person to walk into the room without detecting him. From the open doorway, the eavesdropper would only see Lia still seated at the table.

He watched as the servant he expected to serve them earlier swept into the room with a small platter of food. She placed it down on the table, acknowledging Lia with a polite greeting. Lia responded in kind, keeping her attention fixed to the servant. Nothing in her manner alerted the middle-aged woman of Jericho's presence behind the door. He stayed there until she left the room, moving only once the door began to shut.

“Did you think all that was really necessary?” Lia looked at him with her head cocked.

“It can't hurt to be careful. Though, her behavior bothers me. She knew I was here, yet didn't act surprised when she did not see me,” he replied. He sheathed his weapon before joining her at the table again.

“What makes you so certain?”

“She listened at the door for almost a full minute before entering.”

Lia's eyes widened. “So what are you suggesting? I'm sure she only wanted to make sure she didn't interrupt us at an inopportune time. Besides, what happens in my private quarters is not meant to be gossip fodder for the servants and, therefore, is none of her concern.”

Jericho snorted.

“Something on your mind, *were* ?”

“Have you thought about who might be trying to kill you, Lia? The attempt could have been successful.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “It is part of who I am. Part of my life. I, in particular, especially until I am wed, will always be someone’s target.”

“You don’t seem upset by it.”

“Because it’s the way of things. Our community is strong and after I wed,” she paused, a dark cloud shadowing her face, “after that day, the strength of my family will be unrivaled.”

Jericho blinked at her in disbelief. “You say that as if you would expect no less. The attempts on your life, I mean.”

Again, the wistful idea of living simply during his last days as a guard fluttered just beyond reach. If attempts on her life were part of her every day existence, as she insisted, he’d been placed in a precarious situation. If anything at all happened to her while she remained under his care, he could kiss his own ass goodbye.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Jericho, but no human or werewolf likes a vampire that is too strong and that’s what I’d be.”

“Wait a minute,” he interrupted. “What does this have to do with werewolves or humans? A blood-sucker attacked you last night.”

Her face reddened. “Of course not. It had to be a human or werewolf. You’re mistaken in your assumption.”

“It is no assumption and I *amnot* mistaken, Lia. I know what I scented last night. A vampire attacked you.”

Lia chewed her bottom lip as she stared at him. Her voice chilled a few degrees when she finally spoke. “A vampire would never dare.”

“What makes you so certain, so sure none of your kind is beneath assassinating you?”



“Because *I* am prima lux! Second only to the Lugh. My wishes, my words are law! None of my kind would dare harm a hair on my body.”

To argue with her would only fan her anger even further. He knew what he knew. The fair-haired man reeked of vampire and newly spilled blood—just as most others of his kind did. If she wanted to believe vamps were above killing one of their own, he could only prove it to her by exposing the assassin in the act. Since Ross had been unsuccessful in apprehending the man, future encounters seemed inevitable. Hopefully, she would be married before the next attempt and that burden wouldn’t be his to bear.

Although, the thought of her marrying someone else made his stomach knot.

“You look disturbed, Jericho. “ Her raised eyebrow and half-smile mocked him. “As if you don’t believe I have that power over my community.”

Why didn’t she get it? Power—especially too much power—encouraged violence against her, not prevented it. Still, it was not his place to draw her attention to what seemed obvious to him.

He inclined his head, dropping his eyes with the motion. “I did not mean to offend...”

“Cut it out. Speak freely to me.”

First he was to call her by name, then she encouraged him to speak freely? Her ancestors were probably not just turning in their graves, but spinning at full-throttle.

“You are a fascinating person, Lia.”

She laughed. “I seriously doubt that’s what you were thinking a moment ago.”

“True,” he acknowledged with a smile. “But it’s what I’m thinking now.”

“So you’re not going to tell me?”

“What I was thinking?” He shook his head. “No, Lia. Not unless you order me to.”

“Is it so bad?”

“Not at all.”

“Then I will wait until the day you think you can trust me enough to tell me what’s on your mind, Jericho.”

One day they might get there, but he doubted it. He picked up his cooled coffee, took a sip and said, “Until that day, then.”

\* \* \* \*

Lia baited him every chance she got.

Something about having him so close day after day roused her desire to push him into behaving some way other than with the detached emotion he wore as he waited by her side. He could be a slab of granite for all the excitement he showed as he stood by patiently as she finished her everyday chores and mundane tasks of her office. Of course, nothing about preparing to be the next Lugh was terribly stimulating, but he just *stood there*. It irritated her to no end. Especially since she got occasional peeks at the other side of him and knew something else existed beneath the sultry exterior.

In the evenings, before she retired to bed, he accompanied her on walks through her father’s garden. The strolls were a habit her mother instilled in her before she died. Years later, Lia realized they were originally intended to heel some of the raging hormones of a teenage vampire. Now, they calmed the mind of a burgeoning politician.

The first night, he walked a few steps behind her. Not close enough for conversation, but close enough to be at her side in the blink of an eye if need be.

The following night, she let him keep up that distance for about ten minutes before she made him walk beside her. Conversation started slowly, but he made for an interesting partner.

By the third night, he offered his arm—which she gladly clasped. The halting conversation she sparked the evening before flowed smoothly this night. He spoke of his homeland, a place he wanted to return to, while she told him of her youth in the community. By the end of the evening, she did not want to retire from his presence. He reminded her of Syler. Of the way he could make her forget who she was while in his presence. For that, she cherished him.

No matter his apparent ease, every night the furtive glances at their surroundings might have been precautionary against any danger, but she suspected he kept an eye out for anyone who might not like the way they interacted. He was so hell-bent on maintaining appearances.

As if it mattered. She was *prima lux* . No matter how many different ways she tried to

explain it, he just didn't get what that meant. But, no matter what, she appreciated the attempts at maintaining her reputation.

Could she help it her reputation could stand a little tarnish and he was such a convenient target?

"So you really think women with piercings in exotic places are sexy?"

"Gods, Lia." Jericho groaned. "How did we get on this topic?"

She laughed at the consternation in his voice. If the moon shone brighter, she had no doubt as to the blush that would be coloring his cheeks. After catching her breath, she pleaded, "Just tell me!"

"I will answer no such question from you." The smile he tried to unsuccessfully squelch continued to turn up the corners of his mouth.

Four days. In four short days they'd become friends. His sexual appeal often dropped in to say hello to her flustered hormones, but he seemed to have beaten any desires he may have harbored into submission.

She was not so fortunate.

When she looked up at him, she often glimpsed the pulse in his neck beating in tune just for her. He also had a unique scent of earthiness and cloves which lingered even when he left. Last night he leaned close and the urge to bite him again overwhelmed her. He didn't seem to notice. But that moment went with her into the bedroom that night.

"Oh, fine. But if you're not going to answer that one, I have another one for you."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what it is," he replied. A smile still curved his lips.

"Well, this one's a little personal."

"And asking me what I find sexy isn't?"

She thought for a minute on how best to phrase her question. "Is it true what they say about werewolves?"

He shrugged. "I guess it depends on what they say."

“I was thinking about why it didn’t make sense for a vampire to attack me the other night.”

“That again?”

“And I came up with something that makes sense.”

Her hand rested in the crook of his arm. When Jericho stopped walking, she paused beside him. “Go on,” he said, looking down on her.

“You’re the first werewolf I’ve really gotten to know and I don’t have any one else to ask. So here goes.” Lia took a deep breath before continuing. “I’ve heard that *weres* can be a little... impulsive.”

The moment she felt him tense, she regretted the statement.

“Impulsive,” he repeated.

In for a penny, in for a pound. “I’ve heard that sometimes they can... well, kind of lose control. That’s why they can be dangerous to have around.”

He turned to face her, his eyes angry slits. “Do you consider me too dangerous to be around you?”

“No, of course not!” Gods, why had she started this conversation? “Just something I heard.”

“Don’t be so quick to believe everything you hear, prima lux.”

Now she’d done it. He only reverted to her title when they were alone if she pushed him too far. Any other friend would have stalked off by now. Her guard waited for her to make the first move. But if he were truly her friend and not just an employee, she should apologize. She had no problem apologizing as a vampire to a werewolf, but for the prima lux to apologize?

Never.

She bit her lip. Then again, *never* was such a strong word.

Jericho raked a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. “Please don’t look so

stricken. I did not mean to offend, Lia.”

“You haven’t...”

“What you’ve heard has some truth to it. *Weres* can be dangerous and impulsive. But for us, it has to do with the call of the moon. When that time comes, we are unpredictable. Thank the gods, we know in advance when it will happen.”

“Only for one night, right? The full moon?”

“Right,” he said. “I say we’re better off for knowing what will happen. Not like other creatures who can turn on a whim.”

“Is that some sort of veiled shot at vampires?” She smiled.

His gray eyes flashed at her. “If the shoe fits.”

“Well,” she huffed, “I can’t speak for other vamps, but I am not impulsive.”

“Oh?”

“Do you think I’m impulsive?” It was her turn for hackles to rise.

“I’d say in the right circumstances you could be.”

Lia put balled up hands on her hips. “Oh yeah? And when would that be?”

Jericho glanced down both directions of the path. She reacted on simple instinct by backing up when he rushed forward. In three large strides, he had her all but pinned between him and the tall hedges at her back. He stood close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from his body, less than an inch of space separating them.

His head dropped down next to hers so his breath tickled her skin as he spoke. “In the right circumstances, Lia, your senses are as heightened as my own.”

He knew her kind so well. She *could* detect the blood pulsing through his neck. Could almost hear it roaring through his veins.

“If I stood here long enough, if you were hungry enough,” he whispered, “this would tempt you to do something impulsive.”

Her eyelids fluttered closed. Since the other night, she fed meagerly. Just enough to get by. Something about knowing what she missed out on prevented her from enjoying vampire blood. His close proximity, the memories from before teased her mercilessly.

“Are you hungry, Lia?” He sniffed the hair tucked behind her ear. Traveled over the crown of her head, exposing his neck even more to her.

She wasn’t just hungry. She was ravenous.

“Jericho,” she said on a breath. He’d proven his point. She pressed her hands against his firm abdomen, ready to push him away.

He turned his head. “Do it,” he teased, his voice husky. “Do it, Lia.”

Her canines throbbed a tortuous beat. She could almost taste him, taste the salty skin that would yield beneath her before a burst of his sweet blood poured into her mouth. Just one taste. One little taste would ease the burning need for him. It didn’t have to happen again after this.

Just this one time...

All thoughts of pushing him away fled and she curled her hands into the waist of his pants. Jericho pulled her into his arms as she sank her teeth into his neck.

## Chapter Five

Lia couldn’t tell which intoxicated her more. The rush of blood feeding her aching, hungry desire or the sizzling heat of eroticism flooding her mind.

Her body took over for her, rational thought evaporating like a mist. She pulled from him, the warm flow spreading sensuously over her tongue. The more she drank, the more she yearned for him.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt his arms tighten around her waist. Heard his gasping moan. Pressed against him, she felt the hardening evidence of his own passion against her stomach as she fed.

The longer she stood in his embrace, the more alive her body became. Between her thighs was slick with moisture, as needful and greedy as her bloodlust. A shudder knifed through her because Jericho shifted, the motion brushing him against her clit, already desperate for attention.

In her mind's eye, his hands explored her body. Touched. Teased. *Aroused* .

There, he was inside of her, filling her. Completing her.

His scent clung to her skin as she gripped him tighter, pulled him closer. Their mouths caressed, their tongues battling. He drank down her cries, the awakening of raw emotions overwhelming and consuming.

She met him thrust for thrust, the crescendo she sought just outside of her reach. Then she was there. With him, she climbed to the pinnacle of pleasure, to topple over it seconds later.

Lia screamed as an orgasm raced through her veins, immobilizing her in his arms. His hot breath caressed her in short bursts as he came with her. His cock pulsed his seed against her womb, her pussy drinking in each torrent. Jericho trembled beneath her hands, the moisture of his sweat threatening to make her lose her grip. She clung harder, tighter because this was where she wanted to be. Needed to be. In his arms for as long as he would have her there.

"Lia," he moaned. Although his cheek rested against hers, his voice sounded weak, distant.

Something about the way his heart pounded with an erratic beat next to hers dragged Lia back to the present. She opened her eyes to find they were both kneeling in the grass, the hedge of bushes the only thing holding them upright. Her mouth was still clamped to his neck, his blood still fueling her.

*Oh gods.*

Frantic, Lia pulled away from him, almost forgetting to lick the wound closed. His face was pale, his body swaying as if he would topple over should she let him go.

"Jericho!"

He seemed as if he didn't have the strength to even open his eyes. Too much blood. In the midst of a haze, she'd taken away too much from him.

She looked up and down the path, looking for someone to help them. "Guards!" she screamed. "Guards!"

"Sh-shouldn't have tempted you." His mumbled words and feeble attempts to push away from her gave Lia a small measure of comfort. He had enough strength to talk and try to stand.

With a smattering of the gods' blessings, by tomorrow he should recover well enough.

"Hold on, Jericho," she whispered against him.

The sound of feet pounding on the thick cushion of grass drew closer. Lia looked up to find three of her father's guards running toward them. All three men had their blades in hand, their combined stares fixed on where Lia and Jericho kneeled on the ground.

More noises alerted her to additional guards coming from the opposite direction of the path. Ross, in fact, led this group. The determined look on his face darkened as he approached.

"Prima lux," he panted, "are you injured?"

She shook her head. "He's ill."

Before she recognized what he was doing, Ross gripped her shoulders. He pulled her away from Jericho who managed to stay upright by some small miracle.

"But how are you?"

She shrugged loose from his grip. "I'm fine, Ross. *Helphim*."

Her eyes narrowed at the older vamp when a low growl sounded in his throat. He didn't dare disobey her, but he didn't look pleased by one iota.

Hands on hips, he looked down at Jericho whose ashen face alarmed her. With a bored tone, Ross said, "On your feet, guard."

Lia could have screamed at him. This was so stinkin' typical of vampires. She dropped next to Jericho, putting her arm around his waist. He tried to shove away from her as he fumbled in his efforts to stand, but determined, she pressed herself against his side.

She looked up at Ross. "If I have to repeat myself, captain, you will not like it."

It must have been the light, but she could have sworn the look that crossed his face was venomous. Ross snapped his fingers and jerked his head to Jericho. Wordlessly, two of the men sheathed their weapons. With her assistance, they managed to prop him up, his legs unwilling to hold his weight.

Ross stepped up to Jericho, peering into his face. He sniffed him, his eyebrows knitting.



His gaze drifted to Lia. He stared at her, and said, "Take him to his quarters. Whatever illness he has, we do not want it infecting the prima lux."

The men started away, half-carrying, half-walking the werewolf between them.

She started behind them, but Ross stepped into her path. His voice raised, he said, "I will escort you to your quarters, prima lux." He spoke softer then, just loud enough for her alone to hear. "You and I should talk."

The subtle undertone of menace punctuated his statement. It should have been a request for them to talk. Not an order. No matter how long he'd been a part of their family's protection, she wouldn't tolerate any form of disrespect from him. Only his seniority saved him from facing her wrath as it rose to the surface.

When the other guards were out of earshot, Lia whirled on him. "How dare you?" she hissed.

Ross studied her face dispassionately. "That werewolf has been bitten recently."

Blood drained from her face at his words. There was no way he should be able to tell. *None*. Her mind blanked on how to respond to him.

He stepped forward into her personal space. "I need not remind the prima lux of the consequences of feeding from the tainted."

No. She knew better than most what would happen if they were found out. "You forget your place, guard. Your words sound almost threatening to my ears."

He inclined his head, a wicked glint dancing in his eyes. "I did not mean to offend, prima lux."

Lia gathered the remains of her courage, including every ounce of contempt she could muster. "Then see to it that you don't!"

Ross half-bowed. He murmured, "Prima lux."

She strode away from him, certain tonight would not be the last time she heard of this.

\* \* \* \*

“I meant to ask, who’s the stiff standing guard? And what happened to the one I wanted to get stiff?”

Lia chuckled. “Syler, must you always be so exasperating?”

Some of the cherry wine sloshed over the rim of the glass he held as he shrugged in her direction. “What? He’s a hunky piece of meat even if he’s *awere* .”

Hunky piece of meat, indeed.

When Jericho didn’t wait for her outside of her bedroom this morning, she all but panicked. As casually as her trembling voice would allow, she inquired as to his health from the guard who replaced him. When he told her Jericho would resume his duties later on in the day, Lia could have collapsed with relief.

“He’ll be back on duty by this evening. He took ill last night.”

Syler’s purple painted lips matched the black and purple ensemble he’d fashioned himself in this morning. No matter what she wore, Lia always felt downright plain standing next to him.

He clapped his hands giddily. “So,” he said, cocking an eyebrow, “making any progress in that department?”

“I am not even going to entertain that question, Syler.”

“Then I won’t mention the blush on your face when I mentioned him.”

“I did not blush!”

His smile broadened. “Oh girl, if you weren’t blushing before, you are now.”

She almost pushed away from the table and stood, but what would be the point? He was like a hunter after its prey and would not be deterred. From the day they met, Syler did whatever he wanted, said whatever he pleased. Maybe a slight change in the topic might help.

“Since you’re always in the know, maybe you can answer something for me.”

“Juice? You know I love to dish!” He leaned forward conspiratorially after taking another sip of wine.

“This has to stay between just you and me.”

“You know you didn’t even have to mention that.”

Lia nodded. “I know, but you have to promise me.”

“Pinky swear!”

She took a deep breath. In for a penny. “Tell me. What do you know about the rule behind not feeding from *weres*?”

For the first time in ten years, Syler appeared at a loss. His mouth dropped open, but no words tumbled out for several minutes. “Well, uh.” He swallowed twice. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me the why.”

In the privacy of her rooms, she felt secure enough to pursue this line of questioning with him. If anyone would know about the forbidden rules of the community, it would be Syler. He single-handedly pushed the boundaries of each and every one of them.

“Lia, this is a dangerous conversation.”

Or maybe not.

Although he’d been in her receiving room more times than she could count, for the first time he looked uneasily at the walls surrounding them.

“You do realize I was just kidding, right? You know the part about getting it on with the *were*?” The deadpan look she gave him hastened him into speaking again. “Okayyy, it’s your ass. All I know is that it started some war or something way back when.”

“No!”

“Yes!” He slapped the table with his fingertips.

“You have to give me more details than that.”

Syler sank back into his chair. “Sorry. I don’t know more than that. Just tell me you’re

not seriously taking what I said about that guard of yours to heart? Like I said, it started a war, as in people killing other people, war.”

“I don’t know if I believe a little romance can truly start a war. That’s the kind of stuff you read about.”

“Believe it or not. It’s what I know.”

Lia must have been lost in her thoughts for a little too long. His voice soft, Syler asked, “Is he worth it?”

Before she could answer, a knock on the door sounded. Lia flashed him a rueful smile. “Come in!” She turned to Syler. “Maybe they’re bringing us some of those little nut things you like so much.”

She heard the door swing open, and reached for her cup to refill it. Her attention shifted to him just long enough to spy Syler’s raised eyebrows when the gentle hush of noise stopped.

“No, I think this is for you,” he said.

After a glance at the person walking through the doorway, she put down the cup, and her breath caught in her chest. The force of her beating heart could probably be heard a dozen communities away. She didn’t know what to say, how to react, but from the moment Jericho walked into the room, she lost focus on everything else but him.

He still was an alarming shade of pale, but the man looked good. Sexy. Almost as if he hadn’t lost his natural color, but was meant to be this glowing shade of alabaster. The dark browns and blacks of his uniform made his skin stand out even more.

Gods. He really looked good.

His gray eyes turned smoky as he stared back at her. Neither exchanged a word. She could see the tension in his stance. The way he stood immobilized, unable to take another step. Lia sat similarly paralyzed in place.

His attention flitted to Syler for the briefest of seconds. Just long enough for a flash of disappointment to cloud his face.

Jericho ambled to her, his stride slow and seductive. It was an invitation or perhaps a plea, a notice to anyone who watched of his longing, his need. When he dropped to a knee before her, his very proximity seemed to steal the air from her lungs. He reached for her hand, raising it

to his mouth.

“Prima lux, I am once again at your service,” he murmured. Then he lifted her hand to his lips.

Lia’s mouth went dry as he brushed a kiss across each knuckle of her hand. He hovered over each before the unending torment finally ceased. Her skin came alive beneath his touch, every nerve ending singing in chorus. Rapture, or something damned close to it, sparked alive. If she feared even the tiniest amount of the consequences of almost draining him dry yesterday, it evaporated in an instant.

He lifted his eyes to meet hers before rising to his feet. When he removed his hand, his fingers drifted across her palm in an intimate gesture which spoke of secrets. Desires.

Without saying another word, he turned and left. By the time the door clicked shut, Lia remembered to start breathing again. He’d only been in the room for a matter of seconds, but to her, it lasted an eternity.

She was smitten. No other word could describe it.

“Well, girl,” Syler said after clearing his throat. “If a man looked at me like that man just looked at you, I’d risk a war too.”

## Chapter Six

Serve his time, then get out of there. His duty done. Never to haunt him or his family again. After that, he could go home and live out his days on a pension that would keep him just outside of poverty until he died of old age.

Falling hard for the prima lux had never been a part of that plan.

After she’d bitten him, he lay in bed nauseous, his stomach rolling, and all but gasping for air because his body desperately missed the oxygen-rich blood she’d pulled from him. Based on the horrified expression on her face, it was obvious she hadn’t meant to weaken him. The fact she could impress him. It took a lot to bring werewolves to their knees.

During that moment in the gardens, it only seemed fair that he should send some temptation her way. Having to stay by her side for three-quarters of the day, watching her graceful movements, steadying his breath when she emerged in one of those outfits designed to tease, or sharing intimate yet chaste pastimes together made his pulse race. He could only watch with envy as vampire males approached her or conversed with her without a second thought. They didn’t have to maintain their distance, or bow subserviently or any myriad of actions that

demeaned themselves in her eyes on an hourly basis. When she added insult to injury by calling his kind 'impulsive', he didn't think. He just reacted.

So he had what she'd done coming. No denying that. If anything, he owed *her* an apology. He would also make certain he offered no other temptations. They pushed their luck the first time she bit him. A second time dangled their lives in front of Fate who appeared displeased with them both. A third time and who knew what would happen?

The moment he stepped inside her suite and saw her sitting there, once again, the blood drained from his brain to head south. She had no idea the effect cleavage spilling over her bustier had on him physiologically. Nevermind the fact it made him swear under his breath. The moment she shifted and he saw just a whisper of a hint of her dusky areolae, his heart stopped beating. His mind stopped thinking. And instinct took over.

If her friend hadn't been in the room, Jericho had the sinking feeling he would have emerged from there a few pints lighter of blood. Not that he would have minded.

Thank the gods she had an escort. Although, even that barely stopped him from showing his heart to her. Once upon a time, he would have considered himself too much of a loner to want to feel the touch of the same woman on a regular basis, but just caressing her hand for those few seconds pleased him to no end.

What was he thinking, really? This could only end badly no matter how they played it. For heaven's sake, he'd not just fallen for any woman. It had to be a vampire. Destined to be the next Lugh.

Oh yeah. To make certain those two things weren't obstacle enough, add in the fact she would be getting married in a few days.

Gods.

He stood outside her quarters now, waiting for her to emerge for the evening. Calloused hands scrubbed over his face as he wished for some sort of reprieve. The way things were going, he was going to be nursing a wounded heart for years to come. As long as he had something to do with it, he would make certain she wouldn't experience that pain. Not because of him.

\* \* \* \*

"You've been very quiet."

He glanced down at her. "Just lost in thought, *prima lux*."

“Since when do you call—oh, I get it. You’re angry with me.”

Jericho shook his head, unwilling to say more. This was harder than he thought. He wanted to distance himself, wanted to make certain they maintained a professional relationship. Better late than never.

But as Lia walked beside him, holding onto his arm as the skirts of her dress swished quietly with her steps, the silence annoyed him too. He wanted to talk with her, ask her more questions about herself and her dreams of the future, even ask about her past. His ears were almost desperate with the desire to hear her jubilant laugh. Damn difficult to do any of it when he pretended to be aloof.

Off in the distance, a bird called a lonely song. Once upon a time, he might have ignored it. Now, he wondered about animal nature. The primal instinct to hunt, feed and procreate with nothing more than those simple needs driving a species. His wolf’s needs were the same. Over the course of the last week, the human part of him arose with an ache, however. A desperate need for companionship and love. He couldn’t help but wonder when it was time to leave her side, would he be able to just walk away from her?

“I think you *are* angry, Jericho. You haven’t ignored me like this since the first night I met you.”

How could he explain he wasn’t angry? What words would make her understand how he was willing to give up everything he was, everything he’d dreamed about for years for just the chance to interact with her as a man and a woman should? Not just sex. But the ability to talk with her in the open, walk hand in hand, dream about a real future with her?

“I am not angry, *prima lux*.”

“Please don’t call me that,” she said quietly. “You must know I never meant to harm you.”

This had to end.

“That’s just it, Lia.” He stopped, pulling away from her so they could face each other. “You didn’t mean to hurt me, and you never will mean to. I never want to hurt you. But look at us. Our relationship is changing. Has changed. And if we continue as we have been, one or both of us will end up hurt.”

“I can resist feeding from—“

“Not the feeding, Lia. I mean... I mean I can't stand being near you any more. I can't stand the pain I get right here,” he clutched his chest, “when I think about the fact that in a few days I will never see you again. Never talk to you again. That you will be another man's *wife* .”

“Oh, Jericho.” She seemed as surprised by his confession as he was.

He laughed bitterly. “If anyone overheard my words right now, your father could order my death. Just my words, Lia. Under these circumstances, how could one of us not end up being hurt?”

“I cannot change who I am. What you and I are. What others would say.” She reached up to stroke his cheek.

Warmth spread over his face from her touch. He almost leaned into it before remembering himself. Pulling away from her hurt him deeply. He sighed. “I know.”

“Where do we go from here?” She wrapped her arms around herself.

Gods, he wanted to pull her into his embrace. Provide her what comfort he could. Instead, he steeled himself. “No more feedings.”

“Agreed.”

“And this, our friendship, must stop, prima lux.”

Her voice hitched. “I-I don't have many friends, Jericho. Please.”

“I can't do my job well if I'm not objective, prima lux. I should have never let it get to this point.”

“Please, Jericho...”

He could see her attempt at keeping her hands to herself. She grasped the material of her clothing with a white-knuckled grip, only to loosen her hold a moment later. When she tightened her fingers on the material again, he knew for certain the torment she went through.

“Lia, prima lux, please don't make this harder than it already is.”

“But I don't understand why this has to change now! Why it cannot wait until... later.”



Later. The day of her marriage later. The day she was no longer his charge. She didn't have to say the word for him to know she avoided thinking about it as much as he did. But not saying it out loud didn't change the fact it fast approached.

"Because I'm afraid of what might happen if we wait."

Her blue eyes shone in the moonlight. The hurt and disappointment dulled their edges. "What could possibly happen?"

Jericho knew it at that moment. Knew with certainty as he looked down on her, the air redolent with jasmine and a gentle breeze caressing over them both. He'd tried to do the right thing. He did what duty told him to do. What would save them both heartache later.

But it felt too wrong.

He couldn't do it, couldn't let her go. Gods help him.

He said hoarsely, "This."

Lia wrapped her arms around him when Jericho pulled her close. He studied her lips, giving her this one last chance to stop him, before his mouth descended on hers.

She tasted of sweet spices and heaven. Her lips were soft, molding to his, meeting him as his need grew urgent. She parted her mouth, her tongue delicately seeking his. When they touched, his wolf howled with excitement.

He could lose himself in her forever. Could do nothing more in life than feel her body pressed against his, breathe in her scent, taste the loveliness of her mouth. A soft noise escaped from her, a slow sensual sound of ignited passion.

Twice before he held her in his arms. Twice, in a surreal state, he knew her. Knew the feel of her, knew her scent. The beat of her heart, the way it pounded in time with his, Jericho knew all of this.

What he didn't know was how false it had been.

Nothing could compare to this very moment. The moment of this wondrous kiss. A moment where he was just a man with the woman he was falling in love with.

By the time he pulled away from her, his breathing picked up speed. His pulse roared in his veins. He was trembling—gods, he was trembling as he held her. He hugged her tight

because it was all he could do. If he let her go, he couldn't imagine what it might do to him.

Lia's muffled words were almost indistinguishable against his chest, but he heard the anguish in them. "How did we get here, Jericho? What have we done?"

He didn't know how to answer. In the years of forced discipline, of eating meager rations and marching through miles of wilderness in the name of the Lugh, order ruled his life. Why now, when he needed it the most, could he not force himself to do the one thing that would save them both? Why couldn't he walk away?

She tightened her arms around him and he pulled her as close to him as he could. For just a minute more, if this was all he could have, for just one minute more he wanted to keep her there.

The sounds of someone approaching broke his peace.

There wasn't time to warn her, he could only wrench himself away from her, distancing himself with a few quick steps. When she opened her mouth to protest, he held a finger to his lips. With the other hand, he reached for the blade at his side. His pose relaxed slightly when he realized more than one person approached. Their steps were quick, urgent. Militant.

Two guardsmen trotted toward them, anxiety written on their faces. They paid him no attention as they stepped up to Lia. A faint blush colored her cheeks. She tilted her chin up, her gaze unwavering. Not a strand of hair was out of place. Her clothing molded around her as if a tailor left her only moments ago.

The prima lux stood regal.

"Prima lux, your presence is requested," one of them said as he slowed to a walk.

Only her father would call for her at this hour. She tensed, and once again he wished he could move closer to her. Provide a little comfort during her uncertainty. "By whom?"

"The Lugh requests your presence, prima lux." He turned, ready to escort her back inside the complex. His next words chilled Jericho through the bone.

"Your fiancé has arrived."

## Chapter Seven

Jericho was not permitted to see much of her over the next two days. The arrival of

Lucas Anders spun the complex into a fury.

The following morning, Ross came to his quarters to let him know that his responsibility to the prima lux ended with the arrival of her betrothed. While she prepared for her wedding, she would be continuously surrounded by important members of the community. The security of the entire group would be of the utmost importance. It would be impossible for anyone who didn't belong to approach Lia.

Jericho stood stoic as the news was delivered to him. Inside, a maelstrom of emotion threatened to rend him in two. He wanted to rage against Ross. Tear the place apart. Threaten anyone and everyone who stood in his way until they permitted him to see her.

Instead, he bowed his head toward the vampire. Numb, his eyes devoid of anything that might betray his feelings, he simply responded, "Sire."

Ross told him a new rotation would be available after the wedding. Until then, he could consider himself on leave.

He should have been excited by that news, but he couldn't find the wherewithal to express it. Ross stared at him, studying him before turning to leave. If he heard Jericho collapse onto the chair behind him, wooden legs no longer willing to provide support, the vampire didn't acknowledge it by turning back around.

Jericho found excuses to be inside the complex that day. There, he managed to see glimpses of her. As expected, an entourage continuously surrounded her, always at her beck and call and blocking his complete view. That evening he thought he might catch her alone in her gardens, but despite bribing a fellow guard with a week's wages, he left disappointed. At least he'd stayed long enough to inhale some of the blossoming jasmine he'd grown so used to over the last week. He would have traded a year's wages for the scent to have come from her.

The evening of her engagement party, he decided to change strategy. Rather than spend so much energy looking for her, he needed something else to occupy his time. He wanted to see the man. Lucas Anders.

Jericho stationed himself along the wall of the main receiving room. Unlikely anyone would bother to pay attention to yet another guard standing along the wall of colorful tapestries. The exotic plants next to him would attract more attention. To the vampires congregating, he was just another body in dress uniform.

The Lugh appeared in high spirits at the head of the table. His consort, a striking woman with a mass of red hair sat to his left. They exchanged heated glances that spoke of their desire to be anywhere else but here. Jericho almost could have believed the unspoken exchange for true emotion, but he knew she was just a flavor of the month. When the Lugh tired of draining her

blood, she would be replaced. He went through consorts at an alarming rate. None of them seemed to mind.

He shifted his attention to the man he envied. Lucas was tall, thin and for lack of a better word, glamorous. He epitomized everything the vampire community wanted in its leader's mate. Blond hair spilled down his back, past his waist. Two thin braids framed his angular face where intense blue eyes peered out from beneath dark brows. When he spoke, the gleam of his white canines caught the attention of those he addressed. He stood straight, his lean body evident beneath tailored clothing.

Jericho's heart sank as he scrutinized him. Lia might go into the marriage unwilling, but his outward appearance—if nothing else—would prove a distraction. With time, she might even find love in their union.

On the other hand, he had nothing to offer her, and this man, her betrothed, represented everything he was not. Wealth. Respectability. Power.

"Where is my daughter, Issa?" The Lugh lifted her wrist to his mouth, scraping his teeth against the skin. Another public display of his affection for the woman.

She laughed prettily, her gaze fixed on where he nibbled. "Allow her time to make herself presentable. I'm sure she wants to look her best for her husband-to-be."

"I am patient, my Lugh," Lucas called. "This time allows me an opportunity to get to know the community which will align with ours. Besides, after tomorrow I have eternity to spend with my bride."

Well spoken by someone who did not appear the least bit interested in the people surrounding him. Like his fiancée, he knew when to play the politician. Theirs would be a marriage of power. Nothing more.

The Lugh pulled away from Issa's hand long enough to dip his head in acknowledgement. Lucas turned back to the man at this side, resuming the conversation which had been interrupted.

When the doors to the hall opened a few minutes later, in a wave, the voices in the room fell away. All eyes turned to the prima lux as she glided into the room. Jericho thought his heart would burst from pride as he watched her.

Lia radiated sheer elegance as she made her way toward her father. Her long dark hair was piled on top of her head, a few soft tendrils curling downward to kiss her shoulders. Around her neck, four rows of a dozen diamonds surrounded by rubies sparkled, matching the stones in

her ears. The skin-tight wrap of her ruby-colored dress gave way to a train of material flowing behind her. It didn't look as if there was room enough to breathe in the dress, much less walk. Jericho could only stare in stunned admiration by the way she made it look so easy. Another sign to him that she was meant for this life.

She stopped to curtsy at her father's chair. "My Lugh," she murmured as she rose.

Lucas pushed away from the wall and strode to her. She looked down on him as he knelt on one knee, taking her hand in his. A pained look flashed across her face as he kissed the back of her hand before rising again.

"Lucas." The smile on her lips didn't reach her eyes.

"Prima lux, thank you for deigning yourself by acknowledging me."

She smiled at him again, but said nothing. It could have been because of either humility or wry amusement. Lucas would never know. He may have been a powerful vampire in his own community, but his power did not rival hers.

Jericho's heart went out to her. Maybe the fear she would be attracted to Lucas had been unfounded. They ignored each other equally. When they sat down, Lucas resumed his conversation with the male vampire while Lia stared into the bottom of her wine glass.

She remained stoic for half an hour, her only movement from an occasional sip from her glass. Issa and the Lugh entertained each other on one side of her. Lucas and his staff member argued good-naturedly on her other side.

Unable to watch any more, Jericho made up his mind and prayed for the strength to keep it. She looked forlorn, but the image of her as she sat among her peers, among the other vampires, the rightness of it could not be denied. She was prima lux. He was her guard. Nothing more than an employer-employee relationship could ever be between them.

He shifted out of the shadows, letting the overhead lights shine on his face. He wanted her to see him standing there. One last time he wanted to look into her eyes before letting her go. It hurt through every part of his being to watch her next to Lucas, but loving her only existed in his fantasies. Before he left, he just wanted her to see him one last time.

*Look up.*

As if she heard him, Lia's eyes lifted, zeroing in on him. The smile that curved his lips would not be stopped when her chin tilted upwards too. They locked on to each other, a second's glance echoing the depth of emotion between them. He wanted to tell her a dozen things, but he

was too far away. Had he been closer, he doubted he could have spoken for his mind whirled with all of the things he wanted to say. All he could manage was the weak smile and hope she knew what he would have given up for her. How much she meant to him.

Before it could become too painful, he dropped his chin to his chest and turned. Walking away was the hardest task he'd ever undertaken in his life.

\* \* \* \*

“Jericho, wait!”

Lia was out of breath from running as best she could in the damned dress, but she called the words as if her very life depended on them. By the time she caught up to him, his quarters weren't far away. She almost ran into a few guards who were startled by her harried appearance. They hurried on toward the main complex to avoid missing out on the festivities, though.

He turned on his heel, his spine stiff. The startled look did not give way to the welcome she expected. “Wh-what are you doing?”

She slowed to a stop a few feet from him. Her chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath. Her gaze on him did not waver. Her words husky, full of meaning, she said, “I am not married yet.”

“Prima lux?”

She walked a few steps closer. “Your duty to me is not ended until I am married.”

“Prima lux, please...” His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard.

“We have tonight, Jericho.”

His eyes were wide with apprehension. “Lia...”

“Take me away from here, Jericho,” she whispered. “Please.”

“The Lugh. Your fi-”

“Has been told I am feeling ill.” She walked closer, stopping only when she could feel the heat emanating from his body. “We have tonight... Give me this one night... Please.”

He clenched his eyes shut, obviously torn. Lia slipped her hand in his, holding it tight, praying he would find the strength within himself to do this. If she had to spend the rest of her life married to a man she did not love, just once she wanted to be loved by the man she loved in return.

Something made a noise in the distance and Jericho's eyes opened. An instant later, his mouth firmed into a thin line. He tightened his grip on her hand and started walking. When his stride lengthened and he started to jog, Lia's heart lifted. She almost stumbled when he picked up even more speed. Without slowing, Jericho scooped her into his arms and, at a jog, carried her away from the complex.

She held him tight, trusting his strength. Trusting him.

The beat of his heart matched the cadence of his trot. She didn't know how long he held her against him or where they headed, but she was content just to be here. When he finally slowed, she peered over his shoulder at the grassy plain. She knew this place.

They were surrounded by trees, some of them older than the oldest vampires she knew. The subtle sound of moving water came from only a few feet away. Now, only minutes after sunset, a ghostly haze floated over the grass and shrubbery. Jericho eased her down gently, and she looked up into his luminescent eyes, forgetting the idyllic scene surrounding them. Only seeing him.

He cupped her face in his hands, studying the depths of her eyes. "Lia, we can still go back. It's not too late."

She stared back into the gray eyes she'd come to love. The ones that brightened her mornings and visited her in dreams at night. She stared into them and knew with certainty it was too late for her. She was lost in them and in him.

Reaching down, she began to unfasten the clasps on the side of her dress. With a practiced hand, she loosened one clasp after the other. Jericho's eyes never left hers, but she could feel the quickening of his breath on her skin. At the same moment the dress slid to the ground, he lowered his mouth to hers.

The clove scent of him overwhelmed her. She breathed it in, relishing in it as his mouth caressed hers.

The kiss began slowly, softly. He kissed her as if she were a dream, as if he were afraid she would disappear beneath him. She pressed herself harder against him. Pressed until he wrapped his arms around her tighter, forcing her breath to catch.

She would not allow him to treat her as if she would break. Not this night. This night she was not the prima lux. She was Lia. The woman who loved Jericho.

He responded with the enthusiasm of a starved man and she was his bread.

Lia slipped a hand inside his vest, tugging at the material's ties until they loosened. He helped her by unlatching the cloak around his shoulders which fell to the ground with a soft sigh. Jericho shrugged out of the vest, then shirt, his bare chest available to her probing fingers within moments. A fine crop of hair tickled her palms as she ran her hands over the hard lines of his chest. Skimmed over pebbled nipples. Found the rhythmic beat of his heart.

It matched her own.

He touched his tongue to hers, ran it over her teeth. The casual flick over her sensitive canines sent a bolt of electricity straight down to her sex. She nibbled on him, smiled against his mouth. Her body was humming in anticipation and so far, they had only kissed. By the time he pulled away, they both panted.

"How long do we have?" he gasped.

Her smile broadened.

"All night."

## Chapter Eight

Jericho seemed to realize for the first time that she stood before him in nothing but thin wisps of fabric for coverings. The silky undergarments and thigh-high stockings did little to keep the chill of the evening at bay. He swept over the material with his hands, skimming lightly, stopping nowhere.

She kissed down his chest. Little, tender sweeps of her mouth over his trembling abdomen. With a finger, she traced a network of scars marring the cobblestone perfection. Jericho clenched as she ran over the pale lines of his flesh. She was mesmerized by them. By the pain he hid away from the world. They were old, well-healed, but they represented a reminder that she did not know him as well as she wanted to. She wanted to know all of him... down to the finest detail.

Lia lingered a moment longer then traveled down to the clasp of his pants. He stepped out of his boots as she freed him. Then helped her lower his clothing to the ground.



The length of him was lovely. Erect and already leaking. When she touched him, he drew in a satisfying sharp inhalation of breath.

Bending at the waist, Lia rubbed the dusky head of his cock over her cheek. She inhaled the musky odor of him. Her pussy dampened from the heady, clove scent. She looked up to find him watching her beneath hooded lids. Thrilled, she kept looking into his eyes when she took him into her mouth.

“Gods.” A beautiful sigh escaped him.

Lia swirled her tongue over the soft velvety head of his cock. At his sides, Jericho’s hands clenched and unclenched like he fought with himself to remain motionless while she tended to him.

His mouth parted before his head fell back. With a brisk shake of his head, he looked down again, watching her every moment. His stomach tensed each time his breath caught. Otherwise, Jericho stood immobile.

When she looked up at him again, he focused on her every movement. Tenderness gazed back from his soft gray eyes.

She suddenly recalled the night in the garden. When he told her vampires were impulsive. How he could make her lose control if he wanted to. A wicked thought took root in her mind, growing like a weed.

Payback was a bitch.

Lia hummed against his cock, pulling him deeper into her throat. With this new attention, at last his hips began to rock. She sucked harder, alternating her grip between teasing looseness and determined strength. With a practiced hand, she pumped him into her mouth, sipping on the leaking evidence of his heightened arousal.

“Lia,” he warned through gritted teeth. He’d taken down the clasp in her hair to thread his fingers through it now. He seemed determined to pull her away from him, but she was determined to stay put.

She gasped with delight when he gave up the fight. Jericho’s breath hissed out, his release inevitable. If the gooseflesh erupting over his skin didn’t give away his loss of control, the strangled moans did. He cried out her name as one final warning before he went still. Lia slammed her eyes shut when a torrent flooded her mouth. His cock jerked against her tongue, the musky release sliding down her throat in waves.

By the time she pulled the last drop from him, Jericho was almost doubled over. She released his softening penis with a muted sound, a smile curving her lips when he shuddered. She could have watched him in that moment forever. With his pants puddled at his feet, his cock glistening with moisture and his flushed chest still heaving from exertion, Lia appreciated his vulnerability. The direct contrast with the fierceness she expected from him.

He reached down with hand and helped her stand. Warm arms embraced her, holding her tight against his chest. “You didn’t have to do that,” he murmured against her hair.

Lia smiled. She didn’t have to do it, but she needed to.

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Jericho swayed with her in his hold, his heart pounding. Not just from the excitement of being loved so intimately by her, but by the fact they stood here together. They both risked so much... No. He wouldn’t think about it. He would concentrate on the here and now, leaving tomorrow for tomorrow.

“I have to tell you something, Jericho.”

She was no longer relaxed in his embrace. Whatever she wanted to tell him kept her from seeking his face. Dread started to coil in his gut.

“Let’s get comfortable first.” Maybe she wouldn’t recognize it for the distraction he intended it to be. He moved away just long enough to reposition the cloak on the grass. He knelt, then offered his hand.

She settled in next to him, scooting over until she could lay her head against his shoulder. He inhaled her feminine scent, his attraction pushing aside the dread. Whatever she had to say couldn’t make their situation any worse. He hoped.

“What is it?” he prodded when she did not speak after several minutes of silence.

Lia sighed. “I hardly know where to begin.”

“You seem to have that trouble around me.” Jericho smiled, recalling their first conversation which she began with almost the exact same words. His mouth straightened when she continued to keep her face down.

“I need you to know something.”

He put his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face to his. He searched her eyes, found sadness in them. The brush of his lips across hers was a reminder for her to remember the depth of his affection.

“After I am married, you will hear news about me.”

Jericho nodded. So long as he stayed in the community, news about the prima lux would travel to him. “Go on.”

She pulled away, looking into the distance. “With any luck, I will be pregnant within the year, Jericho.”

The blow of those words stung him as if she slapped him with her hand. She would be married tomorrow. He’d already resigned himself to losing her to another man. Why he’d never thought beyond tomorrow, what it would mean for her, he would never know. The thought she would eventually become pregnant, gods, it never occurred to him.

He was slow to respond. When he did, the voice that left him sounded odd to his own ears. “It is part of your duty.” The same cursed duty that drove them apart.

“Not just that.” She sounded so hollow. He pulled her against him again, needing to touch her, to provide her what comfort he could. “Lucas and I... we have a past. When it was announced we would be married, we tried to get an early start on the relationship and so, we were lovers once.”

A chill blanketed his flesh. This was getting worse and worse every time she spoke. His voice locked in his throat, refusing to utter a single syllable. He could only nod, even knowing she did not see it.

“I had to end it early. Because, well, because his sexual proclivities are unusual...”

Did he think she’d already hit the worst she could have possibly said? This had to be it the bottom, gods please. His churning stomach couldn’t take another hit. “Lia, why are you telling me this?”

A teardrop slipped down her cheek and he immediately regretted the biting way he spoke.

“Because he hurts me every time I am in his bed, Jericho. He likes to do things—unspeakable things—to me. He is excited by my pain. He says he loves my screams. Spilling my blood in places no one else can see arouses his perversion. But if I can stand it often enough in the beginning, if I can become pregnant immediately, I won’t have to return.” More tears fell, but

her voice remained even. “*I* have to bear his child right away Jericho. I am required to provide an heir for the community. I just don’t want you to think... please don’t think when I do...”

“That you love him?”

She nodded miserably.

To think he’d been jealous of the vampire earlier. He’d hoped she might find something worthwhile with her husband. Instead, now, every fiber of his being clenched in response to her confession. Just thinking she would be subjected to torture in the name of duty ate at his insides. If he did it with his dying breath, Lucas Anders would learn the hard way he was to never lay a hand on Lia. Ever. He would visit the bastard before the wedding and...

“Don’t do something foolish for me.”

She must have seen the murder in his eyes. He wouldn’t be sorry for it. “I will not stand uselessly by knowing that he will hurt you, Lia.”

Her hand pressed against his chest, resting where his heart pounded. “No, Jericho.”

“But...”

“No,” she said softly. She brought her hand to his lips where he pressed his mouth against it.

“Ask of me anything,*anything* that will keep you out of this nightmare and I will gladly do it.”

“Mark me.” She spoke with authority, the fear and anxiety gone from her voice. Tears dried on her face. “Place your mark on me so that when I enter my marriage bed, he will know with unwavering certainty that I allowed another man to recently touch me even as we were betrothed. Put doubt into his mind. Make him wonder if my screams are for him, or in the remembrance of you.”

He liked the way she thought and could have smiled if the situation weren’t so dire. It would be dangerous though. “He would know it is not the mark of a vampire, Lia. What then?”

“He wouldn’t dare think it belonged to a werewolf. A human. Never, ever a werewolf.”

Still, it could backfire. Make her situation worse. Perhaps*anything* came with too high a price. “You like to live dangerously, woman.”

She looked up at him with a sparkle in her eyes. A devil in her smile, she asked, “What if, as your prima lux, I ordered it of you?”

Jericho almost chuckled. He bowed from the waist as much as his seated position would allow. “Then I would be honor bound to fulfill it.”

Lia didn’t have to put into words her command. The angle of her head, the gleam in her eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Jericho leaned back until he lay flat. He allowed her wanton gaze to travel over him before he tugged on the slip of material covering her sex. “Remove it.”

Without saying a word, she stood. She shifted her hips, pushing her panties down in a sensual sway that made his blood surge. By the time she kicked them away, his sleepy cock awakened. Her eyebrows arched when she noticed. She reached behind her, the silk bra falling to the ground with a flick of her wrist.

“Fuck,” he whispered hoarsely. This was going to be his unforgettable pleasure.

He didn’t know where to let his gaze linger first. Pale, creamy skin glowed in the fading light. Pink nipples on her upturned breasts called to him. And the loveliness of her soft curves made him praise the gods for womankind. The down-covered juncture between her thighs held him captivated.

He made a decision and reached out to her. “Come here.” He guided her to standing over him, not allowing her to stop until she stood over his waiting face. With a tug on her hand, he motioned her down until her knees were planted on either side of his head. He murmured, “I require a kiss as payment, prima lux.”

Lia gasped as his mouth connected with the most intimate part of her. He slid his tongue through her moisture, drinking in her essence. Using long, broad strokes, he traveled over her swollen lips, alternating between sucking and nibbling. Although heat cascaded from her body, he almost shivered at the soft moans she emitted.

He could lose himself in her for the rest of his life and it would be too short.

Above him, he could feel her trembling. He had to wrap his arms around her thighs, holding her in place as he ravaged her. When his teasing licks found the hardened nub of her clit, he thought she would collapse.

“Jericho!” She sobbed his name again and again, and he knew the moment he needed approached.

Using his fingers, he spread her lips, focused on her pleasure center. It took only a moment to dip into her core, spreading her moisture over his fingertips. The moment her body seized, he replaced his mouth with his fingers, drawing out the orgasm. In that same instant, he shifted his attention and bit on the intimate part of her thigh. Hard.

Lia screamed into the evening air, his name morphing into a howl of combined pleasure and pain. The twinge of guilt he felt at marking her was replaced by pride as she shuddered violently. She would curse him in the morning, but right now she rocked her hips over him, encouraging his attentions. He sucked on her flesh, soothing away the sting with the sensual spread of his tongue. After a few minutes more, she slowed her body, shifting away just enough until he ceased torturing her sensitive clit.

Jericho realized his cock ached, his earlier release seemingly forgotten. Lia slid down the length of his body until she could rest her head upon his chest. He stroked her back, long comforting caresses, as she brought her breathing back under control. He could have pushed into her at that moment, finally found the home within her warmth he needed, but they had all night. He would not rush this.

She giggled. “My gods, Jericho. That was... amazing.”

With a single, deft move, he rolled them both until Lia lay beneath him. “And to think, we’ve only just begun,” he said.

## Chapter Nine

Jericho couldn’t believe he was here. His body was poised over hers, Lia’s delicate hands slid over his torso and chest and his aching cock was as hard as granite with expectation. Her chest rose and fell beneath his, her excitement flaring in her eyes as she waited for him to finally bring them together. He didn’t want to rush this, though.

Gritting his teeth, he eased forward and the head of his cock unerringly nestled into her entrance. Pushing open the soft petals of her pussy at last caused his body to send every spare ounce of blood rushing to his already overwhelmed erection.

Please gods, he didn’t want to ruin this. It was all he could do to slow down, breathe through the pleasure wrapping around him as he slid further into her warmth. Her whispery moan, the way she clenched around him could have sent him over the edge if he let it. Thankfully, his blood-deprived brain had enough sense to slow down his actions, stifle the urge to come right away and relish her.

Jericho's heart thundered in his chest as he picked up speed after a few minutes of teasing them both with an agonizingly slow probe. When at last he couldn't stand any more, his hips rocked faster. He drove into her, her soft moans encouraging, almost begging him for more.

*Gods, gods, gods...* he couldn't think of anything else. Couldn't get his mind to concentrate on anything but the way she felt wrapped around him. The heat of her pussy as it spasmed. The slick moisture coating his cock each time he pushed and withdrew from her.

Her nails raked his back, encouraging, begging from him. He could scarcely catch his breath trying to answer her call, but gods if it killed him, he would do it again. And again. And again.

He looked down on her to catch a glimpse of her elongated canines glistening in the night air. They were sensitive to the touch. The discovery excited him the moment it happened. When she admitted she could come with just the right attention there, he thought his heart would burst from his chest. Yet another place he would be certain to explore with detailed attention before the night was over.

Lia's eyelids fluttered, her nostrils flared. It wasn't just the drugging sex they shared. The look on her face—hell, she looked *hungry*. And not necessarily for food. He realized then the depths of his density.

"Bite me, Lia."

Her eyes snapped open, heat flaring. She fought to catch her breath. "We don't—oh gods, Jericho!—we don't need it."

He rolled his hips ensuring his pelvis ground against her clit. "Love, we shouldn't waste it. Bite. Me."

If it took too long to convince her, he wouldn't be able to last. Already he could feel the churning in his balls signaling his impending release. When she nodded, a sigh of relief escaped before he could call it back.

Jericho lowered his neck to her lips. She trailed her tongue across his skin, right over the artery, before opening her mouth. She hesitated for a moment. Then the pain of the bite struck him as before.

The same moment the pain dissolved into ecstasy, an orgasm ripped through his being, uncoiling and stretching over him, capturing and then releasing him, scorching through his boiling blood and pouring out of him into her. It threatened to drown Jericho. To overwhelm and

consume, binding him to Lia in so fundamental a way they would never be separate again.

And for the briefest of moments, he thought it would never end.

No—he prayed it wouldn't.

She'd bitten him twice before and twice before, a wonderful union resulted. Tonight, the bite sent him careening headway into the powerful grips of love, pure and true. Tonight, he recognized the best union of them all, the one that would stay with him always existed in the real world where her jasmine scent and welcoming moans, where her soft curves and smooth skin were here for him to claim. To mark as his.

Although an eternity passed, through the hazy fog of his mind he realized she licked the wound in his neck, sealing it. His thoughts refocused. Sounds and smells from their surroundings became recognizable.

Spent, he tried to command his limbs to move, to relieve some of the pressure she must have been feeling as his weight pressed into her, but nothing wanted to respond. It took two tries, but he finally managed to roll to his side, bringing her with him. His penis slipped out of her with the movement, the sensation stripping him bare.

He wanted to say something profound. His mind raced, but the best he could manage was to pepper her mouth with his. The sweet smile she gave him in return went straight to his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Lia stomped away from him and furious, Jericho didn't try hard to catch up. He couldn't believe they were arguing. Fucking arguing after spending all night making love.

He wanted to yell into the night sky. How could she have truly believed he would just let her go without a fight? After what they just shared, how was he supposed to watch her walk away like none of it mattered?

All he wanted to know was if there was some way they could be together. Even the smallest, remotest possibility would suit him. Yeah, he was acting like a whipped dog in his pursuit of her, but hell, she was worth it. Too bad she obviously didn't feel the same way. Not like he assumed she did.

She stopped, whirled back around to face him. Her mouth dropped open like she was ready to spew malicious words at him, but then she snapped it shut. She opened it again, but only a sigh escaped.



She shook her head slowly. "What are we doing, Jericho?" she asked, her voice soft.

He walked to her side, waiting until they were standing close to respond. A grudging smile quirked his lips. "Being angry about the impossibility of this situation and taking it out on each other."

She chuckled. "It doesn't help that I'm exhausted and can't think straight either."

The flash of pride at that statement shouldn't have been so satisfying. Three times he laid with her tonight. Three times they shared something too intense for words.

They were still far enough away from the complex he could be certain they wouldn't be spotted. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed the crown of her hair. "Lia, what are we going to do? I just can't lose you. I can't."

"I've thought about it a dozen different ways. Don't you think I've tried? I don't know how if you can understand what it would mean to my father, my community if I tossed aside my duty. The same duty which has been drilled into me daily since I could walk."

He said quietly, "I know all about duty."

She must have heard the bitterness in his words because she pulled away enough to look into his eyes. "Is there something I should know?"

"Over fifteen years of military service because of duty. Five years in duty to my Lugh. Five years of service in duty for my father, who never served his time but was somehow found out. Five years in duty for my very young cousin who I did not want to see sent to the military. I served his time for him. And these few months in duty to my equally young brother, who became injured and could not complete his term. A term I am gladly finishing for him."

"I don't understand."

"My mandatory military term for the community kept getting longer and longer for some reason or another. I wasn't being gallant when your father offered me a reward and I turned it down." Another bitter laugh escaped. "I was being tired. I'm ready to return home with the pension I've earned."

Lia squeezed around his waist. "I'm so sorry."

"Believe it or not, some vampire felt sorry for me and figured my experience could be

put to use protecting the Lugh. It's how I ended up serving directly under him. It was supposed to be just a few weeks of simple, uncomplicated service before I could leave for good. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it would result in this." He laughed again, this time filling the air with joy. "Had I only known... Every scar, every injury worth just five minutes with you."

"Thank you. I-I don't know what else to say."

"Just know that I understand the pull your family can have on you. I'm not asking you to give it all up for me. I just want us to find a way to make it work."

She tried. She turned it over again and again, looking for some angle—*any angle*—to give them the outcome they sought. They worked against impossible odds.

A vampire and a werewolf? The prima lux and her guard? Add in the fact the same prima lux would be marrying a sadist in hours and they were beyond screwed.

She couldn't divorce Lucas easily. A child would be required first. She didn't want to ask Jericho to wait for her until then. That would be too cruel.

If she took him as her lover—meeting for trysts, sneaking him into her suites—and they were discovered, he would most likely be executed and she would lose her title. The community might forgive its leader for having a liaison or two with another vampire, but never with a werewolf. She would not risk his life. Only one limp compromise came to mind, but gods, after what he'd just told her, it was so much to ask of him.

"You've thought of something, haven't you?" His luminescent eyes searched hers, a hesitant smile just starting to form.

"It wouldn't be fair..."

"Lia, I love you. With all my heart, I love you. Whatever it is, tell me."

It was the first time either said the words out loud. She wasn't prepared for how it would make her feel. How her insides melted from the warmth spreading through her body, down her limbs and ending in her fingers and toes. In that moment, she could imagine living a simple life with him, one where they might one day start a family. Where neither had any other responsibilities except to themselves and their children.

"The risk would be great, but," she blew out a breath, scarcely believing she would tell him her thoughts, "you could remain with me. If you remained my guard, there would be less reason for others to suspect anything between us."

He was already shaking his head. "I don't think I can knowingly share you with another man. If I had to watch him touch you, stand by your side... At first, I might be able to handle it, but I know eventually it would come between us. If it is our last, no other choice option, then so be it. It scares me though. We would be doomed before we began."

Her spirits sinking, she mumbled, "We're already doomed."

The caress of his hand against her cheek made her look up into his face. "No. Don't say that. We wouldn't have been given this time together for it to be taken away from us just like that. I won't believe that. Don't doubt us ever, Lia. *We will* find a way."

She curled her fingers around his hand and brought it to her lips. The kiss she pressed there was a reminder for both of them that she did not doubt. Would never doubt. "I love you too, Jericho. This isn't over yet. We still have a little time."

The smile he gave her melted her insides all over again.

They walked in silence. She chewed the inside of her mouth, her mind sorting through every possible scenario which would put them together. Once, she glanced up at him to find his face a mask of concentration. Between the two of them, they just had to find a way.

If only the wedding wasn't only hours away. Hours before she would be wedded to Lucas. A chill spread down her spine every time she thought of it. What it would mean. What she would be forced to do for her community. She tried to get out of the marriage once by pleading with the Lugh. He'd turned deaf ears to her, even after she'd shown him the damage Lucas had inflicted. Her relationship with her father cooled after that day.

When Lia glanced up, the sun was about to breach the horizon beyond the walls of the complex. She looked around to find Jericho walking several feet behind her. So absorbed in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed when he slowed.

Her heart lurched. If they were in visual distance of the complex, anyone on the inside could see them too. Trust Jericho to maintain the appearance of propriety with her at all times.

His voice was barely above a whisper, but she heard his words from where he walked behind her. "We cannot be seen together from here on, but I will escort you to your suite. You may not see me, and if you do, don't acknowledge me. Just know that I will be watching over you. And, Lia... I love you. No matter what happens today, I love you."

She choked down the well of emotions threatening to bubble up and consume her. Blinded by stinging tears, she could only whisper back.

“I love you too, Jericho. We will find a way.”

As hard as she fought it, she had the unshakable feeling they would be the last words they exchanged.

## Chapter Ten

Pounding on the door startled her awake. She'd only meant to sit on the edge of the bed for a moment to collect her thoughts. Lia still wore the skin-tight gown, her jewelry and makeup. Exhausted, she'd sat down to gather the energy necessary to strip before resting for an hour or two. Only the moment she sat down, her fatigued body had other ideas.

The door flew open before she could answer. Indignant, she shot to her feet when Ross strode into the room. Behind him, two of her father's guards blocked the doorway. Heat flamed her cheeks at his audacity. Who in hell did he think he was?

“Prima lux, you are to come with me.” He eyed her clothing, taking in every detail. Something in his manner unsettled her.

“How dare—”

“Now.”

Stunned that he would override her, her mouth dropped open. Seniority or not, he'd crossed the line. As far as she was concerned, his days with the family were numbered. She would personally see to it.

“Ross, I demand to know what you are about! How dare you enter my quarters unannounced and without my invitation? I could have your head.”

Unfazed, he stepped up to her, stopping when a few inches separated them. He grabbed her arm, tightening the grip until she winced from the pain of it. She turned her head when he brought his face close to hers. He inhaled deeply, the sound ominous to her ears.

“You stink of him.”

He said it so low the men at the door would not have heard. The threat underlying his tone could not be mistaken.

He knew. She didn't know how, but she'd be willing to bet money before he even

entered the room,*he somehow knew* .

She turned to stare into his cold slits for eyes. “I do not know what you mean, but if you don’t let me go *this instant* , you will not live long enough to regret it.”

Lia possessed absolutely nothing to back up her claim other than her words. If the battle-axe of a warrior wanted to hurt her, it would only take the flick of his wrist. They locked stares, her gaze unwavering.

His hand slid away, but she didn’t allow herself the luxury of reveling in the small victory. For Ross to outright disrespect her meant he knew something she did not. She resisted the urge to rub her throbbing arm because he stared at her as if sizing her up. Trying to decide what course of action he would pursue next. If she wanted to maintain her diminished authority, she would not show him the smallest hint of vulnerability.

Ross held out an arm, indicating the door. “Your father requires your immediate presence, *prima lux*.”

Did he have something to do with this treatment? What did he know or suspect? Could Ross have hinted to him that something was awry between her and Jericho?

She pointed her chin in the air. “I am not presentable. Please let him know I will be there momentarily.”

“Your *immediate* presence.”

Damn. There went any chance of a quick shower and change of clothing.

It took a reserve of inner strength to not react in any other way than to follow his lead. Ross walked in front, the two other guards at her back. She’d noticed the complex seemed subdued this morning, but as they walked together, she really noticed for the first time how still everything seemed.

Most of the people they passed did not look her in the eyes. However, a few of the servants watched openly. They seemed to watch her curiously, to scrutinize her situation. Passing judgment with a glance. If she didn’t know better, she would think she detected pity from some of them.

Her mind raced trying to figure out what might be going on. Everyone but her seemed to know.

If she'd been caught with Jericho, they surely wouldn't have waited until now to confront her. She bit back the temptation to ask Ross. If ever she counted the old vamp as one of her friends, that relationship had vanished. Some of her apprehension waned as they headed toward her father's suites. For a second, she'd wondered if Ross might take her elsewhere. If he had, then she'd really know how much shit she was in.

They paused before the large oak door of the suite after Ross knocked. He glanced over his shoulder once, again taking the time to visually rake her from head to foot. Lia bore his scrutiny without comment. She would find out soon enough what this was all about.

The Lugh bade them enter. Ross opened the door and stepped through. The two other guards remained outside. Before she could curtsy as she'd been raised to do each time she came into his presence, her father ran to Lia, wrapping her in his arms.

"Thank the gods! Thank the gods you're alright." He rocked her from side to side, kissing her cheeks over and over.

It took a moment for her to recover from the unexpected outpouring of emotion. Her father *never* displayed his emotions on his sleeve. Another lesson from the Lugh to the prima lux. Never put your heart out where others might see.

*Papa, what is the matter? Papa?*

He held her for a few minutes more before responding.

*Where were you, Aurelia? They said you were not in your suite and after what happened...*

*But what happened? I'm flattered by your attention, but I don't understand.*

His blue eyes widened. *You haven't heard?*

She shook her head, a bad feeling already forming in the pit of her stomach.

*Assassins. Assassins in the complex, Aurelia.*

Impossible! *Are you injured? Did they come after you?*

*They did not come after me, Aurelia. We suspect it was you—you and your fiancé who were the targets. Your suite had been broken into and Lucas...*

He didn't continue, his eyes saddening. It didn't register that he led her to a bench near the large stained glass window. It had been her favorite spot growing up. After her mother died, she sought comfort in the colorful panes. The scene of flying birds over a field of flowers provided her a place for her mourning imagination to escape.

*Lucas?*

*I'm sorry to tell you he and two of his staff were killed in the night.*

Lia didn't know which emotion hit hardest or fastest: relief, sadness or joy. She must not have done a good job hiding the flutter.

"Your reaction does not comfort me, Aurelia."

She glanced at Ross who watched their exchange. She searched her mind for the appropriate words with which to reply. *I'm sorry for his community's loss, papa.*

"Is that the best you can do? He was your fiancé." All of his previous relief fled like a thief. Now, disgust dripped from his words.

It took all of her training to not blow out a breath of frustration. Obviously, he no longer cared if Ross was included in the conversation. "He was the fiancé you chose for me, papa. Not the one I would have chosen for myself. Especially after what I told you about him."

"That damned scar you make me look at day after day? My healers could have had it removed the very first day," he snapped. His face glowed bright red.

"That was the point, papa! He hurt me, time and time again and all you would do for me is offer your healers. Why did you not break our engagement?"

Turning to Ross, he said, "This conversation does not leave this room."

The guard nodded, his expression blank.

The Lugh whirled back on Lia. "Your marriage would have been what was best for the community, Aurelia. Your sacrifice would have been for the community. You are prima lux and are not allowed the luxury of deciding what *you* want. It is decided for you. Why have you not understood this?"

"Why can't you see me as something other than the prima lux? Why do you not see me as your daughter, someone who deserves to make a few decisions in her life?"

Deadlocked, they stared at each other.

When neither moved for several minutes, she grimaced. If she knew one thing about her father, she knew he would never be the first to concede. Tamping down her anger, she tried again to offer her sympathy.

*I truly am sorry for his community, papa. Despite our personal differences, I would not have wished him dead. What will happen now?*

He waved a dismissive hand. *We have already sent word to his community and hope they will not seek restitution. He was in my care and I failed him. Poisonings, stabbings, bombings. Assassinations for what? What has this world come to?* He shook his head. *And of course, the search for a suitable match for you must now begin again.* This time he sighed. “There are so few communities appropriate for you. It will be difficult. I wouldn’t blame others if they were reluctant to join with us after this disaster.”

Ross cleared his throat from behind them. He waited to be addressed. When the Lugh turned to him, he gave a curt nod.

“My Lugh, I cannot help but notice the prima lux is still dressed from yesterday. With the recent events, I wonder if it is appropriate to inquire as to the reason.”

Lia had to give him credit. He hadn’t risen to captain without cause. Not quite an order to his leader, but phrased in such a way it wouldn’t be ignored. Thankfully, she already had a reason lined up. In a bored tone, she said, “I fell asleep in my clothing, captain.”

A grimace creased Ross’s face. “And the reason you were not found in your suite last night, prima lux?”

“Now you go too far!”

The Lugh straightened. “I agree, captain. It is not your place to question the prima lux.”

*But as your Lugh, it is mine.*

“Papa!” Lia reeled back, unable to disguise the incredulousness from her voice.

*When Lucas was discovered, guards were dispatched to your suite, Aurelia. You were not there. Why not?*



*My Lugh, I don't understand why you would question me. Have I done something wrong?*

*You made no secret of how you felt about your marriage. I would be remiss if I did not ensure you had nothing to do with his demise. If for no other reason than to alleviate the questions others might raise.*

"I could not sleep right away. I went for a walk, just outside the complex."

"Without your guards, Aurelia?"

She struggled to find another appropriate response. So soon on the heels of her own assassination attempt, her father would not believe she would be so brazen as to venture unescorted outside of the protective walls of the complex.

"My Lugh," Ross interrupted. "The assassin has been apprehended. We are working out now who he worked with."

Jason studied his daughter. "Perhaps you should come with us. Let's hear what this assassin has to say about his accomplices."

So this was it. What others in the complex thought they knew. Because she could offer no alibi, because no one could account for her whereabouts, her own father suspected her of assisting with the plot against Lucas. In any other circumstances, it would be laughable. At least the assassin would not be able to name her as co-conspirator.

She followed Ross and her father out of the suite. The guardsmen at the door took up positions behind them. On their way to the holding cells at the rear of the complex, she mused over her good fortune.

Yes, she should have been horrified by Lucas's death. In truth, she couldn't find any sympathy for him. In their short time together, he'd inflicted so much physical and emotional damage on her, that she hadn't been scarred for life was just short of a miracle.

Of course, this now meant she and Jericho had been given a sort of reprieve. Until her father found a replacement suitor, they could steal whatever time possible together.

The thought left her giddy.

She wrinkled her nose as they neared the holding area. If she ventured over here more than every five years or so, the estimate would be generous. The musk in the air stifled to the

point she found it difficult to breathe. It seeped into her nostrils, closing down her airway. Lia coughed, doing her best to clear her screaming lungs.

She brought a hand to her face, covering her mouth and nose. It did little to help. A gloom settled on her and she shivered. Another effort to ward off the dank wretchedness hanging in the air like a cloud. The lighting dimmed, forcing her to squint in the corridor as they passed.

Ross stopped before a door along the way and pulled it open. The air from the room rushed toward the party and the distinct smell of fresh blood assaulted her.

The guard led the way into the room. Both he and the Lugh seemed untouched by the change in atmosphere, but Lia's stomach turned. She walked further in, dreading she had to be here. She almost gave in to her impulse to turn and leave, but with a quick glance took in the sight of the bloodied man gasping for air against the wall.

And immediately recognized the scars across his abdomen.

## Chapter Eleven

"Jericho! No!" She pushed past her father and Ross. The sound of her dress ripping echoed in the room as she fell to her knees before him. She took his face in her hands, scanning over him, horrified by the damage they inflicted. It was no wonder she barely recognized his face.

One of his eyes was purple and swollen shut. Dried blood plastered to the same side of his face. His already crooked nose bled openly, some of it dripping into his mouth. His bare chest was slick with sweat and more blood, various cuts and abrasions evidence to the torture inflicted there.

"Prima lux," he sighed. The words sounded foreign on his thick tongue.

Gingerly, she brushed her lips across his. The sweet taste of blood brought tears to her eyes.

"What is the meaning of this, Aurelia?"

She ignored her father, turning to give Ross a lethal glare. "You know he's no assassin."

Ross's gaze volleyed between her and the Lugh. "I know no such thing. Besides you, he is the only unaccounted for person for the time when Lucas Anders was assassinated. No one would have had time to make it outside of the complex. The assassin had to have been inside the

complex long before the murders.”

Between clenched teeth, she said, “He’s no assassin because he was with me.”

Jericho shook his head, moaning. “No…”

“It’s okay, love,” she murmured while stroking his jaw. She used her fingers to wipe away some of the blood starting to drip there.

*Daughter, you shame me.*

“Papa, I will not apologize. Not in this matter.” Lia turned back to Ross. “Free him this instant.”

Beneath his gaze, the vampire watched as if toying with the prey he was about to eat. “We still do not have proof that either or both of you did not assist in the assassination of Lucas.”

“I was… by myself,” Jericho rasped. He tried to twist out of her hands, but she held firm.

She would not let him throw away his life for her. Especially not when she could save it. She kissed his lips again, then stood. “You want proof, captain?”

With a vice-like grip, she wrenched open the rip in her dress. Struggling, she did not stop pulling until the slit bared the bottoms of her panties. At last she spied the purple edge of what she sought. “There!” she said, pointing. “There is his mark. Given to me last night when we were together. A wedding present for my new husband from my lover.”

The bruise couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a lover’s ‘kiss.’ “We entered the complex together at sunrise. Unless Lucas was killed during the daylight, I swear to you, Jericho and I were together during the night.”

Her victory died a quick death when she looked into the faces of her father and the guard. The gleam in Ross’s eyes pointed to the truth. As she suspected, he really did not believe Jericho an assassin.

*Hedid* believe the Lugh would have the werewolf killed.

As if on cue, he roared, “Leave us!”

A smirk on his lips, Ross bowed. He turned on his heels and walked out, taking the other

guardsmen with him. They shut the door behind them, leaving Lia to face her father's wrath.

He paced the room, watching her out of the corners of his eyes. When he stopped, he took a deep breath. "Explain yourself. You know what this means. How dangerous this is. *You know*, Aurelia!"

She glanced toward Jericho who shook his head at her. The eye looking at her had blown blood vessels in it, the iris tinged with a ring of red. She imagined he had multiple opportunities to let Ross know where he'd been. Why he wasn't the assassin. As stubborn as ever, he'd remained silent.

"*Idon't* know, papa. I don't know why I am not permitted to love who I want." Her hands shook as she addressed him. She resisted the urge to curl them into balls. To do anything to distract her from facing him head on for the first time in her life.

"Don't make this about Lucas! You could have married any number of men. You did not want any of them."

She took a shaky step toward him. "Don't! You never gave me that option. I did what you asked of me. Always. But I am telling you this now, if I can have what I want, then know that I want him."

"Have you? Y-you haven't fed from him, have you?" Lia didn't answer, but he read the answer in her narrowed eyes. The Lugh threw his head back, shaking it in frustration. "My foolish, foolish child."

He walked to the door and pounded on it. "Captain!"

When Ross opened it a moment later, the guard stuck his head in, but turned his attention first to Jericho and then Lia. "My Lugh?"

"Bring me an adult male werewolf. I don't care which one. Just bring it here."

Ross nodded curtly before closing the door again. Lia watched the exchange, her confusion growing. Deciding the matter not worth her attention at the moment, she dropped beside Jericho.

He still panted as if desperate for air. That's when she noticed the large purple bruise across his ribcage. She had only a rudimentary grasp of medicine, but she guessed he suffered from broken ribs. She knelt beside him again.

“What have they done to you?” she asked softly.

Jericho leaned forward, resting his head against her neck. She caressed him with a gentle touch, her heart breaking for him. If her father watched, she couldn’t afford to care. She had to work on how she would get Jericho out of this room and away from Ross. The vampire’s motivation for keeping them apart was anyone’s guess, but at the first opportunity she would repay him for his treachery a thousand-fold.

Jericho said something undistinguishable. She leaned closer, putting her ear next to his mouth.

“It’s not too late for you... tell them...” he whispered.

“Shush, now. Just hold on to me.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and she pulled him as tight as she dared. She matched her breathing to his, inhaling and exhaling with him. Wanting to absorb some of the pain from him. She felt calmer, at peace with him in that moment. As if they were alone in the room. The two of them against the world.

The sound of the door opening broke the tranquility. Lia lifted her head to watch Ross lead one of the house servants into the room. The poor man’s eyes were as big and round as dinner plates as he took in the sight of her on the floor with Jericho. He was probably a few years younger than Lia. His thin hair needed washing and his clothes were a little better than thread-bare, but otherwise, he seemed well cared for.

The Lugh walked to where they sat and stood over them, his hands resting on his hips. “There is a reason we do not feed from werewolves, Aurelia. A rule we don’t break for good reason.”

“What reason, papa? What reason could support the way vampires treat them? The fact they can never rise to positions of importance.”

He shook his head. “Daughter, we are not so unkind as a species to despise them without cause. The fact of the matter is, we don’t feed from them because their blood is detrimental to us as a civilization.”

She looked up at him, trying to see past a red wall of anger. He no longer seemed upset, but her ire was just getting started. “What? What does ‘detrimental to us as a civilization’ mean?”

He searched her eyes. “You really don’t know, do you? Gods... you couldn’t... I’m

sorry I never told you myself. When we say their blood is tainted, it's literal. In most, maybe all, their blood has something in it which makes it addictive."

Her heart began to thunder in her chest. The implications of what he told her could change everything she believed. "Addictive, how?"

"So addictive that a vampire once waged a war on those who kept him from his werewolf mate. After hundreds of thousands of lives were lost in that war, when the true cause—the denial of his addiction—was discovered, feeding from werewolves became forbidden."

She glanced at Jericho and could see the apprehension in his face. She fought down her own fear because didn't want to believe him. Could not believe him. "Why did I not know this?"

"I can't answer that, Aurelia. But I will prove it to you." His eyes softened, as if he empathized with her plight. He reached his hand out, indicating the servant should be brought forward. Reluctant, the man shuffled forward after being prodded by Ross.

The Lugh took the servant's arm, raising his hand to Lia. "Drink," he instructed.

Jericho reached forward and knocked the arm aside. He turned until his good eye was to her. The blood seeping into it made him look like evil personified. "You don't have to do this, Lia. You don't have anything to prove to him or to me."

"But..."

"Don't doubt us, Lia."

\*

The smile she gave him pumped new life into his heart. She cocked her head, the grin almost as lopsided. "And it's because I don't doubt us that I have to do this. To prove him wrong."

She swallowed hard before she released him. When she stood, she turned to the servant. Jericho's heart pounded, but he watched when she approached the other werewolf, her smile comforting and warm. And he loved her then. Loved her with all that he was.

"Thank you," she said to the man who still looked ready to bolt. "I'll make this as brief as I can. Would it be alright if I feed from you?"

Trust her to ask first. Her father ordered the frightened man into the situation, but she

made it seem as if he had a choice.

Jericho pushed against the wall, forcing himself to stand. Lia started to his side, but he raised a hand to stop her. He wasn't done yet. She needed to finish what her father wanted so they could move forward. The proverbial cat was out of the bag. No telling what each of the next few minutes would bring.

Ross prodded the werewolf again. The thin servant took a few reluctant steps forward in Lia's direction. He raised his hand of his own volition when she reached for him. She gave the servant another reassuring smile before glancing at her father.

Her beautiful blue eyes looked at Jericho when she bit into the man's wrist.

Jericho watched her, mesmerized and disbelieving. He couldn't believe it. Would *not* believe what existed between them could be explained away by something he carried in his blood. Something that made him chemically irresistible to vampires. To her.

He held his breath as he watched, his pulse slowing in time. She pulled once—twice—three times from his wrist, never dropping her gaze. By the time she finally pulled away, licking the wound closed, his pulse slowed to barely a crawl.

She took a step forward with a smile on her face. "It's not true," she whispered, her face a palate of disbelief. "Nothing happened! An old wives' tale perhaps..."

Jubilance wiped away as her eyebrows furrowed. Lia swayed where she stood, and he cursed under his breath, certain his pulse had come to a dead stop. She appeared to struggle to keep her eyes on him, as if something within her fought a hypnotic lull.

When she stumbled, he rushed to her side, catching her before she crumpled to the ground. Pain shot through his abdomen like lightning at the sudden rush of movement, but he didn't have time to focus on it. Lowering her to the concrete floor felt as if someone ground glass into his chest and side. He gritted his teeth through the pain, his attention riveted to her frightening pallor.

"Lia?" He wiped a trace of red staining the corner of her mouth. "Talk to me, love. What's wrong?"

"B-bad bl-blood."

When he glanced up, the young werewolf was backing away, his face as ashen as hers. Wide eyes kept cutting between Ross and the prima lux, the looks pleading and confused.

Jericho's wolf growled low and ominous within him. "What have you done?" he barked.

"He said to drink it," the young werewolf whined.

"Who? Who said to drink what?"

Ross cut in. "My Lugh, the healers..."

Jericho ignored him. "Who?" If he wasn't holding Lia in his arms, he would have crossed the room to throttle the words from the werewolf.

"Aurelia?" Jericho peered over his shoulder long enough to see fear shadowing the Lugh's face as he watched his daughter fading. The older man turned to Ross and yelled, "Detain that wolf, now!"

Lia's father looked down on Jericho. "I'm getting my healers. Don't... I'll be right back." His voice softer, he said to her, "Hold on, Aurelia. Hold on."

At the same time Ross scruffed the werewolf, the Lugh dematerialized. He heard the men scuffling near the doorway, but Jericho fixed his attention on Lia. He knew Ross would have the man thrown into one of the adjacent cells.

If she died, the five-inch thick walls wouldn't be haven enough to keep Jericho out.

He prayed under his breath. Pleaded with the gods to show him how to fix this. Her ragged breathing was some small measure of comfort, but he didn't know how long she would fight against the poison in her system. Surely, it was some sort of poison the werewolf drank before she fed from him. Time moved at a glacial pace and he prayed again that the Lugh would arrive with his healers in time.

Her lips trembled as she said something. Too soft for even his sensitive hearing, he leaned closer.

"I... loved you," she gasped out.

His throat dried up and he blinked back stinging in his eyes. She had to fight.

Jericho swept his mouth over her warm forehead. "Stay with me, Lia. Just a minute more, stay with me!"



He faltered when a series of percussions rocked the walls surrounding them.

*Gods... no, no, no!*

He recognized the devastating impact. Years in the Lugh's service oriented him all too well to the effects of well-placed explosions. This couldn't be happening. Not now. It just couldn't be happening.

When another ripple forced him to cover her as best he could with his body, he heard the soft wheeze of her breath escape. The walls shook around them, dust clouds forming in the air.

He pulled away to glance at her again. Lia's eyelids were closed, her breathing slowing. A new pain seized him in his chest as he watched the life slowly seep out of her.

Around them, the walls vibrated from another blast.

"Lia?" He shook her when she didn't respond.

*Please—oh gods, please...*

A final blast sounded from overhead. Jericho had just enough time to look up at the section of ceiling as it fell toward them before he covered her with his body.

Gods...

Please.

## Chapter Twelve

One year later

He exhaled through the motion of swinging the axe down on the log of wood. It felt good to exercise muscles growing too used to complacency. The axe smashed through the center of the log, sending splinters of wood shooting in several directions as the piece of wood split into three pieces. The blade wedged itself into the stand and he left it there. He reached down and separated a piece of the broken log still attached by a sliver of wood.

As he stood, the distinct odor of vampire drifted to him.

He placed another log onto the stand. He dislodged the axe and hefted it over his shoulder. The axe whistled when he swung it. This time, the log split into two equal pieces. He managed to split three more pieces of wood before he heard the soft crunch of leaves being stepped on as well. The person walked toward him, stopping a few feet away. When the axe tip lodged into the stand again, this time he let it remain there.

He straightened, forcing a sense of calm to wash over him. He turned to the vampire, and almost managed to suppress surprise at who stood before him.

“I wondered how long it would take to find us,” he mused.

“You didn’t make it easy.”

He smiled to himself. No, they hadn’t wanted to be found and he put every skill he could think of to use in covering their tracks. Favors owed to him were cashed in exchange for silence. The plot to remain anonymous had been complicated, but doable. Almost infallible, really. At least, until now.

He was curious. “What finally led you here?”

It was the vampire’s turn to smile. “Just some rotten luck on your part. Happenstance, in fact.”

He nodded at the acknowledgement. No matter how well they planned, there would be some small detail he couldn’t foresee. Some well-meaning person who would say too much in the presence of the wrong person. Their peace couldn’t last forever.

“You knew you would be found, of course.”

“We did.”

“But you remained hidden anyway?”

“We decided to cross each bridge as we came to them.”

“I see.” He nodded as if he indeed understood their plight.

He heard her singing a tune as she tended their garden. Around a bend from the small house, he knew the vampire wouldn’t be able to see her. He probably couldn’t hear her either. If she decided to come find him though, the danger would multiply.

Keeping his empty hands in plain view, he pointed downwind with his chin. “Let’s walk a little further over here.”

The vampire’s hand rested on the curved blade at his side. He paused as if to mull over the request before he indicated they could move.

Jericho’s heart thudded within his chest as he led the vampire away. He’d hoped, really hoped this day would never arrive.

When the ceiling collapsed, by some miracle the most treacherous piece missed them by inches. Another explosion violent enough to demolish a wall followed afterwards. The doorway blocked by debris and large stones, he’d been frantic to find a way out of the room to get help for Lia. Light filtering into the room gave him a small glimmer of hope.

A year later, he could still taste the dust he choked on as he worked on widening the section until it was big enough to get her through. He didn’t know which he prayed for harder: for her to hang on until he could get help or for the explosions to stop long enough to get them both out.

It felt like a week passed before he squeezed through the opening. With as much care as he could muster, he pulled her through the opening behind him. By the time he stood erect, carrying her limp body, what he could see of the complex was in chaos.

To this day, he couldn’t say why he did it. Why he didn’t wait for help to arrive. Pure impulse drove him to run, to go and find help. Maybe deep down he knew with everyone running for shelter, it would take too long to get someone to stop and figure out where the Lugh might be. Where to find healers.

So he ran too. Ran until he collapsed from his own injuries, far away from the complex. Fortunately for them both, a kind couple found their bodies not far from their home. The elderly human went for a local healer as his plump wife tended to them.

Lia’s recovery took almost three months, but thank the gods, despite many times when all but Jericho dismissed her, she pulled through. For every moment he spent waiting by her side, he mulled over what to do when she was well enough to leave. They’d been given a chance—a small chance—to be together. To find peace and a future.

There would be risks, though.

Their lives might never be their own. They might have to leave everything behind at a moment’s notice if news of her survival ever reached her community. The decision would require her to give up her title. Her home. Her family.

He almost expected her to say no. To leave him a shell of a man when she left him behind to return to her duty. When she agreed, however, it was the third happiest day of his life.

They sold half of the stones of her diamond and ruby necklace one by one. Hoarding the income and spending only when necessary. It yielded them their current home and enough to live on for the rest of their lives. The remaining stones were kept hidden and safe in case they ever had to flee in a hurry.

The second happiest day occurred when they were married two weeks later in a small ceremony attended by the farmer and his wife. A handful of other peasants who wished the young couple well and some of his family were able to attend too.

“We were content to leave you alone, you know.”

Jericho stopped in his tracks. That didn’t make sense to him. “What happened? Her father?”

He laughed without mirth. “Her father thinks she’s dead. We haven’t tried to sway his thinking.”

The blood in his veins turned to ice. If the Lugh thought his daughter was dead, why was the vampire here?

“Don’t look so stricken, Jericho. I understood you knew vampires were out to assassinate the prima lux. Don’t tell me you didn’t suspect those close to her capable of planning the attempts on her life?”

Jericho stared into Ross’s pale eyes. *He hadn’t* suspected. Not the captain of the Lugh’s guard. *Gods* . Almost anyone else could have done it. But only someone close to her, like one of the guards, could have gotten away with it.

Suddenly, the last day at the complex made a little more sense. Ross knew Jericho wasn’t behind the assassination of Lucas Anders. Lia told him she suspected the captain knew of their affair.

“We would have let you live your mundane lives together. She no longer posed a threat to us.”

“A threat?” Jericho growled. “How the hell was she a threat to you?”

“Way too much power for one person. Imagine if she’d married Lucas, if you will. The two largest vampire communities on this world would have combined to form one giant superpower. She would be the Lugh for both his community and hers. Vampires would be ruled by her whim alone. Civil unrest would be inevitable, if not in her lifetime, in another. No, she couldn’t be allowed to marry Lucas.”

“But you killed him, right?”

“Yes, we took care of him. But that didn’t take care of the entire problem. Her father would have found her another powerful suitor and then we’d have to start all over again. When Lucas died, almost immediately there were rumors his cousin would be given the community. And so what that he was ten years Lia’s junior? Her father would have found a reason for them to wed.” He sounded bored now. “And on and on the cycle would have gone. No. We had to eliminate the source of the problem. We almost did too.”

Anger burned through him and Jericho tried to shove away the thoughts of Lia waiting for him in their little home. He had to focus on Ross.

“The bombings. That was you too?”

He nodded with an apologetic shrug. “It was supposed to be an insurance policy in case the poison didn’t work. Who knew the two of you have more lives than a cat?”

Through clenched teeth Jericho ground out, “But why now? We just want to be left alone.”

“I’m sure you do and that’s fine. So, let’s assume she doesn’t want to ascend to her place. What about the half-breed she carries in her womb? What will he want to do?” Ross pulled the blade from its sheath. A gleam reflected in the bright sunlight. “If he tries to take his rightful place... well, we can’t allow that to happen for more reasons than one.”

The wind left Jericho’s lungs as sure as if Ross punched him in the gut.

His unborn child.

He could remember the exact moment she told him she was pregnant like it happened only yesterday. They’d been making love. With a few simple words, she propelled that day to the happiest of his life.

How the news of her pregnancy traveled back to the community he’d have to wrestle with later. Jericho reached under his shirt for the strap holding his curved blade in place. He pulled it out, relishing in the feel of the handle. Ross’s lip curled in mock admiration.

He would have been a fool to walk around casually without some sort of weapon against vampires. And Jericho was no fool.

The captain dropped into a crouch. Jericho circled with him, waiting for him to make the first move. Once upon a time, he might have been concerned at facing off with the older warrior. Today, that man threatened his wife and his child.

His inner wolf panted in excitement. Waited with growing impatience for the chance to spill his blood.

Ross lunged first. The thrust went wide and Jericho almost stepped in to plant his blade into the vamp's side. At the last second, he recognized the feint for what it was and spun in the opposite direction of where Ross would expect him.

Ross lost his balance as he followed through, his eyes growing wide when he realized Jericho wasn't where he should be. Jericho tossed the blade to his opposite hand and using a backwards swipe, sliced the razor edge from his clavicle clean up through midway into Ross's throat. Blood sprayed from the wound, but Jericho stepped out of the line of fire.

He watched dispassionately as the life drained from Ross. The silver in his curved blade made certain the vamp couldn't heal himself in time for the arterial rupture to mend itself. Instead, Ross dropped to his knees, his own blade falling from useless fingers to the ground.

Hate filled the dying man's eyes as he stared at Jericho. Then the light filtered out of them. By the time he fell face forward onto the ground, a minute may have passed. In any event, Jericho was certain of his impending death, if he wasn't dead already.

A flicker of fear jetted through him at the realization he could no longer hear Lia. No telling how many men had come with Ross, distracting him from protecting her. With a surge of adrenaline fueling him, Jericho took off at a dead run for home. His inner wolf howled, urging him to run harder, faster.

He almost didn't see her at first. When she rounded the corner, a basket of vegetables in hand, relief flowed over him in rivers. Still wary, he slowed to a casual stroll as he approached. As he walked, he kept his attention on the woods surrounding the house. He could see nothing amiss. No scent of vampire. No movement from anywhere. The urge to be next to her right now consumed him, though.

A grin growing on his face, he picked up his pace until he was jogging. She turned just in time for him to knock the basket from her hands. When he pushed her against the side of the structure, he used the tender playfulness of a lover.

“What has gotten into you, Jericho?” She laughed with glee. Her smile poured joy into him at the very sight.

He captured her mouth with his, needing to taste her. To know she was real. Right there and his.

She answered his kiss by threading her fingers through his hair. Her body pressed tightly against him, her small belly sending a shiver of possessiveness through him. She kissed him back with a passion that made his heart thunder.

Pulling away from her took a reserve of strength. “You know I would do anything for you and our child, Lia, right?”

She smiled again. “I never had a doubt.” Her eyebrows knitted together. “Are you okay?”

He shrugged a shoulder, pulling her away from the wall. “Just a little hot and sweaty. Nothing getting you that way won’t cure.”

Lia seemed to realize that he was walking them toward the front door, the vegetables and chores of the day forgotten. “Wait a minute, Jer. I have things to do!”

He waggled his eyebrows.

Her laughter rang out like a bell.

“Jericho!”

“Lia?”

He pushed her gently inside. As he shut the door, his face hardened as he took one last look around the perimeter of their property. Maybe not today, but more vampires would be coming. As far as he was concerned, that was all well and good.

Let them come.

He would be waiting.

The End





### **About the Author:**

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled. Now, Dee is a best-selling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her at <http://www.deecarney.com>

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