

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

KRESLEY COLE



THE WARLORD
WANTS FOREVER

IMMORTALS AFTER DARK
SERIES PREMIERE

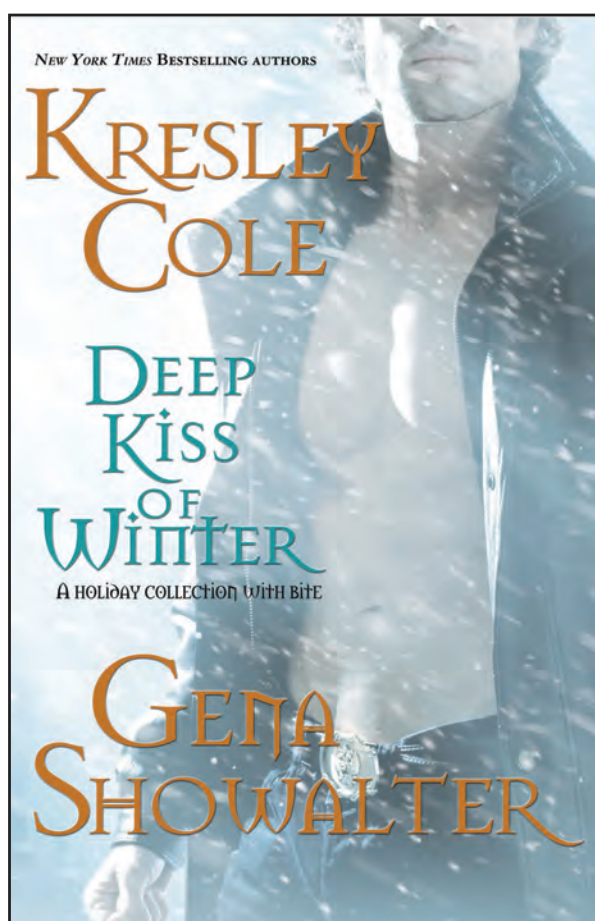
PLUS A COLLECTION OF IAD EXCERPTS

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

KRESLEY COLE

invites you to discover the

IMMORTALS AFTER DARK SERIES



IN THIS SAMPLER, ENJOY
THE FULL
WARLORD WANTS
FOREVER

NOVELLA
AND SEVEN IAD EXCERPTS,
INCLUDING ONE FOR

DEEP KISS
OF WINTER

*(A duology with the mega-talented
Gena Showalter)*

AS WELL AS A SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK
OF THE COVER FOR

PLEASURE OF A
DARK PRINCE

(Garreth and Lucia's story, Feb 2010)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to The Immortals After Dark Series	1
The Warlord Wants Forever	2
Excerpt from A Hunger Like No Other	114
Excerpt from No Rest for the Wicked	132
Excerpt from Wicked Deeds on a Winter's Night	156
Excerpt from Dark Needs at Night's Edge	180
Excerpt from Dark Desires After Dusk	206
Excerpt from Kiss of a Demon King	230
Excerpt from Deep Kiss of Winter	264
Sneak peak of Pleasure of a Dark Prince cover	279
The Book of Lore: Glossary	281
Bibliography / Purchase	286
Kresley Cole Biography	287



INTRODUCTION TO
THE IMMORTALS
AFTER DARK

Every creature or being that was thought to be mythical . . . *isn't*.

They all secretly exist alongside humans and enjoy the gift of immortality. There are hundreds of different kinds: from Vampires to Lykae, from Furies to Shifters, from the Fey to Valkyries.

These immortals call their world **The Lore**.

You may have had a brush with one of Lorekind already. The ethereal waif of impossible beauty—whose fingernails look more like claws. The eccentric billionaire with hypnotic charisma—and an aversion to sunlight. The Highlander with a seventeenth-century Scottish accent and animal magnetism—who can never be penciled in on the night of the full moon.

They walk among us (in bars, on campuses, in luxe retail boutiques) but they war among themselves. Each faction has its strengths, weaknesses, and age old prejudices against the others.

Every five hundred years, the Accession, a battle for supremacy, rages. That time is now. . . .



February, 2006 ~ Pocket Books ~ ISBN 1-4165-1087-7

THE WARLORD WANTS FOREVER

a novella introducing the series . . .

Nikolai Wroth, once a ruthless human warlord in the 1700s and now a general in the rebel vampire army, needs to find his Bride, the one woman who can render him truly alive. As a turned human, he takes no breaths, has no heartbeat, and is consequently weaker than fully-blooded vampires. He wants his Bride for the power she will bring him and can hardly believe it when his heart beats for Myst the Coveted, a mad, fey, mythological creature.

Myst is known throughout the Lore as the most beautiful Valkyrie, part chillingly fierce warrior, part beguiling seductress who can “make you want her even as she’s killing you.” She has devoted her life to protecting an ancient, powerful jewel and to fighting the vampires, and she now sees a way to torment one—for with Wroth’s heartbeat comes consuming sexual desire that can only be slaked by her.

She eludes him for five years, but he has finally chased her to ground and stolen the jewel which commands her, giving him absolute power over her. While he possesses it, he can make her do anything, and he plans to in order for her to experience first hand the agonizing, unending lust she’d purposely subjected him to for half a decade. Yet when Wroth realizes he wants more from her and frees her, will she come back to him?



THE WARLORD WANTS FOREVER

Prologue — The Origin of the Valkyrie

Into the blood-splattered snow, the lone warrior fell to one knee and shuddered with weakness. Still, an arm shot out to raise a sword against the oncoming legion.

Her dented breastplate swallowed her small form.

The winds howled, whipping her hair, but she still heard the twang of the bowstring unleashed. She screamed in fury; the arrow punctured the center of her armor, the blow sending her flying back.

The arrowhead had pierced through metal, then barely through her breastbone, just enough that her heart met the point with each beat. The beating of her own brave heart was killing her.

But her scream had woken two nearby gods sleeping together through a brutal, wintry decade. They stirred and looked down upon the maiden, seeing in her eyes courage burning bright. Bravery and will had marked her entire life, but the light ebbed with death and they mourned it.

Freya, the female god, whispered that they should take her courage and preserve it for eternity because it was so precious.

Wóden agreed, and together they gave up lightning to cleave through the ether and strike the dying maiden.

The light was violent and slow to fade and made the army tremble.

When blackness cloyed once more, the healed maiden woke in a strange place. She was untouched, her human mortality unchanged. But soon an immortal daughter would be born from her—a daughter who possessed her courage, Wóden's wily brilliance, and Freya's mirth and fey

beauty. Though this daughter enjoyed the pure power of lightning for sustenance, she also inherited Wóden's arrogance and Freya's acquisitiveness, which merely endeared her to them more.

The gods were content and the maiden adoring of her new baby. Yet after an age had flickered past, the gods heard another female call out for courage as she died from a battle against a dark enemy. She wasn't a human, but a Furie, one among the Lore—that stratum of clever beings who have convinced humans that they exist only in imagination. Scarce moments had the creature—in the freezing night her breaths were no longer visible.

“Our halls are great, yet our family is small,” Freya said, her eyes sparkling so brightly a mariner in the north was briefly blinded by the stars and almost lost his way.

Grim Wóden took her hand, unable to deny her. Those surrounding the dying Furie saw lightning rent the sky once more.

And it would strike again and again in the coming years, continuing on well after female warriors—be they human, demoness, siren, changeling, or any brave creature from the Lore—knew to pray for it as they died.

Thus the Valkyrie were born.

– 1 –

Five years ago
Mt. Oblak Castle, Russia

If the overgrown vampire didn't stop staring at her face, even his wicked talent with his sword wouldn't keep his head upon his shoulders.

The thought made Myst, an immortal known as the Coveted One, grin as she curled up in the windowsill of her cell. Leaning against the reinforced bars, she watched the two vampire armies battle below as she might a rumble from the back of bleachers.

The poor warlord with his broad shoulders and jet black hair was about to join a legion of other males whose last sight on earth was her smiling face—

She frowned when he ducked and ran through his enemy. He was a big male, at least six and a half feet tall, but he was surprisingly fast. Tilting her head, she studied him. He was good. She knew fighting and liked his style. *Dirty*. He'd cut with his sword then strike out with his fist, or duck a parry then throw an elbow. It amused her to watch, but what she wouldn't give to be down there fighting. In the middle. Against both sides. Against *him*.

She fought dirtier.

His gaze continued to stray to her, and once he'd even killed while his eyes were *still on her*. She'd blown him a kiss, sincerely, choosing to see it as a tribute.

He found time to glance back even as he thundered orders and gave commands to the army of vampires around him, showing brilliance in strategy. She examined it all as though watching *Decisive Battles* on A&E and grudgingly noted the effectiveness of his army's acid grenades and guns.

The creatures of the Lore scorned human weapons like these. The only ones such weapons could kill were humans, which was beyond non-sporting. Yet that was the thing about bullets—aside from ruining perfectly good couture, they *hurt* and could immobilize an immortal for precious seconds. Long enough for a dirty fighter to take your head. Done enough times, they could help take an “untakable” castle like Ivo the Cruel's.

Myst hardly cared that Ivo, her jailer and tormentor, was about to have his ass handed to him by this warlord with his forbidden modern weapons. Her situation would not change, for these rebels, turned humans known as the *Forbearers*, were still vampires. *A blood foe is a blood foe is a blood foe. . . .*

An explosion rocked the castle, and sparks and bits of debris wafted down from the roof of Myst's cell. The low creatures in the dank holds down the corridor howled with impotent fury, increasing in urgency with each successive blast, until it was . . . over. Silence. An aftershock here and there, a muted whimper . . .

The defense of this castle was no more, its inhabitants having disappeared—by *tracing*, as the Lore called teleporting—leaving no more than an airy draft and the burned records of their Horde.

She could hear the rebels searching the bowels of this place but could've told them they wouldn't find any of their enemies. The denizens here had not been a fight-to-the-death sort, more of a *he who fights and runs away, lives to run away another day* type.

Shortly after, she heard heavy boots on the stone floor of the dungeon and knew it was the warlord. He crossed directly to her cell and stood before it.

From her perch, curled in the window, she examined the vampire up close. He had thick, straight black hair that hung over his face in uneven sections, no doubt from where he'd sheared it off with his blade months ago, and never thought to cut it since. Some hanks were kept from his field of vision with those small ravel plaits like the berserkers used to wear. He had scars on his hands, and

his big body was powerful and cut with muscle. She wanted to purr—because apparently central casting had just sent down the consummate virile warlord.

“Come down from there and show yourself.” Deep voice. Russian accent, moneyed, aristocratic.

“Or what? You’ll lock me away in a dungeon?”

“I might free you.”

She was at the bars before he’d had time to lower his gaze from the window. Had his squared jaw slackened just the smallest bit? She listened for a quickening of his heart, but found none because there was no heartbeat whatsoever. So the vampire was single? His eyes were clear of the red haze that marked bloodlust, which meant he had never drunk a being to death. But then a *Forbearer* eschewed taking living blood through the flesh altogether.

Once he saw her face up close, the key wasn’t immediately in the lock as it usually would have been, but his lips parted, exposing his fangs for her to see. Of course his would be sexy—not too prominent or even much longer than a human’s canines.

When she saw the short splendid scar that passed down *both* of his lips, lightning struck just outside, but he didn’t flinch at the bolt or even glance up—he was too busy staring back at her.

Scars, any external evidence of pain, attracted Myst. Pain forged strength. Strength begat electricity. This one could give it to her.

It was possible he was even missing an eye under a thick hank of hair.

She stifled a throaty growl as her hand shot out to brush his hair back. But he was quick, catching her wrist. She curled one finger in a beckoning gesture, and after a moment he released her, allowing her to reach forward. She brushed his hair back, revealing a hard-planed, masculine face covered with grit and ash from the battle.

He was still in possession of both of his eyes and they were *intense*. Gun-metal gray.

When her hand dropped, his brows drew together, perhaps at her blatant interest, or perhaps at her fingers already stroking the bars in invitation as she stared at his mouth. She was surprised by how carnal she found it, especially since the vampire could use it to hurt her.

The smooth gold chain that she’d worn at her waist for millennia now felt heavy on her.

“*What are you?*” he asked in his pleasingly low voice. She realized then that his accent wasn’t Russian, but from that of neighboring Eesti. The general was Estonian, which made him a kind of Nordic Russian, though she was sure he wouldn’t appreciate that description.

She frowned at his question and pulled back her hair to show him her pointed ear. “Nothing?” She parted her lips and tapped her tongue against her smaller dormant fangs. No recognition.

Apparently, the rumors were true. Here was a leader in this army, a general most likely, and he hadn’t a clue that she was his mortal enemy. He would think she was fey or a nymph. She’d prefer fey because she’d cringe to be confused with one of those little hookers—

She shook her head. As long as he didn’t know she was Valkyrie it worked for her.

Killing the unwitting Forbearers would be easy for her and her sisters. *Too* easy. Like being your own secret Santa.

Myst had just confirmed rumors in the Lore that whispered of asses and elbows and this Horde’s inability to differentiate between the two.

* * *

“What are you?” Nikolai Wroth demanded again, surprised his voice was steady.

When he’d seen her in the light, he’d felt like exhaling a stunned breath—if his kind respired—for she was strikingly lovely, with a beauty only hinted at from the distance of the battlefield. He’d been attracted to that face to his reckless peril.

Though she had expected him to recognize her kind, all he could determine was that she wasn’t human and that he hadn’t a clue what she might be. Her ears said fey but she also had the smallest *fangs*.

“Free me,” the creature said. Flawless skin, coral pink lips, flame red hair. The eyes that flickered over him appraisingly were an impossible green.

The way she held the bars was suggestive—everything about her was . . . suggestive.

“Swear fealty to my king, and I will free you.”

“I can’t do that, but you’ve no right to keep me here.”

His brother Murdoch passed by then, raised his eyebrows at Nikolai’s discovery, and muttered in Estonian, “Sweet Christ.” Then he walked on. Why was Nikolai unable to do the same?

“What’s your name?” He wasn’t used to his questions going unanswered.

Another stroke of the bars. “What do you want it to be?”

He scowled. “Are you a vampire?”

“Not the last time I checked.” Her voice was sensual. He couldn’t place her accent, but it was drawling, honeyed.

“Are you innocent of malice against us?”

She waved a dismissing hand. “Oh, good gods, no! I love, love, *love* to kill leeches.”

“Then rot in here.” As if she could kill a vampire. She was scarcely over five feet tall and delicately built—aside from her generous breasts showcased in her tight shirt.

Just before he turned, he saw her eyes narrow. “I smell smoke,” she called after him. “Ivo the Cruel burned his records before he fled, didn’t he?”

Nikolai stilled, clenching his fists because he’d have to return.

“He did,” he grated at the cell once more.

“And this new king’s army is full of Forbearers—turned humans? It matters little. I’m sure the king is very knowledgeable about the vampire Horde’s *extensive* list of enemies within the Lore. He wouldn’t need this castle’s records. In fact, I’m *positive* that that is *not* the reason you chose this stronghold over the four others, including the royal seat.”

How did she know their agenda so well?

Nikolai could plan battles and sieges—he’d earned his rank by this victory alone—but he knew nothing of this new world to advance the army. Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one.

The blind leading the blind. When they’d found the records reduced to a smoldering heap of ash, that’s what Kristoff had muttered.

“You think to bargain for your freedom? If you do happen to have information, I can get it from you.”

“Torture?” she asked with a laugh. “My first piece of information I’ll divulge to you? I wouldn’t recommend trying to torture me. I dislike it and grow sulky under pincers. It’s a *fault*.”

The *things* in the cells, many of which he’d never even heard of, never could have envisioned, howled and grunted at that.

“Now let’s not quarrel, vampire. Free me, and we’ll go to your room and talk.” She offered her fragile-looking hand out to him. A smudge of ash was stark against her alabaster skin.

“I don’t think so.”

“You’ll call for me. You’ll be lonely in your new quarters and will feel out of sorts. I could let you pet my hair until you fell asleep.”

He drew in closer and lowered his voice to ask in all seriousness, “You’re mad, aren’t you?”

“As—a—hatter,” she whispered back conspiratorially.

He felt a hint of sympathy for the creature. “How long have you been in here?”

“For four long . . . interminable . . . days.”

He glowered at her.

“Which is why I want you to take me with you. I don’t eat much.”

The dungeon erupted with laughter again.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“Certainly not like you, Forbearer.”

“How do you know what I am?”

“I know *everything*.”

Then, if true, she had a wealth they didn’t.

“Leave her,” Murdoch called at the gateway of the dungeon. His brows were drawn, no doubt puzzled by his brother’s interest. Nikolai had never pursued women. As a human, they’d either come to him or he’d gone without. He’d had no time in wartime. As a vampire he had no such need. Not until he could find his Bride.

He shook his head at the insane, fey *creature*, then forced himself to walk on, though he thought he heard her whisper, “*Call for me, General,*” making the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

He followed his brother to Kristoff’s new antechamber and found their king gazing out into the clear night from a generous window—that would be shuttered in the scant hours till dawn. When he turned to them, his gaunt face looked weary.

Nikolai suspected it had been difficult killing other natural-born vampires, his own kindred, no matter how crazed they’d become, and no matter that they followed his uncle Demestriu, who’d

stolen his crown centuries ago. Nikolai had no such compunctions. He was weary but only from injury and his sword arm being overworked as he hacked through them.

“Were any of the records salvageable?” Nikolai asked with little hope. If the vampires of this castle had spent as much energy fighting as burning, they might have kept Oblak. To his disgust, they’d fled. He didn’t understand it. When defending your home, you defend to the death.

He had.

Kristoff answered, “None.”

Without the records, their own ignorance would kill them. Kristoff, the rightful king, had been raised by humans far from Demestriu’s reach. For centuries, he had lived among them, hiding his true nature yet learning little of the Lore. His army consisted of human warriors he’d turned as they died on the battlefield, so they knew nothing. Before Nikolai had seen Kristoff standing over him like an angel of death, offering eternal life for eternal fealty, Nikolai had thought vampires were mere myths.

The rules of this new world were complex and often counterintuitive, and their order knew little more than conjecture and what had been learned by painful trial over centuries. They were trapped in a kind of twilight—not human and yet universally shunned by all the factions of the Lore. Those beings hid in the shadows, fleeing from whatever land Kristoff’s army occupied, working together to always be one step ahead.

Nikolai’s human experience said they should have been able to get information by now, but the reality was that this was a different plane altogether. The same effort that went into hiding the Lore from humans for ages went into keeping Kristoff’s soldiers in the dark as well.

“Any sign of Conrad or Sebastian?” Kristoff asked.

Nikolai shook his head. He hadn’t seen his brothers since shortly after they’d been turned but knew natural-born vampires often clashed with turned humans. Though he and Murdoch hadn’t expected to find their brothers here, they had distantly hoped the two might be in the dungeons of the castle they’d strategically needed to take.

“Perhaps the next Horde stronghold.”

Nikolai nodded, though he doubted it. He sensed his brother Bastian was dead and suspected

the mind of the youngest, Conrad, was unreachable even if he could be found. The two had not appreciated the eternal life their older brothers had forced on them.

Murdoch examined a gouge in his arm, seeming unconcerned with this blow, but then he generally seemed unconcerned about everything. Though they shared similar looks, he and Nikolai couldn't be more different in personality. Nikolai believed in Kristoff's cause, seeing many parallels to his own past, and wanted to continue to fight. Murdoch didn't particularly care. Nikolai suspected his brother fought only as a favor to him—or because they had nothing else now.

"Nikolai found a being in the dungeon," Murdoch said. "She seems to have extensive knowledge of the Lore."

"What kind of being?"

Nikolai answered, "I have no idea. She appears fey, delicate, with sharply pointed ears. But she has these small *fangs* and her fingernails were more like . . . claws. She's not vampire."

Kristoff frowned at that. "Perhaps she's born of more than one species?"

"Perhaps." *More speculation.* Nikolai was sick of it. He wanted to know the rules of the game so he could dominate it.

"Find out everything you can from her."

"She won't talk. I've interrogated enough to know she'll hint but never truly divulge. And she hates vampires."

Kristoff pinched his forehead. "Then tomorrow night if we haven't gotten information from the rest of the prisoners, we treat her as the Horde she hates would. Torture her for the information if you can't get it any other way."

Nikolai nodded, but the idea sat ill with him. As a human he'd been merciless to his enemies, but he'd never tortured a woman. She wasn't truly a woman, he reminded himself. She was a female among the Lore, and their army's survival could depend on the knowledge she held.

Perhaps he'd never tortured a woman because he'd never needed to.

The creature had been right, Nikolai thought as a guard showed him to his new chambers. He *was* going to call her up to him.

To do what with her, he didn't know.

– 2 –

“Did you miss me? Because *I* missed *you*,” she said when the guard escorted her inside his bedroom. Out of habit, he stood when a lady entered, and she flashed him a brilliant smile. “A gentleman warrior. Who cleans up *very* well.” She fanned herself with her hand. “I think I’m in love.”

He didn’t answer, and she didn’t seem to mind as she casually scanned the room. “Retro Nosferatu. Not necessarily what I would have done, but then I’m not married to sunproof shutters like you might be. . . .” She shrugged, then headed for the bathroom. “Taking a shower if you don’t mind,” she said airily over her shoulder, making him raise his brows.

At the doorway, she unbuttoned her tight blouse and shrugged from it, leaving only a transparent black bra. She turned to him, revealing her scarcely covered breasts, he knew, just so he could see the creamy flesh spilling from the lace when she bent over to remove her boots. What he didn’t know was why.

Was she truly mad? Most people who were mad didn’t think they were, but she seemed to be proud of it. He was usually quick to determine people’s motives. Yes, she wanted her freedom, but for some reason he knew she wouldn’t sleep with him to receive it.

If he had to guess, he would say that she simply didn’t see stripping in front of him and making herself completely at home in a stranger’s bedroom as odd. In fact, he suspected she didn’t see them as strangers at all.

As he stood, concealing his surprise, she untied the fastening of her silky skirt at her hip, and it

too fell to the ground. A fine gold chain around her tiny waist caught his attention. It was unusual, the design appearing very old, but it glinted like new when she moved. Once he could take his eyes from it, he found her in only that wispy bra and scanty, black underwear so intricate he was shocked anew. They were like a work of art—or a like a ribbon decorating one.

She gave him a teasing smile. “*Vampire like?*” she purred, unclasping the front of her bra to toss it with her other clothes. He scowled because he did like. Very much. He ran a hand over his mouth, wondering if her high, plump breasts could be any more beautiful. She had coral pink nipples that he could spend hours tonguing and alabaster flesh he wanted to cup and palm. He began to speak, then had to cough in his fist to continue. “You’ll strip in front of a vampire when you don’t even know his name?”

She gasped with mock horror and covered her breasts with her hands. “You’re right! So what’s your name?”

“My answer will be as forthcoming as yours. What do you want it to be?”

She smiled at that but then replied to the question, “Some kind of name that fits a battle-scarred, overgrown vampire warlord.”

Battle-scarred? Overgrown? He wondered why in the hell he cared how she saw him. She was divinely wrought, but mad. He’d take his scars with his sanity. “Nikolai Wroth,” he grated.

For the briefest second he thought he saw recognition flicker. But then she eyed him archly and breathed, “Oh, you are *good*. Wroth, the old word for rage? That’s a bingo idea for a name.” Her hands dropped. “I’ll just call you by that,” she said, then gave him a second look, shaking her head with a rueful smile as if she couldn’t believe he was so clever.

... as a hatter.

She leaned back against the doorway, raising her bent arms above her head to grasp her elbows. Displaying her mouthwatering breasts and flashing a flirtatious smile that would’ve dropped most men to their knees, she asked in her whiskey voice, “Care to join me, *Wroth?*” She winked when she said his name and rolled her hips up off the doorframe.

“No,” he bit out the word with difficulty. He didn’t want her to know how his body didn’t respond to her. His mind did, his vague memories of being human did. But not his body. He was

the walking dead. No respiration, no heartbeat, no sexual need—or *ability*. Not until he found his predestined Bride and she “*blooded*” him fully. With his blooding, something inside him, some essence—maybe even his soul—would recognize her as *his*. He would see her as the one he was meant to spend eternity with, the woman he could love without measure, if one believed in that, and his body would wake for her.

In the past he’d yearned for his Bride because of the power she would bring him—he would finally be as strong as blooded vampires, his senses as acute as theirs—but he’d never missed the sex before this. And Nikolai knew after this display that she was not his. For this should’ve blooded any vampire.

She shrugged, the simple movement a sight to behold, then turned the corner to the bathroom. When she emerged fifteen minutes later clad in a towel, she crossed to his closet. He was almost certain she’d used his toothbrush.

Which . . . charmed him for some reason—

The towel dropped, leaving her with only her chain and him with a view of her perfect ass.

He swallowed. “Have you no modesty?” Never in his life had he encountered a female so quick to be naked. Of course, he’d never in his life encountered a female who should so utterly be naked at any chance.

“Not at my age,” she said as she began exploring his recently unpacked clothing. How strange to hear her say that when she looked so young. He found his head tilting to keep his gaze on her as she moved and bent. The chain swayed at her waist, and her long, damp hair cascaded down over her breasts. He stifled a groan at a particularly fruitful glance. *A true redhead*. He closed his eyes. And he couldn’t have her.

“How old are you?” he grated, opening his eyes.

“Physiologically, I’m twenty-five. Chronologically, I’m . . . not.”

“So you are an immortal?”

An amused smile played about her lips. “I am.” She pulled on one of his shirts though it fell far off one shoulder and well down her legs.

“Why did you stop aging at twenty-five?”

“When I was strongest. Not for the same reason you were frozen at . . .”—she trailed off, eyeing him—“thirty-four?”

“Thirty-five. And why do you think I stopped aging then?”

She ignored him to continue digging. After a few moments, she plucked out an old bejeweled cross from his bag. She pinched the relic, holding it away from her, keeping her gaze from it. “You’re Catholic?”

“Yes. It was a gift from my father.” To help keep him alive in wartime. Nikolai shook his head at the irony of just how well it had worked. “I thought I was the one who should be repelled by it.”

“Only a turned human would say that. Besides I’m in no way *repelled*. With jewels like that? If I look at it, I’ll want it.”

“So you wouldn’t want it because you’re Catholic, I take it?”

“My family was very orthodox pagan. Can I have?” She held it forward, still not looking at it. “Can I, can I, Wroth?”

“Put it back,” he said, fighting the unfamiliar urge to grin. With a pouty expression, she returned it, mumbling something about tight-fisted vampires, then dipped her feet into his boots. When she turned to him with her hands on her hips, his lips almost curled at the sight of her, a mad pagan immortal swallowed by his boots.

“What did your mother feed you?” she teased. “Renaissance anabolics?”

His urge to smile faded. “My mother died young.”

“So did mine.” He thought he heard her murmur, “*The first time.*”

“And I was born after the Renaissance.”

She drew her feet from his boots and sauntered past him. “But not by much.”

“That’s true. And why do you think I stopped aging at thirty-five?” he asked again.

She frowned as if she didn’t know where his question had come from, then said, “Because naughty Kristoff found you dying on a battlefield, decided you’d make a fine recruit, then made you drink his blood. Bit a wrist open, perhaps? Then with his vampiric hoo-doo blood in your veins, he let you die. Unless he was in a hurry, then he would’ve killed you. One to three nights later and voila, you rise from the dead—most likely with a frown on your face as you think ‘Holy shite, it worked!’”

He ignored the last and asked, “How do you know the blood ritual?” He’d thought that only vampires knew the true way to turn a human. In movies and books, the change always came as a consequence of a vampire’s bite, when in fact a human had more chance of turning if he bit a vampire.

“Like I said, I know everything.”

Yes, but he *was* learning, if sporadically. She was an immortal who’d been frozen physiologically at twenty-five. If she was pagan she was at least several hundred years old. She knew of the blood ritual and that Kristoff “recruited” his soldiers straight from the battlefield.

When she scooped up her clothes, opened his door, then snapped her fingers for a guard down the hall, Nikolai merely watched like a bystander.

“Psst. Minion. I need these laundered. Very little starch. Don’t just stand there gawking or you’ll anger my good frenemy General Wroth. We’re like *this*.”

He couldn’t see her but knew she was twining two fingers together.

Once she’d foisted her laundry, she closed the door by dramatically leaning back against it—as if to say he couldn’t get away from her now—then glided over to him. As a rule, he observed, he calculated and he waited, but he’d never quite enjoyed sitting back and watching events unfurl as much as with her. Unpredictable didn’t begin to describe—

She clutched his shoulders and straddled him.

Nothing between them but his pants and a few inches. He could even feel her heat as she knelt over him. She was definitely not his Bride or he would’ve ripped through his zipper to get inside her. His heart would beat, he would take his first breath in three hundred years, and in the space of one of those breaths he would be buried so deep in her tightness, wrenching her down on him. . . . But nothing approaching that happened.

“Now, Wroth, we need to work some logistics out. When I’m kept as a pet, my care is very involved.”

His brows drew together. “I have no wish to keep you as a pet.”

“You hold me prisoner. You think to order me. How does this differ?”

“You’re not a pet,” he insisted. He couldn’t think—her eyes were mesmerizing, her sex was

inches away from his, and her pleasing accent was lulling.

She leaned in by his ear and murmured, “What if I want to be your pet? Would you like that, vampire?” Her fingers brushed their way over his chest, unbuttoning his shirt. She picked up his hands one at a time and set them on the armrests, giving each a squeeze as if to let him know she wanted them to stay that way.

With raised eyebrows, he let her. He wasn’t about to move, and couldn’t imagine what she would do next.

“If I was your pet, you could keep me for your pleasure, and I would serve you in *every* way you desire.” She pulled his shirt open, clearly admiring his chest. “Hard.” Her voice was breathy. “Scars.” She moistened her lips. “I’d endeavor to blood you so you could wake at sunset with my mouth greedy on you while you clutched my thighs to drink from. You would go to sleep at sunrise still deep inside my body.” Her hand was trailing down, her eyes raptly following the jagged scar that had been his deathblow. “I am here for the taking and ache for your touch.”

She reached down and cupped him beneath her before he could grip her wrist. In an instant her seductive look vanished, though she showed no surprise that he wasn’t hard. She felt around his cock, then arched an eyebrow to say, “Well, my word, Wroth. If you were hard, I wouldn’t know whether to be tantalized or terrified.”

Then with blurring speed she was off him, and in the bed, lying on her stomach, chin propped on her hands. She was utterly unaffected by what had just occurred, while he was angered and . . . shamed that she’d felt him like this. He wanted to show her hard. . . .

“How do you plan to keep me here during the day? An unblooded Forbearer shouldn’t be so hard to vanquish.”

Vanquished by her? Amusing. “I’ll send you back to the cell. You want to be my pet? I’ll take you out and put you back in your cage at my pleasure.”

She blinked at him. “You don’t want to send me back. Who will entertain you? I can deal poker *and* make shadow animals.”

He shook himself. This was just another instance of the Lore playing with them. She was not *normal*. He knew that anything he’d learned about females was inapplicable with her.

If she could be unaffected, he could pretend it. “I need you to answer some questions. I need to know what you are and what your name is.”

“I’ll answer your questions if you answer mine.”

“Done,” he said quickly. “Ask.”

“Were you afraid when Kristoff stood over you?”

“I was . . . tired.” Strange question.

“Most mortals would have been terrified to see the Gravewalker.”

“Is that what he’s called?” Kristoff would find that amusing. At her nod, he said, “Well, I’d seen a lot by that time.”

“What’s his agenda? Does he want to replace Demestriu?”

Nikolai hesitated, then answered honestly, hoping that she would do the same. “He wants his crown back, but he doesn’t want to rule over any faction but our own.”

“Uh-huh.” She raised an eyebrow as if she didn’t believe him, then asked, “That was your brother in the dungeon?”

“Murdoch, yes.”

“Turned vampires don’t usually have *family* within the Horde . . .”

“Murdoch died in the same battle. I’ve two other brothers turned later as well.”

“You’re young. Yet you’re a general. How’d you swing that?”

He was over three hundred years old. Young compared to her? “I refused the dark gift if certain conditions weren’t met.”

Her eyes grew bright with new interest, and she patted the bed for him to come sit with her. He felt he was on the verge of learning something, so he complied, resting against the headboard to face her, stretching his legs out.

He almost laughed. The first time he’d been in bed with a woman in centuries, and she was easily the most beautiful of any before—and he could do nothing with her. He couldn’t even drink her, though his fangs ached to pierce the pale column of her neck. Thank God he’d fed before she’d been brought up.

“Wroth, you *countered* with Kristoff as you lay dying?”

When she put it like that it sounded more reckless than it had been. As Nikolai had lain in his own cooling blood, nearly freed of the constant struggle, the ongoing war and famine and plague, he'd told Kristoff, "You need me more than I need to live."

Kristoff had seen him in many battles and agreed. "I did counter. I was used to giving orders and would take them from no one but a powerful king. I wanted my brother turned if he was dying, and trusted compatriots as well. Kristoff complied."

That wasn't all. Nikolai had asked for sixty years so he and Murdoch could watch over the rest of their living family—their father, four sisters and two other brothers.

They'd needed only weeks.

"You know, I'd heard of you when you were a human. Weren't you called the Overlord?"

This surprised him. "On kinder tongues. How could you have heard of me? Your accent isn't from the northlands."

She sighed. "Not anymore. I'd heard of you because I'm interested in all things martial. You were quite the vicious leader."

He felt his expression grow cold. "We were defending. I was anything I needed to be to see it done." He could tell by her reaction that she liked his answer. Her lips parted as she tilted her head at him. Then she sidled closer to him on the bed as if she couldn't help herself.

Her voice more gentle, she said, "But in the end you lost."

He stared past her. "Everything." The battle had only been like the final blow on a dying man. Prior to that, the enemy had scorched and salted their lands. Famine followed and there'd been no defending when plague erupted.

"Wroth," she said softly. He turned his gaze to her. "Let's make a pact, you and I." Her eyes were so captivating in her elven-like face as she eased open his legs to kneel between them. "Let's vow that we won't harm the other in this room." She pressed him back until he lay fully on the rolled pillow. *What would she do next?*

When he gave her one quick nod, she flashed him a warm smile that made him feel praised in some way. Her damp hair was spilling down over his legs, and with the back of her hand, she swung it to one side, baring her tantalizing neck. A rush of the innate scent of her hair swept him up, like

a drug. Sweet and subtle, just like her skin. If she smelled like this, he couldn't imagine what she would taste like. He wished she'd bared her flesh in offer to him.

"Wroth, this is embarrassing," she murmured in a sensual voice, "but I think I've caught you staring at my neck."

"You did," he admitted, oddly feeling no shame to be contemplating his order's most reviled crime.

She brushed her fingertips over her skin. "Are you tempted to take a drink from me?"

In the worst way.

He wondered how many times Ivo had taken her and felt a spike of some unfamiliar feeling claw in his gut. "We don't drink from living beings. It's how we got our name." It was this order's pledge, their pact. Nikolai had never tasted flesh as he drank. But then he'd never felt the smallest stir of temptation to before her.

"Why?"

"So we are never tempted to kill," he said, giving her the official line, which was true, but the whole truth was more complicated, and they kept secret the details they'd managed to learn. Living blood, blood not separated from its source, brought side effects with it. A vampire would suffer torments from it, such as his victim's memories. Kristoff believed these memories were what drove natural-born vampires insane and made their eyes turn permanently red. As far as they could determine, the only way not to harvest them was to drink blood that had died, avoiding the evils—and the benefits.

"What if you drank from an immortal that couldn't be killed from that?" she asked, her words lulling again. He couldn't seem to take his eyes from hers.

A tricky question to answer without saying that the immortal would have far too many plaguing memories, multiple in number to a mortal. He answered her question with one of his own. "Do you want me to take your flesh, creature?" The mere idea of it made his words rough, his fangs ache.

At her titillated look, he feared she'd say yes, calling his bluff. What would he do then?

"Rain check," she answered brightly. Then, to his shock, she curled up between his legs, her face nuzzling against his uncovered torso, and wrapped her pale, delicate arms and hands around

his thigh.

“I never asked my questions,” he said, staring at the ceiling, trying to sound casual about what was occurring. He’d seen a great many things in his life, but this female was throwing him.

“We have all the time in the world for that, do we not?”

He thought she kissed the scar on his lower stomach with her lips—and a slow little lick. He lay tensed, rasping, “At least tell me your name, creature.”

“Myst,” she whispered, then she fell asleep.

Myst. How fitting that she was named after something intangible and capricious.

Long after, he was still roiling. In sleep, his little pagan clutched his leg with her pink claws. And they were claws, sharp and curling, though somehow elegant. He ignored the pain, for it was little compared to the odd satisfaction of thinking that she clutched him for comfort.

He savored simply resting with her, doing nothing but watching as her hair dried into big, glossy red curls that spread out over his chest. For centuries their army had been constantly on the move, hiding in the shadows of the northlands in often grueling conditions, keeping their growing numbers secret. Everything had been about the war, all adding up to this attack, to furthering their cause.

He brought a curl up to his face to brush it over his lips. So soft, like her flawless skin. Tomorrow night, if she hadn’t given him information—and he somehow knew she wouldn’t voluntarily—could he lash her skin to get at her secrets? After Myst had cleaved to him so trustingly?

Could he break any of her delicate bones and have her gaze at him with pain in those green eyes? If she’d been his Bride he wouldn’t have to hurt her, would be forbidden from ever harming her—his life given over to protecting her.

He ran the backs of his fingers down her silken cheek, feeling her light, quick breaths warm on his stomach. He’d never truly felt the sting of envy in his life, had never envied other men except those who enjoyed peace in their land. He’d been born affluent, his family aristocratic, and fortune had followed him until the latter years of his mortality. To envy was to lack.

So why did he want to destroy any vampire who might be blooded by her?

– 3 –

Where the hell is my warlord?

Myst jerked upright, waking from the first real sleep she'd enjoyed since she'd been taken by the Horde four nights ago. She was alone in his bed, her clothes washed and folded at the foot. She smiled to realize he'd drawn a blanket over her.

She needed to keep up with Wroth until her sisters broke her out of this pokey. She swore again that this was the last time she would be bait—and this time she meant it. Rumor was rife in the Lore, but tales of Ivo the Cruel making dark alliances proved worrisome enough for them to “reconnoiter,” or undertake Operation: Myst Gets Nabbed.

Yet she'd learned little about Ivo for her troubles—the acting, the getting too close and then letting herself get caught, etc.—only that he was definitely planning something major.

She chuckled. That is, until General Wroth punked his ass out of a castle.

No, she hadn't learned much about Ivo, but this Kristoff and the general would make good dish. What if this king really wanted to kill Demestriu and stop vampires from terrorizing everyone else? Was it possible that not all vampires had a predisposition toward sociopathic evil?

What if the Valkyrie didn't have to war with these Forbearers? However, it was doubtful. Her sisters wouldn't discriminate between the two vampire factions. Kill first and then say, “Gosh, were you actually good? My duh!” Vampires as a species were simply too powerful to go unchecked.

Demestriu and his vampire Horde had been brutal to all the Lore, but especially the Valkyrie. Fifty years ago, Furie, their queen, the strongest and fiercest of them all, had tried to assassinate

him. She had never returned. Tales abounded that Demestriu had chained Furie to the bottom of the sea to drown again and again only to have her dogged immortality surge her to life for more torment. When the covens finally found her and freed her, Furie would be as none other on earth, awash in rage. She wouldn't check for vampire affiliation before she slaughtered and would expect her covens to follow her example.

So, until Myst's covens decided on their plan of action with this new power, she'd go about business as usual, which meant she needed to find Wroth. Before he'd come, Myst had been powerless here. She could handle weapons as well as most in the coven, though a sword and bow were not her strengths.

Her preferred weapon was men. And now she had one—a big, scarred one with gorgeous eyes, and with skin that she wanted to lick until her tongue got tired—in her clutches.

Or she'd had him.

Manipulating them, playing them, making them believe she lived for them alone in order to have them do her bidding were her m.o. Furie had once asked her, "Why would you ever send a man to do a woman's job?"

Confused, Myst had answered, "Because I can."

The problem with Oblak's vampires was that they had no appreciation for her whatsoever. At least Wroth liked to look at her.

For them, the blood superseded all, and she could neither withhold it nor capitalize on it. Though the eyes of every creature in the Lore turned a certain species-related color with intense emotion, theirs were permanently, wholly red from sucking the life from their victims to the very marrow—not from merely *drinking* as these Forbearers feared. One kill put them in a downward spiral, because with the kill came the bloodlust riding them to do it again and again. Then the subsequent accumulation of their victim's memories over the years drove many of them mad.

Yet for the last four nights, Ivo and his men had never drunk from her, vacillating, examining her as she had yawned with boredom. Finally, she'd snapped to Ivo, "Get dental with me or don't, but make a damned decision." His eyes had slitted with menace, his red gaze a contrast to his pale face and shaven head, but in the end he'd avoided her blood, thinking *her* madness might be

catching. Worked for her. In fact, she'd never in her life been bitten.

She wondered what it would have been like to have Wroth take her neck last night when his irises had flickered black with want. She was an awful person, she knew it, weak with perversion to even entertain these thoughts. Probably the only Valkyrie on earth who'd ever fantasized about a vampire. She frowned. No. There'd been one other. . . .

Myst tapped her chin, wondering if she should tell the Forbearers that they forwent for really no reason.

Neh.

Maybe if the scrumptious general continued to be nice to her she'd hint a little. She *had* heard of him back in the day. Of course they'd had a correspondent in the field following that war, and she'd reported back that Wroth had been big and brave and deliciously ruthless to his enemies. Though the Overlord had lost in the end against a much larger force, he'd bought his people at least a decade of protection.

Myst and her sisters had sat by the hearth, sighing over tales of his deeds as though ogling an issue of *Tiger Beat*. Myst remembered that she had felt loss at the news of his defeat because she'd known it meant the death of a great man. But he'd made a comeback, and in person, he hadn't disappointed. Except for the fact that he was now a mortal enemy—or rather, an immortal mortal enemy. Oh, and a leech.

She tried the door to his room, just in case he'd decided to trust her, but it was locked—though not mystically reinforced like her cell was. She could easily have broken it down, but she didn't have to be back in the dungeon until dawn. So she took her time dressing and piling her hair up in a way she thought he'd like, and still had time to root through all his things. Though she kept her eyes from the shiny jeweled cross, lest she get sticky-fingered with it.

Digging through his clothes, she realized she liked how he dressed, his style modern but still aristocratic somehow. And she loved his scent and his careless but sexy hair. She'd rolled in the bed with one of his big cable-knit sweaters, her face buried in it, uncaring if he returned and found her like that. But he never showed, and instead two guards had arrived to escort her back down as per *his* orders.

They wouldn't meet her eyes.

Well, shite, they knew something she didn't. Wroth hadn't kept her as she'd hoped. She was in trouble, and she suspected she knew why. *If you do happen to have information, I can get it from you*, he'd said.

When they closed the cell door behind her, and she realized she was the only one in the dungeon, her fears were confirmed. The low beings here—those who made up the Saturday night creature-feature underbelly of the Lore—had been taken away, no doubt to be tortured and killed.

She was the only girl left on the dance floor, but not for long, she knew, because none of the others would've talked. Of course, she'd threatened to peel them, and *their families*, for revealing any information, and there was a reason that *"And may you never feel a Valkyrie's breath at your back"* was a drinking toast among the Lore. The vampires might come and take one's village, but the Valkyrie would creep in, hiding under a bed to take one's head from one's pillow. Their word was law.

Which left her. . . . She looked up when she heard boots striding over the stone.

"Listen carefully, Myst," Wroth said as a guard opened her cell before leaving them. "I'm going to ask you questions about your kind and about the different factions in the Lore. You must answer them or I've been ordered to get the information from you by force."

"Torture? Ordered? Can't disobey Kristoff for me?"

"Myst, you know I'd be dead if not for him. My brothers and friends as well. My life has not been my own since that night."

He was actually serious about this. But then Myst hadn't been kidding either when she'd said that torture really pissed her off. She'd been giving Wroth preferential treatment because he was, like, a *celebrity* in martial circles, but now he'd taken a plunge into vampirism—and she needed to remember that. She'd push and cajole to the end but after that . . . *bring it, leech*. Still bubbly friendly, she said, "Wroth, you could help me escape—"

"I swore my fealty and I'll see my order through. Answer or you'll face the consequences," he said. "I'll begin with the most basic. *What* are you?"

"Pussy Cat Doll?" she asked, immediately doing a slow headshake at his look. "Judge, jury and

executioner.” He scowled. Her eyes lit up. “Transient! What? Really. No? Babe in Toyland?”

“Damn it, Myst, just answer the questions. Then you can come back up to my room.” He lowered his voice and curled his finger under her chin. “We can sleep together again as we did today.”

“But you don’t understand that torture would be easier for me than to go back to the Lore as an *informant*.” She’d no longer be an A-lister, an “avoid at all costs” enemy. She’d lose her status as a *creature with which one did not fuck*.

“My brother has tried to get information from the others—”

“But they didn’t talk either, huh?” Had she sounded smug?

He seemed to shake himself, hardening his resolve. “You’re leaving me little choice.”

Well. She was about to experience first-hand the Overlord’s ruthlessness she’d admired, because apparently he’d decided she was an enemy just when she’d thought they were getting kinda cozy.

Way to hurt my feelings, Wroth. She sniffled. Now I’ll really have to kill you.

* * *

With his thoughts constantly on her throughout the night, he’d stalled for hours, as much as he could, waiting till nearly dawn, ensuring it would at least be brief.

“You’re really going to do this?” she asked as she turned from him, moving into the back corner.

Her shoulders were shaking, and he suspected she was laughing. When he crossed to her, taking her arm and turning her, he was shocked to find genuine tears streaming down her heartbreakingly beautiful face. “Wroth, I thought we had an *arrangement*.” She cast him a brows-drawn look of betrayal.

She wasn’t feigning this. In her wild, mixed-up mind, she had thought they were . . . friends?

The cell wobbled and he braced himself, frowning that she seemed not to notice. *Just after-shocks from last night.*

He didn’t want her to hurt. But her eyes blazed with it, raw and true and bare. He was actually seeing *her*—Myst with her false swagger and play peeled back. This was a facet of her, but it *was* finally Myst, and suddenly he found it unbearable as each tear fell. He flinched when one dropped to her cheek, flinched as if he’d been hit.

Another shake all around him.

She turned from him and appeared to wipe her face. When she turned back, she was blatantly sexual, as though she'd donned a mask once more.

"Myst, I don't want to hurt you, but you must answer my questions. This isn't a game."

She gave him a look of utter disbelief. "That's *exactly* what this is. You want to know about the Lore? Learn this lesson well—we are *all* pawns."

The castle shook around him, and while he glanced around wildly, she remained undaunted. No, it was not the outside shaking.

The sound booming in his ears like an earthquake was coming from . . . *within him*. "What are you?" he demanded again.

Her face never lost its expression of vague distaste even when her hand pressed gently against his chest—to feel his heart stutter then thunder to life. Because he'd finally *seen* her and recognized her for what she was. . . .

"Apparently, I'm your Bride."

* * *

"I was wondering if I could get you to turn for me," Myst purred to him, as he struggled to hide his shock.

She'd found him to be a cool, disciplined man, but she'd heard a new heartbeat was deafening for these unblooded vampires, the sudden rush of sexual desire overwhelming, their breaths unpracticed and rough at first. With soft touches, she eased him against the wall. His eyes were half-lidded as she rubbed up and down his chest. "How does the air in your lungs feel?"

He inhaled deeply. "Cold. Pressure, but it feels good." He looked at her with such gratitude for blooding him.

They always did.

"How does your blood feel, heating and moving?"

"Stronger. It's . . . searing."

She palmed his erection through his pants, and his entire body jerked as he threw back his head to yell out. She was almost as shocked. She'd known Wroth was very well endowed, but hard, he

was *overly* so.

Like Demon or Lykae endowed.

He held her hand in place over his shaft, curving her fingers around it as he slowly thrust against her palm. Her body softened when she imagined the onslaught of need clawing at him. In a sensual whisper, she asked, “And how does this feel when it hardens and distends?”

“*Good*,” he grated with a shudder. “So damn good.”

“It’s been three centuries? Well, you are due I suppose.” She unzipped his pants just enough to wiggle her thumb inside and rub the broad tip of his penis, making it grow slick. His eyes rolled back in his head. “I can only imagine how heavy and tight this feels, throbbing with pressure, close to exploding.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

Because I can.

Soon he would have no more thought than an animal. His eyes were growing black. She stroked his length through his pants, relieved she would never have to take his uncomfortable size within her. Five, four, three, two . . .

Wroth attacked with surprisingly strength, pinning her arms over her head. He kissed her, deeply, *possessively*, seeming to brand her with his kiss. He left her panting when he bent down to lick her nipples, sucking at them through her blouse. His other hand cupped her sex.

With a growl, he yanked himself from her, and took her elbow. “Come with me.”

Damn it, dawn neared. Where were they? She had to keep him here. “No, Wroth,” she said.

“Won’t claim my Bride in a dungeon.”

“But I can’t wait,” she cried. “Tell the guard to leave.”

“No—”

“Wroth,” she gripped his shaft hard while whispering in his ear, “*my body weeps for this thrusting inside me.*”

He bellowed out that order, then tore open her blouse and bra, suckling and tonguing her nipples roughly. Involuntarily her back arched, pressing her breasts into his gorgeous lips. When had she begun undulating her hips for him?

“I’ve waited for you,” he bit out. “So long I’ve waited.”

One hand pinned her wrists above her, the other shot up her skirt and ripped her panties completely from her. His fingers roved, hot and slow over her, teasing. He knew exactly how to set her on fire, using her own moisture to slide his thumb around her clitoris in slow, slick, mind-numbing circles.

“*So wet,*” he rasped against her breast. “As soon as I saw you, I wanted it to be you.” His lips took her hardened nipple, sucking on it till it throbbed. He turned to the other one for the same attention.

Myst made a decision then. There was simply no way she was going to miss this.

She moaned in truth, unable to control herself as lightning fired outside in conjunction with the emotion inside her. When he plunged one finger into her, withdrew, then thrust two deep within her, she wanted to come around them. He slid them into her unhurriedly but with enough force that she was rocked to her toes each time.

She arched her back more, wanting to offer up her breasts. She spread her legs, taking his fierce touch. “Don’t stop,” she panted, so close, aching to reach for his shaft. But he’d captured her hands above her.

“Never.” He thrust harder, until she didn’t know if her toes even touched the ground, then he spread his fingers inside her as if preparing her for his size. Her head fell back and she moaned at the overwhelming feeling of fullness.

She raised her leg to lay it over the knee he’d placed against the wall as if just for that purpose. Spread to him, she ground her hips wildly.

At her ear, he rumbled the words, “Come for me, *milaya*.”

“Ah, yes . . . *Wroth,*” she moaned again, about to succumb to his stroking. She gave a strangled cry and climaxed with a fiery, wet pulsing that staggered her and made him groan as if he had as well.

“*I can feel you come,*” he grated while she clutched him, rolling her hips against his masterful touch until she was too sensitive to continue. But he didn’t stop until she was mindlessly moaning his name in his capturing arms.

When she was spent, she sagged against him, still weakly undulating for him. Her nipples were damp and achy from his tongue.

He cupped the back of her neck and yanked her up to face him, gazing down at her with lust, but his words were more. "I will be good to you, Myst. I will protect you. *You are mine.*"

He was saying these things because he was about to shove into her with that huge shaft, to *claim* her. A true vampire's Bride. He took her leg and clutched it to his hip, about to free himself.

Her half-lidded eyes had just widened with true alarm when she heard the merest whisper at the gateway to the dungeon.

* * *

Before he could react, Myst flung herself away. Why would she do that? His hand shot out to pull her back, but she shrank from him. Why wasn't he inside her right now? He'd made sure she was wet, ready to receive him—

He heard movement and jerked his head around, fangs sharpening in fury.

"Look at the lovebirds." A creature similar to Myst was standing at the entry to the cell, a bow at the ready.

A second one with bright, glowing skin joined the first, happily chewing gum and flipping a dagger in the air. "Don't make me look—I think I'll be sick. Myst, cavorting with a vampire is a new low even for you."

"What is this?" Nikolai demanded, stalking toward them.

The archer nocked an arrow with supernatural speed and let it sing without hesitation. He lunged to dodge it, but she'd anticipated his move and the arrow pinned him to the wall. A second took his other shoulder, drilling its tip half a foot into the stone. He cast her a killing look, then lurched forward to simply let the arrows tear through him, but the shafts were ringed like shank nails.

When he realized he wouldn't be moving, he bellowed with rage.

He saw Myst pulling her clothing together, turning for the door. "*Don't you walk away from me.*"

"So sorry to interrupt your plans for tonight." She cast him that hurt look. "You almost made

me forget that you'd come down here to *torture* me. You want to learn? Know that we hate torture. It starts to add up over the years—"

"That was before I knew you were my Bride."

Her face went cold in an instant. "Before you knew you could finally screw me? Now that your body's in working order, I don't feel the skin flayed from mine?"

"You're my Bride. *Mine*. You belong *to me*."

She flew back at him, enraged, irises glowing silver. The bright one tossed her a dagger and Myst caught it behind her without looking. Again his mind demanded to know what she was.

She pressed the blade to his jugular, as lightning bombarded the castle. "If I *belonged* to every man who wanted it so or to every vampire I've blooded there'd be *nothing left of me*. But no one cares about that."

"You've not blooded others. They would be here protecting you, fighting for you."

"Not"—she leaned in closer, tilting her head like an animal—"if I killed them all."

Then she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him to her, pressing her lips against his. She kissed him hard. Yet he soon tasted . . . her blood? Just as he groaned, she drew back with an inscrutable expression on her face.

Unimaginably warm and rich, her blood was as exquisite as everything else about her, and he shuddered in ecstasy at the luscious taste. "You know I'll want nothing else now," he rasped.

In response, she snapped her teeth at him. To the others she commanded, "Leave him," then exited the cell.

The archer and the bright one exchanged a confused glance. "And by 'leave him' you clearly mean leave him beheaded, disemboweled, and chock full of quills like a pincushion."

"You heard him—I'm his Bride."

"Ohhh," the bright one said, blowing a bubble. "You mean he hasn't, uh, you know, *released*, the first time since his bleeding?" Then with a quick glance at his crotch, she said, "And he stays like that without you, right?" She chuckled. "I'm cool with the plan."

The archer wasn't convinced. "Don't get me wrong, I enjoy condemning vampires to unending sexual torture as much as the next fabulously talented huntress . . ." When Nikolai heard a guard

charging in, she leisurely shot an arrow in that direction, tilted her head at the result, then sighed to Myst, “But *Vampire Bride* just sounds so B-movie. He just dragged you down to B-moviedom.”

The bright one made her voice overly dramatic, saying, “For that alone . . . *he must die*. Seriously, Myst. Your ‘husband’ has irrevocably damaged your street cred unless you kill him like the others.”

They were *all* mad.

And still he was hard, aching for her, for the blood she’d given him just to torture him. “You evil, teasing bitch. Kill me then.”

For just the merest second he imagined he saw compassion in her eyes, but when she shrugged, his hazy mind finally grasped that she was going to leave him here with nothing but a body knotted with lust for her and a taste of blood that he would go to his knees for. “You’re the most malicious bitch I’ve ever known.”

“Flatterer,” she chirped.

Across the corridor, she easily leapt to the window forty feet above, opening the shutters to draw the unfortified bars from the space as though she might pluck back a curtain. She held a hand down for the others.

“I will find you,” he bit out. “I will find you and make you pay for this a thousand times.”

The bright one leapt up and caught Myst’s forefinger with her own. “Sounds like he’s setting up a date,” she said as she dangled.

“Oooom,” Myst purred, her gaze flickering over him. “Dress casual.”

– 4 –

Present Day

Never-ending sexual desire that could never be slaked.

She'd knowingly—delightedly—surrendered him to this torment. His Bride had blooded him, giving him his first need as a vampire, then stoked it to a fever pitch—and only his Bride could work his seed free the first time.

If only she had stayed long enough for him to take her just once, or to merely touch her skin as he'd taken his own ease, she could've spared him this. But then she'd clearly said that that was the plan.

And for the last five years, Nikolai had been cursed with more than that. He was cursed with her memories as well.

The minuscule drop of blood taken directly from her flesh did more than make any other blood taste like tar to him—it did just what the Forbearers feared. With her living blood came dreams where her memories unfolded, so realistic they were as if he was there to experience scents she'd smelled and textures she'd felt.

Sometimes he could even feel her hands clench in anger. But he'd told no one, keeping his secrets because he didn't want to lose his power within their army—or be killed.

Each sunset he rose and checked his eyes for the telltale red, and every day if he could manage to sleep, he was subjected to the same series of memories that subtly grew in detail each time.

The first found her atop a hill, sun bright, with snow still on the ground. “I’ve cursed you to your hell,” Myst hissed at the site of a rough gravestone. She was roiling with so much hostility that Nikolai knew she’d must have killed whatever being lay there. She spoke an ancient language that Nikolai shouldn’t understand, but he did. He felt the sensations she’d felt, the constant sway of her chain around her waist, the smell of the ocean just below her, brine on a cold day.

Another familiar dream. A drunken Roman senator kneeling at her feet. “At long last, I’m about to have Myst the Coveted. And you’ll no longer be coveted, you’ll be possessed.” He laughed. “You’ll make me twist on your little hook no longer.”

Nikolai had discovered the full name of his tormenter. Myst the Coveted.

With disgust, Nikolai saw the Roman take Myst’s dainty foot in his mouth, sucking greedily, stroking himself, as she slowly lifted her skirt up her silken thighs for him. As ever, Nikolai fought not to see this, fought to wake. His violent revulsion never diminished over time.

The first time he’d had that dream, he’d been relieved when another scene unfolded before that one came to some kind of sick conclusion. But never again. . . .

Myst was running past a Viking raiding party on the coast of some northern land. Purposely. She wanted them to hunt her. To catch her and throw her to the ground in the hard snow. What kind of twisted need did she have? She was excited, her blood pumping. Her skin felt like it was sizzling with electricity, and lightning was generated from her excitement. She stifled a smile, when with bellows and cheers, the men gave chase. . . .

As ever, Nikolai fought to force his mind away before he saw a dozen Vikings rutting on his Bride. To her delight.

Tonight a new dream. Finally. Snow outside, packed so high it covered half the window. Women, or other creatures like her, met around a great hearth. They were sisters and Nikolai saw their faces as though familiar and knew their names and who they were as well as Myst did. He recognized the archer as Lucia, and the bright one he now knew was Regin the Radiant. A vacant-eyed one was called Nix, the oldest of her sisters and believed to be a soothsayer. Their clothing indicated early twentieth century.

They were meeting over the fate of a baby that their leader, a somber creature named Annika,

wished to keep. Myst frowned at the little girl in Annika's arms, confused to feel some stirring of feeling for it.

"How are we to care for her, Annika?" Lucia murmured.

Regin snapped, "How can you bring a vampire among us when they slaughtered my people?"

One named Daniela the Ice Maiden knelt beside Annika, gazing up at her, briefly touching her with a pale hand. Myst shivered to think of the pain Danii had just felt to offer that cold touch. Daniela's mother's people had been the ice fey and she couldn't be touched by anyone but one of them without extreme pain. "She needs to be with her own kind. I know this well."

Annika shook her head determinedly. "Her ears. Her eyes. She's Valkyrie as much as vampire."

Valkyrie. . . ? Impossible.

"She'll grow to be evil," Regin insisted. "She's already snapped at me with her baby fangs. By Freya, she drinks blood!"

"Trifling," Myst interjected in a casual tone. "We eat electricity."

The vacant-eyed Nix laughed.

A vampire child? Eating electricity? His heart was racing.

Annika said, "I will keep Emmaline from the Horde and guide her to be all that was good and honorable about the Valkyrie before time eroded us." Her words were laced with sadness and triggered a memory that Myst hated.

Nikolai wanted to see it but couldn't.

Annika rubbed noses with the baby and asked her, "Now where's the best place to hide the most beautiful little vampire in the world?"

Nix laughed delightedly. "Laissez les bon temps roulez. . . ."

New Orleans.

Nikolai shot up in bed, body drenched with sweat.

My Bride's a Valkyrie? he thought with a choking cough. His mind couldn't wrap around the idea of it.

He hadn't known they even existed. A character from legends told around campfires was linked to him for eternity. From the dreams, he knew she was a millennia-old mystical being born of a

fierce Pictish princess—who'd plunged a dagger into her heart rather than be taken alive by an enemy—and of *gods*.

She didn't eat because she took electrical energy from the earth and gave it back with her emotions in the form of lightning. She was a killer and had been a Roman senator's whore. She despised men and enjoyed tormenting them, just as she'd done with him.

He glanced down at his throbbing erection. Even his hatred couldn't battle his relentless need for her. The impulse to take his cock in his fist was there, but he fought it, knowing he could never bring himself to come, knowing it would only increase his pain.

For five years she'd sentenced him to suffering from this constant, grueling ache. Before he'd learned there was no relief without her, he would've futilely stroked himself or thrust against the bed, imagining it was Myst clutched beneath him, but he never took release.

Other females repelled him—because they weren't *her*. Even if he believed he could find ease with another woman, he would never demean himself with another. He'd felt his Myst's incredible softness, felt her wet with desire for him, her body squeezing around his fingers as she'd climaxed from *his* touch.

He shuddered and his cock pulsed hungrily. Linked for eternity. To *Myst the Coveted*, a mythological being who despised him. The only way he'd keep her for eternity would be to punish her for that long.

He knew he coveted her as none other had. And now he knew where to find her.

— 5 —

The fumes of swamp, steamed hot dogs and soured beer wafted up to Myst and her sisters as they perched on a roof above the chaos that was Bourbon Street.

There were rumors of vampires running about in New Orleans.

Vampires in Louisiana? Unheard of.

If there'd been only one account of leeches, then she and Regin and Nix would still be back at Val Hall, their bayou manor, playing video games. But a demon friend had sworn he'd seen one—and a phantom had whispered that there was not just one faction of vampires, but *two*.

Myst's eyes darted over the scene, trying to remain focused and not notice the couples frantically grinding against each other in dark alleys. If Daniela was here she would blow them a kiss and cool them off, freezing hands to asses in mid-grope and making her sisters chortle and roll along the roof. Myst supposed that the Valkyrie were easily amused.

But focus was proving futile ever since her heart had sped up at the idea of vampires here. If for some reason they had come to the New World—which the Horde historically found vulgar and beneath them—that still didn't mean *him*.

Wroth. One of her true regrets in her life.

Every day, she mused that she shouldn't have left that vampire to suffer—she should have killed him.

Regin tossed her blade up, caught the point into her claw, then flicked it up once more. "You know, not that I believe there are actual vampires here—cause that's just whacky speak—but if there

were, they should know that this is our turf.”

“Should we ask them to rumble? Or maybe *mash*?” Nix asked as she swiftly braided her waist-length black hair. “I’ve heard those can be a graveyard smash.” Even sporting the old-fashioned hairstyle and an often confused glance—she saw the future more clearly than the present—Nix still looked like a supermodel.

“I’m serious,” Regin said. “New Orleans may have once been the mystical melting pot of the world, but we control this place now.”

“We can always send Mysty the Vampire Layer to battle them,” Nix said thoughtfully. “Oh *wait*, she’d run off with them.”

Regin added, “Or use her famed tongue assault to flail the skin from their bodies as they inexplicably line up to sacrifice themselves.”

“Har-de-har-har,” Myst mumbled, half-listening. She’d been razed about this continually. And she deserved it. She might as well have been caught free-basing with the ghost of Bundy.

Of course others had overheard the jokes in the coven and the word spread. Even other factions of the Lore—like the nymphs, those little hookers—whispered about her unsavory predilection toward vampires. But it wasn’t vampires plural, it was only one.

Wroth. She shivered. With his slow, hot fingers . . .

In her bed late at night, when she touched herself, she always fantasized about him, remembering his hard chest and harder shaft, imagining his ferocity, his intensity, if he ever found her again.

Truthfully, she thought he might have found her by now. She’d—*accidentally*?—given him her blood, possibly giving him her memories, which could lead him straight here. She often pondered that reckless kiss. She’d had no discernible intention of giving him blood, but hadn’t she known in the back of her mind that his fangs would be razor sharp with her sisters’ arrival? Had she *wanted* him to find her?

She shook her head, needing to stay sharp. Annika and Daniela were down there somewhere.

“Lookit,” Regin said, pointing down. “Men that big shouldn’t get schnocked.”

Myst turned her attention to a tall man who reminded her of Wroth from the back—*why couldn’t she get that vampire off the brain*?—though this one was much rangier in build. The man leaned

against another massive male, hanging on to him for balance as they walked. She noticed her claws were curling.

“Myst, can’t you control that?” Regin asked with a fleeting glance at her claws. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Listen, I can’t help it, I like big males with broad shoulders. And I bet under that trench coat he has an ass that begs to be clutched.”

Nix offered, “And it’s not like she can put Band-Aids over them—”

“Holy shite,” Regin exclaimed. “I see a glow. Ghouls, down by Ursilines Avenue.”

“Damn it,” Myst muttered. “In public again? They are hard-up recruiting then.” Ghouls were maniacal fighters out to increase their numbers by turning humans with their contagious bites and scratches. They had green, gelatinous blood, and the parish of Orleans went gooey every time the coven fought them.

“Again.” Nix sighed. “And there’s only so many times we can convince drunken tourists they’re extras in a sci-fi flick.”

Regin slid her blade into her forearm sheath. “*Stargate* part twelve is officially on location.” She rose. “We’ll go canoodle the ghouls. You keep a watch out for *vampires*.” She made a ghostly wo-wo-wo sound. “And try not to lift tail for any of them, ’kay?”

As Myst rolled her eyes, her sisters linked arms and leapt down, moving so quickly they were like a blur. As usual, no one could see them, and if they did in this Lore-rich city no one registered it.

Myst surveyed the glow from afar. It wasn’t that extensive, so she knew they could handle it. As eldest, Nix was strong and Regin was wily. Besides, Myst had new boots on and she’d be damned if she’d lose another pair to the epic battle between buttery soft Italian leather and goo. Too many casualties already. It was terribly saddening. Really.

Her attention easily fell once more to the man on the street, and she raised an eyebrow. If his front matched his back, she’d be tempted. It had been ages, literally, since she’d had a little someone, and she deserved—

She sucked in a breath, springing back against the dormer. The drunk was no drunk at all she saw when he peered down an alley, giving her his profile. The body she’d been ogling was that of

her “estranged husband,” as the coven liked to tease her.

He stumbled not from drink but from weakness, his build different because he’d lost weight. And that was his brother Murdoch helping him—helping Wroth *find her*.

Shaking, she crept along the roof, pressing herself around the dormers, hoping to get away before he saw her. He stopped, lifting his head above the milling crowd, then swung around to her direction.

His gaze fell directly on her, his eyes black, feral, and riveted to her with a look of utter possession. When Murdoch’s gaze followed Wroth’s, he gave her an almost pitying expression, then he slapped Wroth on the back before tracing away.

The blood left her face. She leapt to the roof of the adjoining building, gaining speed for the next—

She screamed as Wroth’s gaunt visage appeared directly in front of her. Traced. She sprinted in the other direction, but he snatched her around her chest, pinning her to him, making her feel his erection thick against her. She elbowed his throat, dropped from his arms, and dove over the edge of the roof. She tumbled into a high-walled courtyard, landing on hands and feet, then scrambled up to leap out of the darkened space. But her speed was no match for his tracing.

He snagged her again, and though she fought, he was somehow stronger even in his condition—maybe *because* of his condition. One of his hands yanked up her short skirt.

“Wroth! Don’t do this!”

“*Five years of hell*,” he sneered, palming her ass roughly. “You deserve to be fucked till you can’t walk.”

She gasped, trembling. “So the warlord claims his prize? It figures that you’d take your Bride whether she wants it or not. You’d make me remember being forced?”

After a pause he bit out, “No. God, no.” She heard him freeing himself. “Myst,” he groaned, “just feel me.” He took her hand and made her cup his heavy sac, then grip his shaft. Never had she felt such hardness. “Rub the head,” he rasped in her ear, making her shiver as she felt the moisture. “That’s as close as I can get without you. I need to fuck you so bad I’m sick with it.”

“Wroth, don’t . . .”

With a bitter curse, he lowered his head, forehead against her neck, but he only thrust against her ass. “Can’t stop,” he grated, and she knew then that he wasn’t going to take her body, just touch it, use it. Why would he refrain for her. . .?

His fingers strummed her nipple. Lightning. No, she couldn’t *want* this.

His breath was hot on her and made her body go liquid. She *could* want it, just as she did every night in her lonely bed. The air was sultry, redolent with the scent of jasmine and even more moist than usual from the pounding fountain in the corner. No one was home. He wouldn’t take her, so why not enjoy this for mere moments?

When she went soft in his grasp, lacing her arms back to lock behind his head, he growled and kicked his feet against hers, making her spread her legs. Shuddering, he ruthlessly shoved against her flesh, then threw back his head and yelled out just before he came. At the last minute he turned from her and began to spill his seed onto the ground.

She was frozen, unable to see, and for some reason it affected her more to only hear his reactions, the guttural groans erupting from deep in his chest. She felt the violent shaking, the strength in his wracked body as he clenched her through waves of pleasure.

It went on and on, each second that passed, reminding her of how badly he’d *needed* this. Then he put his lips to her neck, clutched her ass and she knew he was stroking himself directly to ejaculate again. When she thought about how many nights he would have envisioned this, her head fell back against his shoulder.

The second time was impossibly even more powerful as he desperately kissed and licked her skin, squeezing one breast then the other, reminding her keenly of when he’d brought her to come that night in the dungeon. She wanted to join him—she wanted him to work those fingers on her next.

When he was done, he lifted her hair and brushed his lips to her neck, shuddering and breathing heavily. Her eyes closed and she was just about to say, “My turn,” when he did the most bizarre thing.

He arranged his clothing again and pulled down her skirt, then he turned her to him to stare down into her eyes. He cupped the back of her neck hard to yank her to face him, but instead of

drinking her, or hitting her, he squeezed her into his broad chest, his hand moving to the back of her head, tucking her into him with those powerful arms. Which was disconcertingly pleasant.

Curious, she let him embrace her, relaxing a fraction, and in return, he lowered his head to kiss her hair. Finally he set her back to face him. His expression was not as wild, but grim. “I’ve searched for you, Bride.”

“Been right here.”

“You’ve treated me ill, leaving me in that state.”

“My sisters were going to kill you, but I saved your life. And you were about to treat me far worse.”

“And licking my fang?”

That had been an accident! Still she raised her chin and said, “The least I could do since you were about to *torture* me. Consider it a memento.”

His face hardened at that, but then he seemed to get his temper under control. “For five years I’ve envisioned the retribution I would mete out, constantly imagining making you pay for what you did to me.” He exhaled a long breath. “But I’m weary of it, Myst, weary of carrying this. I want to look forward and get on with our life.”

Our life?

“From here I’m willing to start with a clean slate. We are even for our misdeeds against the other and we will forget about any past . . . *indiscretions* that might have gone on before we met.”

“Indiscretions?” How magnanimous of the vampire to give her an empty score card. To fill back up.

“Your blood gave me more than a mere taste. How do you think I found you?”

“So you collected my memories?” Lovely. Did he now know she’d been utterly infatuated with him? Had he harvested all her knowledge about the Lore? “Did you enjoy telling your brother and your friends all about my life—my private thoughts and private . . . deeds?”

“I have never told anyone anything I’ve seen. Believe me,” he added in an odd tone. “And I vow I never will. That is between us.”

“Can you vow you’ll never use information about my family to harm them?”

He scowled.

“Forget it, then. Doesn’t matter anyway,” she said, trying to wrench away from him. “There’s no starting *our* life—even if you hadn’t been about to do what that night? Break my fingers, my legs?”

He didn’t deny these things. “That is in the past and you’ve paid me for that in kind. If it is consolation you want, know that I’ve suffered far worse than I could ever have dreamed to inflict on you. For these years, I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t drink. The only thing I could do was fantasize about fucking you, with no relief.”

Warmth bloomed in her belly, but then she frowned. “It doesn’t console me. I just want you to let go of my arms and allow me to walk away. My kind *abhors* yours. And even if I liked you and you were decent to me, my sisters would kill you, and I’d be ostracized by every being in the Lore. There’s no way I’d choose pariah-hood with you over my current life—which I happen to enjoy the hell out of—so back off. I don’t want to have to hurt you again.”

He raised a patronizing eyebrow at that, which made her bristle, then said, “I can’t let you go. I’ll never do that. Not until I die.”

“I’ve given you a warning and I’ll say only once more—release me.”

“It will never happen. So what will make you accept this? A vow? Done. I vow to you that I will never use what I’ve learned to harm your family. As your husband I could never hurt them anyway because the end would be hurting you.”

When she saw he was deadly serious about this, she realized playing with him was over. He was going to try to force her to live with him. Because he felt that was his right over hers.

No different from all the others. Her name should be *Myst the Possession*.

She wondered if she’d keel over dead if someone finally *asked* her to be with them.

“Wroth,” she whispered, snaking her arms up his chest to twine her fingers behind his neck. He leaned down to hear her. “Do you know what it would take to make me your Bride in truth?”

“Tell me,” he said quickly.

“The life leaving my cold, dead body.” She kned him, deciding at the last minute not to break his tailbone with her blow. When he fell to his knees, she backhanded him, sending him flying

twenty feet into the courtyard wall.

He bellowed in fury, slow to rise as she sprinted down a breezeway, nearing the wrought iron gates at the street. But he traced forward, snatching at her, brushing down her back with his fingertips, then snagging the chain. She screamed in pain when it broke from her.

Great Freya, not the chain. If he figured out its power over her, it wouldn't matter how strong she was as a Valkyrie or how well she fought. She ran for her life, busting through the locked gates, blowing them off their hinges to clatter and spark across the street. For nearly two thousand years it had been unbreakable.

Don't hear, don't hear, run, escape from his voice. . . .

* * *

"Myst, stop!" he roared, frustration choking him when he found only the fine, gold strand from her waist.

Yet she froze, nearly falling forward her feet planted so quickly.

She turned to him, sauntering back down the corridor to rejoin him in the courtyard. Licking her lips and smoothing her hair, she said, "That's mine and I want it back."

She reached for it, but he held it high from her. He was not magically inclined—he hadn't believed in the Lore until he was turned—but even he felt the power in the strand of gold. The power of what?

"How badly?"

Lightning streaked the sky behind her. *She must want it very badly indeed.*

"Would you steal from me?"

"You've stolen from me. *Years*—you've taken years from me."

"I thought we were even."

"That was until you tried to unman me."

"I will be kinder to you if you give it back."

Her eyes were mesmerizing, and he had to shake himself. "We're past that point. All I wanted was to make my life with yours. And you left me in pain." Earlier, when he'd finally been released from endless nights of torture, he'd felt overwhelming gratitude to her—irrational, since she'd

consigned him to it—but he’d known a measure of contentment for the first time in years. Then she’d lashed out again. “After tonight, I understand that you’ll never be brought to heel.” He clutched the chain, recalling earlier how she’d stopped so suddenly. “Unless . . .” He trailed off, staring down into her eyes, riveted to his. “Kneel.”

Her knees met the stone as if she’d been shoved down.

His eyebrows drew together in shock, his breaths coming fast. “Shiver,” he commanded, not quite believing . . .

She did, and her skin pricked as if with cold. Her nipples hardened and she hugged her arms around herself.

He knew his grin was wicked. Five years of imagining had never prepared him for this. “Grasp my belt.”

She looked up with dread, was staring into his eyes pleadingly when he said, “Come.”

— 6 —

As soon as her mind registered the command, her body rushed to obey with a swift, fiery clenching that left her sagging against him, her grasp on his belt the only thing that kept her from falling—as he’d anticipated.

When the bliss finally ended and she could catch her breath, she raised her face, parting her lips to ask—

“Again.”

She moaned, unable to release his belt as she twitched and swayed on her knees, brushing her breasts frantically against his legs. “*Stop, please . . .*” She pressed her face against his huge shaft, needing it, her body squeezing only emptiness. She ran her mouth over it even as she begged him to stop. Though she’d hurt him, he was recovering right beneath her lips.

“Come harder.”

To her shame, she did, arching her back and crying out, opening her knees and undulating her hips for him to come fill her.

As the waves of pleasure relented, she dimly perceived him scooping her up into his arms. She was limp, disbelieving, yet every nerve was on fire. There was blackness, dizziness, and then she was in a new place, in a dark paneled study.

He set her to her feet, but she’d gone boneless from his orders and from . . . tracing?

In a tremulous voice, she asked, “Where am I?”

He held her until she was steady, then crossed to open a small wall safe. He tossed the chain in and shut the door. “You’re at Blachmount, my manor in Eesti. This, Myst, is your new home.”

Her lips parted in shock. “You can’t just keep me here—”

“Apparently I can do anything I want where you’re concerned. This is where you’ll stay and where I’m going to show you all the mercy you showed me.”

Her eyes went wide.

“Listen carefully. This safe is unbreakable and you will never, never touch the lock. You’ll never try to deduce the combination or garner it from me. Do you understand? Answer me.”

“Y-Yes.”

He strode to her, clutched her arm and traced them into what looked like a bedroom. A vampire’s lair. With the bed in the corner on the floor as they preferred. She shivered, knowing she was well and truly screwed in every possible sense.

* * *

“Undress,” Nikolai ordered from the shower.

Her shock had been quickly replaced by rancor, and she glared before obeying. He didn’t care. Watching her yanking her clothes off in the steamy bathroom was like witnessing a gift unwrapped.

He stood under the pounding water, his body healing at a rate he’d never imagined. He’d taken a blow from her that would’ve crippled him for days in the past, and yet he was already hard for her again.

In fact, his pain had been the only thing that had kept him from covering her in the courtyard and plunging into her as she writhed from her orgasm, her eyes firing silver with pleasure. Now nothing would spare her.

When she was completely naked, he stared at those plump breasts that had haunted him, his mouth watering at the thatch of auburn curls between her legs. What to make her do? The possibilities were endless. He could tell her to take him into her mouth and see how many times she could make his cock rise under her tongue. He could force her to *beg* to do it, to beg for him shoved inside her. After these last long years of agony, and now to have such a gift as this chain . . .

If Nikolai had a sense of humor, he might have laughed.

He didn't understand the chain's power, only knew that it was absolute over her. He wasn't one to mull over its origin. If he spent time questioning every new development in his life for the last centuries, he'd have gone mad. It was a tool he needed. Simple enough.

He'd decided to bury the past, but tonight he'd realized she was too wild and too vicious to accept him. She'd proven she was just as his dreams told him. With this mysterious chain, could he make her a biddable wife, in his life—and in his bed?

Earlier, he'd been very conscious of her reaction as she came. She'd rubbed her face against his cock, wanting it. In an alley, with his clothes on, having just had his manhood battered, he hadn't been able to fully capitalize on her need. But in the shower. . . ?

“Join me, Bride.”

She was compelled to, though she had an expression of disgust on her face. “You keep calling me that, but you don't have that right. I've given no consent, so I think the term you're looking for is *slave*.”

His eyes narrowed as he took her tiny waist and pulled her into the water with him. “Semantics. The end's the same. You forget that I'm from a time when men needed no consent to take what they wanted.”

“And you forget that I lived in those times as well and was glad to get past them. I'd almost forgotten what it was like having to kill all the leeches like you when your pesky little hearts would beat for me.” She cast him a look of pure venom. “But it's coming back to me.”

When she bent down to wash off her knees, he crossed to sit on the marble bench at the end of the shower, watching her move. “If I weren't a vampire and we had no history, would your body be aroused by mine?”

She'd just stood fully to lift her face to the water. At his words, she clenched her jaw.

“Answer me.”

“Yes,” she grated.

“Good. Come here. Closer.” When she'd finally sidled over, he commanded, “Kneel once more.”

“You can't make me do this,” she hissed even as she obeyed.

"I'm not going to *make* you do anything. I will never force you to touch me or force myself upon you," he explained while her expression turned disbelieving. "No matter how badly you've treated me. In fact, just to make this harder on you, I will never touch you or kiss you unless you *ask me* for it. This will be that much sweeter when you reach to put your hands on my cock or beg me to fuck you."

"*Never.*"

He ignored her protest. "If at anytime in anything we do, you want to deepen the experience, for instance by climbing up here to straddle me, I give you leave."

"Are you off your meds?" she snapped, but he could tell she was nervous.

He gently cupped her face with both hands, thumbing her glistening bottom lip. "Touch yourself."

She gasped, her hand flying to her skin as though magnetized. She stroked up and down between her breasts.

"Lower," he commanded. Her fingers snaked down her flat stomach though she clearly resisted the order. "*Lower.*"

She twitched from the fight, but she obeyed, her fingers descending to her sex.

"Open your knees wide and pleasure yourself as if I wasn't here."

"Don't," she whispered, even as she spread her knees to run her delicate finger against her flesh. His cock pulsed and the head grew slick. After long moments of simply staring in awe as she began trembling and her eyes grew silver, he rasped, "Are you wet?"

"*Yes,*" she moaned.

He felt electricity rolling from her, pricking at his skin, revealing how much pleasure she was experiencing, and it quickened his own need. He bit out, "Inside. Put your finger inside."

When her finger slipped inside her body, she threw her head back, crying out.

"Two fingers. Deeper." He clenched the edge of the bench, and the marble cracked under his grip. "Harder."

She obeyed, this time throwing her head forward, hair cascading over his torso as she moaned against his cock. Her tongue flicked out while she panted against him.

“Ah, deeper. Faster . . .”

She moaned around him this time, because she’d taken the head into her mouth. She continued to work her sex with one of her hands, her fingers sliding in and out of her heat. Her other hand was all over him, wickedly seeking, her lips so moist and plump and hungry, behaving just as he’d suspected she would. . . .

His Bride was on her knees, her fingers deep inside her sheath at his command, sucking greedily at his cock. He bit out, “Do you want me to touch your breasts?”

When she nodded eagerly, he grated, “You have to ask me for it.”

Her fingers slowed, and she released him from her lips, though her head was still bowed. He didn’t want her to stop, knew he’d pushed too far.

“I want to, Myst. I want to have my hands on your beautiful breasts. I’ve dreamed of this for so long,” he admitted.

She hesitated, her body quivering. “Will you touch them?” she breathed, then set right back to her ministrations. He choked out a groan when she kissed all around the head wetly with her tongue, as she might his mouth. She took him with such abandon that he knew she was on the verge again. He reached down and covered her breasts with his hands, closing his eyes at the feel, squeezing, stopping only to pluck and thumb her nipples.

The pressure was building inside him. His sac tightened, knees opening and heels planting on the ground as he tensed to spend. He didn’t know how he’d lived so long without this blinding pleasure.

“Watch me come,” he growled.

She raised her face, and somehow she knew he wanted her to meet his eyes, not watch the actual spilling of his seed. Silvery eyes riveted to his, she worked her fist on his cock, pumping it in time with her finger dipping inside her—as if she yearned for him to fill her.

That thought sent him over the edge. The unbearable pressure exploded as he ejaculated, mindlessly thrusting against her hand, arms shooting straight out to cup her face with both hands. When she saw him spend, her eyes grew wide before fluttering shut and she cried out, jerking against her fingers as she came all on her own.

She collapsed against his knees, still shuddering, clutching his leg as she had that night in Oblak. *Before she'd left him, bleeding and in pain.* The need dampened, the familiar resentment flared.

He brushed her aside and stood, rinsing his seed away, staring at the stunning, evil creature still on her spread knees, hands on her thighs as she panted. The sight of her perfect, generous ass and her wet hair whipped all along her slim back had him stirring yet again.

But she was breathing hard and he knew he'd worked her pitilessly for their first night together. "Rise and come to me."

When she faced him, her eyes were stark, flickering in color, showing how shocked and uncomprehending she was as she stumbled to obey. He felt a stab of guilt, but made himself remember all the aching days he'd spent rolling in pain. The nights he'd sweated from desperately fucking at the very sheets to take relief. She'd reduced him to that.

She was wary, nearing him slowly, and when she was at arms length, he said, "Sleep," then caught her as she fell limp. He rinsed and dried her body and his own, then carried her to his bed.

This should have been a time of satisfaction—by Christ, he had a living, breathing Valkyrie in his bed, and she was *his* Bride—yet there was little. She was utterly under his control, but he wished she didn't *have* to be.

Like a natural born vampire, he hunched over her, dragging the beauty into the shadows with him as he bedded them down in a corner.

— 7 —

Rise.

Myst hazily heard the command, knew she must still be dreaming because her skin was touching another's, though she hadn't slept with a lover in memory. She frowned, disconcerted because her body was so pliant, every muscle released of the tension she normally carried. But why was her face pressed against the naked, broad chest of a man? She was surrounded by his delicious scent that made her go warm and liquid. Snuggling closer, she dragged a leg up over his.

She heard a male rumbling sound of pleasure, and her eyes went wide. She shot up, drawing the sheet to her neck. Dread settled over her as the events of the night came back to her mind. She was in a vampire's bed, here as a slave to his every whim. Or as she figured it, she was in hell.

"Were you dreaming about last night?"

"No," she answered honestly. She'd been thinking about licking every inch of the hard male beneath her.

"How do feel about what we did?"

"We? What you did."

"I only commanded you to take your pleasure. Of your own volition you took me into your mouth." He raised an eyebrow. "Greedily."

She turned away sharply. "Then I feel shame."

"And?" When she frowned at him, he said, "There's rarely an instance where emotions do not

conflict. What else do you feel when you think of last night?”

She recalled being mindless with lust as she had never been before, hungry for his huge shaft. She had wanted to straddle him and slowly work him within her. Shivering at the delicious image, she struggled to keep from admitting her desire. “A-Aroused,” she bit out.

“Are you aroused now?”

She felt herself blushing deeply. Myst never blushed. “Yes.”

“Do you need to come?”

Oh, gods, no, how could he ask her this just when she was reliving last night? “Y-Yes.” She turned from him, curling her knees to her chest. “But I won’t ask you.”

* * *

“Even when I can give you what you need?” Nikolai said.

“The only thing I’ll ask you for is to give me my chain back.”

“You’ll get it back when I am convinced you will stay with me. Now explain to me what it is.”

When she didn’t reply, he grated, “Answer me.”

“It’s called the Brisingamen.”

“Why do you wear it?”

“Punishment and to protect it.”

“Punishment for what?”

She placed a hand out to her side and turned back to him, her green eyes taunting. “When I was only seventeen, I was caught in a compromising position with a demigod of no importance or standing other than his mind-shattering talent at kissing. My family was unamused.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. *Demigod?* Nikolai was a battle-scarred vampire who would never walk in the sun with her.

She studied his expression. “Jealous, vampire? Or do you realize I’m out of your league?”

He ignored her words. “So your family punished you with a vulnerability that gave men control of your body? How many have had it, commanding you to fuck them for your very life?”

When she glared at him, he calmly said, “Answer. Fully.”

“There was no vulnerability. It has never been broken. I’ve been tossed by it, caught by it, even

held above a pit of boiling tar by it. I'd tried to have it smelted from me in the olden days and then lasered recently. Nothing could touch the integrity of the chain before—"

"Before I pulled it free like a thread? So I'm the first." This pleased him and he exhaled in relief, only to immediately frown. "You don't think it's more than coincidental that you were given to me over all other females in any time and place to be my Bride, just as I've freed you from something that no man has been able to before?"

She clenched her jaw.

"How do you find those facts? Answer honestly. Now."

"I find them . . . They might be . . . It might be fated," she bit out.

"*We* might be fated." He'd already known this without doubt. He couldn't believe his heart would beat for a woman that could never love him back. Of course, she'd said there'd been others she'd blooded—then killed.

"Yes, but just because we've been set up by a fate with a sick sense of humor doesn't mean my feelings about you will change. Are you going to keep me prisoner for eternity?"

"Before I let you go philander with your *demigods*? Yes."

Her slim shoulders stiffened and she stood.

He lay back, proudly ogling his Bride's ass as she sauntered around the room, studying her new surroundings. Myst couldn't merely *walk*, he'd discovered—her every movement was the stuff of fantasy, her every touch as well. He hadn't even gotten the chance to claim her last night because he'd been so enthralled with her wet kiss, but he was hard yet again and would remedy that soon.

"So what miraculous feat of engineering brought modern plumbing to this schwag place?"

Schwag? He frowned at her question, watching her as she ran her hand along an old papered wall. She opened a rusted shutter and gazed out the window into the night, seeing, he knew, tangled gardens blighted with neglect. He had a sudden urge to make an excuse as to why his home was in this condition.

"You're actually going to keep me *here*? Your torture is fiendish and boundless, Wroth."

He clenched his jaw, then said, "As I told you, *here* is called Blachmount, and it used to be awing and will be so again, but the estate's been abandoned for many years. While I searched for

you, I lived in New Orleans, and in Oblak before that. I only come here on occasion.” When he missed his family.

With a sigh, she meandered to her pile of clothes, ripped and dirty on the floor. She stared at them, then blinked up at him, clearly wondering what his next move would be. It hit him full force that no matter how he felt about her, it was his responsibility to take care of her. His stunning wife, with her wild red hair and her soft, pale skin was so utterly out of place here. If she would be living with him under his roof, then he’d best get this ancient shell of a keep back to its former glory and give her a home as befitted her.

He knew there would be things she would require that he couldn’t anticipate, because he was beyond unknowing when it came to female needs. Did he dare take her to get her things?

As soon as he’d realized where she lived, he’d left Oblak behind and had had Murdoch purchase a property far from the crowds of New Orleans where they could live during the search. Nikolai could’ve traced back and forth, but the time change meant each night he’d face dawn back in Oblak. Plus he’d been weak, and tracing the shorter distance to the renovated mill on the outskirts of town had been less demanding.

Now he needed to return to the mill for the large supply of blood he’d left there. He was thirstier than usual, and claiming her in this condition would not be wise. He assured himself it was only because his appetite had been reawakened and not because throughout the day, he’d dreamed of drinking from her white thighs.

He could check in with Murdoch, send word to Kristoff that he’d found his Bride, and drink in preparation of finally claiming her. While in New Orleans, he might as well visit a Valkyrie den.

“We go for your belongings tonight.”

— 8 —

“How are we going to do that?” she asked. “You can only trace to places you’ve been to at least once.”

“But I can drive anywhere,” Wroth replied casually, every inch a modern warlord.

So she was to return to her home in ripped clothing, with her skin still flushed from last night, her body still singing for a vampire’s touch.

Lovely.

She would never live this down. And for an immortal, *never* was a particularly woeful proposition.

Yes, going back to Val Hall would mean a possibility for escape, but he could kill one of her sisters if they tried to free her. When he rose and strode to his closet, she studied his body, noting yet again how incredibly strong he was.

He turned and tossed her a button-down, catching her gaze just as it drifted south to his hard shaft. She almost missed the shirt and he smirked, making her jerk her face away. “Come here,” he ordered and she dragged her feet over.

His hands reached out to pile her hair up, just so he could lean down and breathe along her neck, then murmur in her ear, “*Bride, this is embarrassing. I think I’ve caught you staring at my cock,*” making her quiver. She’d teased him the same way when his eyes had been riveted to her neck so many years ago. He added in a sensual rumble, “You like it, don’t you?”

When the question sunk in, her eyes went wide with disbelief, the spell broken. How could he

ask her that? When she would be forced to answer? His lips hovering over her shoulder, he said, “Answer me honestly.”

I want to curl up between your legs, rest my head at your hip, and draw you over into my mouth to taste you for hours, she almost said, then negotiated her mind into another honest answer: “It’s too big.”

He dropped her hair, smirking again. “So it terrifies you more than tantalizes?” he asked, using the words she remembered well.

Knowing he was getting his revenge little by little, she gritted her teeth against her answer but lost. “Both.”

He clucked her under the chin. “I’ll be sure to break you in slowly, ride you easy the first few times.”

Myst of the witty banter and dripping sexual innuendo was speechless. Break her in? Arrogant! When he turned for the shower, she tried not to stare at his back and how it tapered to his narrow hips and his muscled ass with the hard hollows on the sides. She’d been right, it did beg to be clutched.

Damn her claws for curling—

“I believe you like everything about me,” he rumbled from inside the bathroom.

She gazed at the ceiling, embarrassed as she couldn’t remember ever being before. Of course he’d known she was staring, probably by the holes she was burning into his skin. As she dressed, she thought that he was right—she was *tantalized*, and she did like *everything* about him physically. The way he’d made her feel last night left no doubt in her mind that he could not only get her to ask for him inside her, but *beg*.

She needed to escape before then, before he “claimed” her. He hadn’t drunk from her and they hadn’t had sex. As long as those two things stayed sacred she could get past this patch in her life.

When he returned to the room, dressed like a male dream, she felt like shuffling her feet for her ridiculous getup, draped in his shirt that fell to her knees. She had *never* felt insecure before. But she didn’t have long to ponder it, because he put his hands on her waist. “Are you ready?” he asked, staring down at her. Ready? To kiss him, hug him, go to her knees? What?

He pulled her to his body, wrapping his arms around her. “Close your eyes,” he commanded.

She did. “Open them.”

Suddenly, they were in a garage. This was the first time she’d traced and had the luxury to actually think about the process. She’d dropped an intoxicispell or two in her day and found tracing on par with that. She was unsteady at first, but the air smelled like bayou at high tide, which she liked, and was heavy with humidity. New Orleans, but where? “What is this place?” she asked, breaking away from him to look around.

“An old restored mill outside of the city,” Wroth answered. “Where I stayed while scouring the streets for you for as long as I could manage every night. Before collapsing in agony and weakness.”

She looked away quickly, fighting a flare of guilt—and spotted his cars. She tried to be cool, but of course, Wroth caught her eyeing them—especially the Maserati Spyder—and she knew he’d seen her flicker of appreciation. The Valkyrie prized fine things. They were acquisitive to a fault—it simply couldn’t be helped. Her own mother had told her that Myst’s first word was, roughly translated, *gimme*.

He opened her door to the Spyder, and once she was inside, she curled up on the soft leather, loving it. Joining her, he cast her an inscrutable expression. “We are fortunate, Myst. You’ll want for nothing as my wife.”

She’d already been fortunate. She already wanted for nothing. The coven divvied their collective earnings from investments, and the take was always incredibly generous. She had enough money to buy any clothing that struck her fancy, to purchase two-thousand-dollar, hand-painted lingerie sets to placate her obsession. In a deadened tone, she mumbled, “Oh joy. I’m rich . . .”

He commanded her to direct him to her home, not in itself an unforgivable crime. They didn’t hide their address like the Bat Cave, yet they didn’t often have trespassers at Val Hall. When his breath hissed in at the sight of the manor, she was reminded why.

“This is where you live?” he bit out, forearms resting on the steering wheel, his tone incredulous.

She tried to see it from his eyes. Fog shrouded the property, and bolts of light illuminated it in a staccato rhythm. There were lightning rods everywhere, but sometimes they didn’t catch all the lightning, as evidenced by the massive oaks in the yard still lazily giving up smoke. And the wood

nymphs—those little hookers—were way behind on repairing the trees. If Myst heard them whine, “But Mysty baby, there was this orgy,” as an excuse one more time—

“Hellish,” Wroth said.

She tilted her head. In the olden days they used to stick a sword into the ground to mark a grave, and she’d always fancied that the rods made this place look like one of those mass burial sites. Even at this distance, shrieks could be heard coming from within. The Valkyrie often screamed. If Annika got angry enough, car alarms in three parishes would blare.

Okay, it might be a *bit* hellish.

“It’s time you had someone take you from here,” he bit out as he continued closer.

She frowned at him. “You forget. This is where I belong. I’m as much monster as what lies within.”

“You’re a lot of things, Bride. But you’re not a monster.”

“You’re right. I’m what monsters like you fear beneath their beds.”

“But now you’re *in* my bed where you belong.”

“So in this life of ours that your crazed mind envisions, I’m not going to fight?”

He shook his head as he parked down the gravel drive. “No. I’m well aware that you’re deceptively strong. I know that other beings would rather die than risk your wrath. But I won’t ever allow you to put yourself in danger again.”

She batted her eyelashes at him and in a syrupy voice said, “Because I’m just so darn precious to you?”

“Yes,” he answered simply, making her roll her eyes. He got out of the car, and she followed, but he quickly traced to open it for her, looking at her as if she was crazy not to wait for him to assist her.

Perfect. A gentleman warrior. Which she was discovering she might have a weakness for.

As they walked the drive, he said, “Hold my hand.”

“Big vampire scared the wittle Valkyrie will get away?”

He turned to her with his brows drawn. “I just want to hold your hand.”

What was that flutter in her stomach? And why didn’t she mind that her hand was slipping into

his big, rough one to be completely enveloped and secured? They walked like this to the side of the cavernous thirty-room mansion.

He was tense here, ready to trace them away in a split second, and she almost felt sorry for him when she realized he'd never seen anything like her home before. He was of the Lore, and yet in so many ways he was as human as he'd once been.

When he made her point out the window to her room, showing him a destination, he was able to trace them again. Inside, he scanned the lace and silk filled space with those discerning eyes, studying everything within. She was the girlie-girl of the coven with her candles and silk sheets, her room and lifestyle the most human-like of any of them.

Her room was next to Kaderin's, which housed an arsenal of weapons and a string of vampire fangs she'd taken as trophies. Across the gallery was the room of petite, timid Emmaline. Though she was part Valkyrie, she was a vampire through and through and made her little nest on the floor *under* her unused bed.

It could be argued that Emma proved that not all vampires were evil and that the coven could coexist with one. Yet Emma had been the daughter of a beloved Valkyrie, and that half was believed to "temper" the other. An exception had been made for her, but Myst often wondered if she was the only one who noticed Emma flinch and tremble, her big blue eyes glinting with apprehension whenever the coven shrieked and railed about killing leeches. "Present company excepted" really was a weak statement when one thought about it.

"So what do you want me to pack?" Myst asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "You should be used to this. Choose clothes as if you were going away with your lover."

Her hands clenched as she crossed to the drawers that housed her Agent Provocateur, Strumpet & Pink, and Jillian Sherry collections, and those were mass purchases from just last week. "Depends on which lover." She plucked out a red leather quarter-cup bra and a baby-doll teddy that was completely translucent, then held them up for him.

"Both," he rasped, his expression pained. She saw he was getting hard again. He noticed her noticing and his eyes darkened.

Assuming a brisk manner, she crossed to the closet to gather a weekender bag, but he picked her up bodily by the waist and set her out of the way to gather a four-foot-long moving case. He dropped it at her feet. "Fill it, because you're never coming back to this place."

* * *

At his words, she nodded, making it somehow sarcastic, and he knew she was thinking to herself how wrong he was. He exhaled wearily. If he had to battle against her for the rest of their lives he would.

He moved to assist her, but every drawer in her room was full of thongs, hose, lace and little silk nightgowns that made his blood pound. She had a drawer for nothing but garters. It would take him months to bite all of these off her body.

He frowned. Women wore clothes like this for a lover. How many did she currently have? When he imagined them relishing her beauty, the gold chain slapping against her body as she writhed on them, he crumpled the iron post end of her bed.

Now she smirked at him, reading him so clearly. "Nikolai, if you can't control your jealousy, we're heading straight for divorce." She tapped her finger on her chin and added, "Make a note now that I'll expect the house, the kids, and the hellhound. Actually, you can keep the schwag house."

He scowled before turning away, examining her belongings for more insight. Her film collection was copious. He was unfamiliar with them, as he was with most things that had to do with leisure time. "Which of these do you prefer?"

She clearly hated having to answer his questions and struggled against it each time. "I like romance and horror."

"A bit disparate."

She eyed him. "Funny, I used to think so." Then she put the inside of her forearm behind dozens of bottles of fingernail polish, pushing them over her dresser into the bag. The look she gave him dared him to say something. Nail polish was out of his realm of understanding, and he merely shrugged at her.

He crossed to her bathroom, searching the cabinets and drawers. "There are no medicines. No things . . . females need."

“I don’t get ill, and I don’t have bodily functions. Just like you, vampire.”

“None at all?” He wondered if she could get pregnant. Perhaps he didn’t have to be as careful with that as he’d planned. Though he’d long wanted children, the last thing he wished to test was Myst’s maternal instinct.

“None. Why, you can force me to have sex with you nonstop all month!”

“Why would I force you when I can barely keep your hands—and mouth—off me now?”

“Wroth, darling,” she purred, smiling so sweetly. “I can’t wait for the next time I get to put my mouth on you.” In an instant the smile faded and she snapped her teeth and yanked her head back as if she was chewing something free.

He didn’t even have time to cringe because she wriggled from his shirt then. At the sight of her naked body, his cock shot hard as steel. She sensually dragged her underwear up her legs and then bent over in only the thong to step into a skirt. Just as he was fighting the overwhelming urge to take her hips and feed himself into her, shrieks erupted from downstairs.

On edge in this place, he moved to peer over the landing outside her room and found ten or more Valkyrie downstairs, some lounging in front of a TV, bowls of popcorn in front of them—that they didn’t eat. One was up and sparring with what looked like a ghost or a phantom. When the pair crossed in front of the television the others screeched and threw popcorn at them.

At that moment, yet another Valkyrie stalked in the door. This one was covered in blood.

“Cara!” they shouted in greeting, completely unsurprised by her appearance.

“What’d you get into tonight?” one asked from her perch on the mantle.

Cara pulled her sword sheath from her back. “My human unknowingly went into a demon bar. A demoness thought to make her lover jealous using *my* charge.” She shook her head. “It was everything I could do to keep the demon from ripping Michael’s throat out with his teeth.”

“How’d you do it?”

Without blinking an eye, she said, “I ripped the demon’s throat out with my teeth.”

When they all laughed, Nikolai raised an eyebrow, vowing that Myst would never see these malicious creatures again. *Never*. Without their influence, she would be kinder, gentler.

She sure as hell couldn’t get worse.

“Have Myst or Daniela returned?” Cara asked.

“No. I’d expect this from Myst—”

Because she often ran off with men?

“—but certainly not from Daniela. She never returned from the Quarter.”

“Well, the hits keep coming. I just saw Ivo the Cruel there.”

When they laughed again, she said, “You should know by now that I *do not* jest about vampires unless they’re dead.”

They sobered and one asked, “Has he returned for Myst? Somebody needs to warn her.”

Nikolai quickly turned back to her room—but Myst was gone.

He traced to the opened window, then to the end of the field below when he caught sight of her sprinting away. Though he yelled for her to stop, somehow she kept running.

She was fast and might have outrun him with her unnatural speed as she covered miles, but he traced, lunging from that momentum to snag her ankle, tripping her forward. She wore plugs in her ears from a music player. Enraged, he yanked them from her, heard the music blaring and threw the contraption into the woods beyond.

She’d almost escaped him. *Before he’d claimed her.* Thoughts grew distant. A shadow fell over his vision. He pinned her down, tossed up her skirt, then ripped the silk from between her legs, glorying in that feeling. He was finally going to take his Bride.

Hazily, he realized she was still struggling from him. Her words echoed inside him. “Wroth, you want it? I’ll fight you for it.”

He would always fight for her, *always*. Would he fight *her* for the right to her body?

“Then you’re *mine*.”

– 9 –

A nightmare was about to take her.

When his fingers dug into her skin, dragging her beneath him, she knocked her forehead against his. He bellowed with rage, until she squirmed around and drove her elbow back into his throat. As he fought for breath, she took advantage by scrambling from him enough to mule-kick his chest, sending him reeling.

Why hadn't she broken his neck with her elbow through his throat? She had before with other vampires. Why did she hesitate whenever it came to hurting him? She wouldn't again, she thought as she leapt on top of him, drilling her fist into his face so quickly it was like a blur. His lip split. Another two hits in rapid succession. She thought she broke his cheekbone.

"You'll get no mercy now," he bit out, his eyes black, his deep voice rumbling almost unrecognizably. He caught her fist when she struck again and squeezed. With her other hand she swiped her claws down his shirt, across his neck, hissing in fury. Lightning came down like a hail of bullets. Somehow he caught her free wrist and turned over on her, forcing her hands above her head.

Just as she tensed to kick her leg straight between his and send him flying forward, he groaned as if in desperation, sinking his teeth deep into her neck. She shuddered and cried out, her body going limp beneath him. Her eyes widened in shock as she stared at the lightning above. This wasn't pain he was giving her.

His bite was ecstasy.

He did it again and again lower on her neck. Each bite, each time his fangs entered her skin

was like the thrust of a man inside her. Each time he released her skin was like a slow, measured withdrawal. The pleasure was dizzying. Exquisite agony.

She'd never been defeated before in a contest of two. No man had ever been strong enough. And Myst had an animal need deep inside her for a powerful male—like this one who'd pleased her, fascinated her—to win. Her mind rebelled, reminding her of what he was. She'd killed the last three she'd blooded. Why not him? He'd planned to *torture* her in that horrid dungeon, planned to control her with the chain.

But his bite . . . It made her body demand, growing wetter, feeling empty without him shoved tightly inside her.

Please be strong enough. Please . . . For once in her life would a man take control?

So she could finally lose it.

When he pinned her wrists with one hand—hard—she arched her back in delight. He used his other to rip open her shirt and bra and bare her breasts. He palmed her flesh, then opened his jeans and freed himself. His huge erection jutted between them, the sac heavy beneath.

Her eyes widened and she fought anew, digging her heels into the ground to scuttle back. Too large for her. *Break her in slowly*—that's what he'd said.

His palms landed with a slap on her upper thighs, lifting her pelvis. Her hands loose, she rose up and fought him viciously—scratched, bit, hit—but it was futile. Still clasping her thighs, he used his thumbs to spread her sex, then wrenched her down on his shaft. Yelling brutally as she cried out in pain, he buried himself into her flesh until he was thick and throbbing deep within her.

He'd done it. *Myst will want the first man who can defeat her.* That's what they'd always whispered about her.

They'd been right. She'd challenged him and he'd bested her. In her mind, he deserved to claim his prize no matter the consequences.

He stilled, then bent his head to her and dragged his tongue over her nipple as if to soothe her. As if somewhere in his crazed mind, he wanted her to have pleasure.

He set to her other nipple for long moments, then sucked from her neck again. Somehow the bite turned pain to pleasure, helping her body grow slick to accept the invasion. She yanked the

remains of his shirt open to sweep her fingers over his splendid chest and that helped as well.

As he slowly withdrew, he groaned, “*So wet,*” but when he thrust again, she hissed in a breath, eyes watering.

“Wroth, it really hurts,” she whispered.

“Can’t stop,” he bit out. His neck and chest sheened with sweat, the muscles rigid from his effort already.

“T-Tell me not to feel pain.”

“*Ah, Myst,* don’t hurt.” His words were ragged. “I don’t want you to feel pain from this.” Immediately, the pain muted to only a feeling of fullness.

When he drank from her, pulled back his hips and then tentatively thrust, she cried out again. He stiffened. “No, Wroth . . . it’s good! . . . Keep *going.*”

He did. He timed each draw from her neck with the bucking of his hips, and she knew it was over, gave herself up to it, arched her back, arms limp overhead. The lightning whipped up the wind, and it rushed over her heated body, over her tight nipples.

He raised up, positioning himself on his knees. She whimpered when she thought he would withdraw, but he dragged her up with him until she was straddling him. He spread his knees so he could thrust up inside her. He was getting too large to move within her, already hitting the end of her sex so she couldn’t take him to the hilt.

His body was so big around hers, making her feel truly vulnerable. As if he read her mind, he wrapped his arms tight around her, pinning hers to her sides. He completely captured her to hold her in place while he drove into her from below.

She relaxed her every muscle—why not? This was a position she had never allowed before, from which there was no fighting, even if she’d wished to. She knew he wouldn’t let her go or fall. She relaxed in the crushing tightness of his arms, her naked breasts pressed against his scarred chest.

He kept her immobile while he continued to fuck like a piston below them. Her head fell back, and she watched the sky in a daze of pleasure, seeing her own lightning thrashing the earth.

Bliss welling up, strengthening, so close.

“Myst,” he growled, releasing her neck.

She thought he would order her to come, thought he was tightening his arms even more as if to threaten her should she disobey, but he didn't. "*Milaya, I want you so much.*"

Milaya, the endearment from years ago said in his accent, sent her over the edge. She cried out from the shattering pleasure. But it only built when he desperately wrenched her up and down on his shaft as he tensed to come.

Groaning, snarling, another bite that made her shudder in her second orgasm. Then he threw his head back, neck and chest tensed with corded muscle, to bellow from the force of his spending. She felt it inside her, searing, palpable, seeming endless as he pumped and pumped within her. She came the entire time, her body squeezing around his thickness.

Then after-shudders. Arms loosening though she didn't want them to. She didn't want this to end.

When his breaths had calmed somewhat, he drew her back to search her face. His eyes had cleared. "I didn't want to hurt you," he rasped. "I didn't— Your *neck*," he said in a shocked tone, staring.

She brushed her fingertips over her marks. "It didn't hurt. Even before you . . . we . . . uh, worked it out." They were nothing and would be healed by tomorrow. "You've really never seen this before?"

"Never."

"I was your first bitee?" Why that would please her she couldn't know. Why she wasn't leaping away from him in disgust confused her. She was just so overwhelmed with everything.

And she felt . . . *tenderness* toward him. Yes, Myst had always been the girlie-girl of the coven, but she'd never in her long, long life felt truly feminine until this male had squeezed her in his arms and *taken charge*. She had never—in all the lifetimes she'd endured—experienced that much pleasure.

"I've never taken flesh to drink because I knew what it would do to me." He rested his forehead against hers. "Myst, my eyes will go red from this. I will turn."

He looked so horrified, the words slipped out, "Your eyes will go red only when you kill as you drink living blood. The ones whose eyes turn drink to the marrow of their victims, sucking from the

pit of the soul. They take all the bad, all the madness, all the sin.”

His jaw slackened. “Is that why pure-blooded vampires go mad?”

She shook her head. “It’s more than that. They get addicted to killing, which means they can never drink from the same source. After years and years of different victims, the memories add up.”

He cupped his hand behind her head. “Every sunset I checked my eyes, not sure if I would turn from your blood. Not knowing if my brothers would have to kill me.”

His tone wasn’t reproaching, but hell, could she feel *more* guilty? This male was still *inside* her, inside her body that was humming as she’d never even known it could . . . and she’d tortured him. “Wroth, you’re a vampire. Others may not agree, but I for one believe that you’re meant to drink. To connect, to live. But never to kill like that. And it takes decades of killing every day for the memories to accumulate.”

In a stunned voice, he said, “I won’t turn. I’m meant to drink.” His lips curled, and he stroked her hair, still supporting her with one arm. He would never let her go. *He’s bested me*—she shivered.

“And you found pleasure in it.”

It wasn’t a question, but she answered, “Your bite was the only thing that saved you from a stiff legged kick at your groin.” When he grinned, she added softly, “It was intense pleasure.”

He groaned in approval and thrust into her once more, still semi-hard. To her surprise, she moaned, desire stoking again. “Did I take too much?” he asked. Still on his knees, he laid her back until she was horizontal, secure in his arms, one hand cupping her head, the other clutching under her shoulder as he pulled her along his length in a long, strong stroke.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she answered without thought. “Immortal here. Remember?”

He stopped suddenly, brought her back into his chest, arms around her, protective once more. “I heard something.”

“It’s nothing.” Frustrated, she kicked him in the ass with her heels, rocking on him. He stifled a groan but didn’t thrust. When she opened her eyes, she found his gaze furious and focused on . . . the sword point tucked under his chin.

Regin was pressing hard enough to bring blood trickling down. Lucia stood at her side with an arrow nocked.

“No,” Myst said, her voice sounding hoarse from screaming. “Don’t.”

Regin stared at her in disbelief. Regin, whose entire race had been destroyed by vampires . . . and who’d secretly learned to count by her mother’s bite scars. “This thing just violated you—”

“We followed the lightning here, Regin,” Lucia interrupted. “Whatever he did to her she let him do.”

She couldn’t imagine what they looked like there in the field. They’d fought ruthlessly. They must be bruised, bloody, their clothing in shreds.

Why hadn’t he traced her away? Why hadn’t he thrown her out of the way and attacked Regin? She suspected the answer to the first—he wanted them to see her like this. Their relationship couldn’t be made more brutally clear. She pulled away from him, though his arms tightened around her to prevent it. “Please, Wroth,” she whispered in his ear, “let me face them.”

He finally released her. But jealous Myst didn’t want her sisters to see Wroth hard, huge and magnificent, and she pulled her skirt over them as she drew him free from her, then yanked his shirttail down. *That’s mine*, she thought irrationally. She’d been acquisitive all her life but never with men. Now *she* wanted possession.

* * *

When Myst stumbled away, Nikolai reached for her, but Regin raised her sword against him, piercing several inches into his chest muscle. He didn’t fight back—he could hardly feel it—and he had vowed not to harm her family.

He was euphoric. There stood his Bride, putting her chin up as she pulled her shirt closed.

Claimed. He stifled an evil grin. With witnesses. She could never go back now. She was his.

His heart pumped madly for her, his blood rushing inside him—and *her luscious blood as well*. She’d enjoyed his bite, lightning had streaked the sky each time that she came—he’d *seen* her pleasure. He could give her lightning each time he drank, without fear of turning, without fear of hurting her. No more checking his eyes each sunset.

They could sustain each other. He’d never known greater satisfaction.

Now if he could just get her witch of a sister to cease stabbing him.

“You just had sex with a vampire,” Lucia said. “Myst, where is your mind? You know the repercussions. You’ll be shunned by the Lore, mistrusted.”

Regin added in a deadened tone, “When Furie rises . . .”

Whatever that statement meant, it made Myst’s brows suddenly draw together. She appeared shocked by everything, as if her sisters’ arrival had splashed ice water over her, waking her from a dream. He needed to get her home, away from them.

Suddenly Regin gasped and stared at Myst in horror. “Oh sweetheart,” she whispered, “where’s your chain?”

“Quickly,” Nikolai snapped to Myst as he reached for her, “take my hand.” Myst obeyed, diving forward to take it. He traced them just as Regin leapt for Myst’s legs and an arrow sang for him, hitting him in the shoulder but not staying within him as he disappeared.

Back at Blachmount, he set Myst on the edge of the bed. “Stay here,” he ordered, then returned for the goddamned bag he’d gone to get in the first place. Just as he arrived in her room, Regin and Lucia bolted up the stairs. “Give her the chain back, leech!”

“I’ve claimed her. She’s my wife now,” he said simply, then traced with an ease he’d never had, covering the distance as if an afterthought.

Back home, he tossed her things to the side, then took her shoulders. “Rest, *milaya*. Take a hot bath and relax here until I return.” She didn’t respond, and he didn’t want to leave her unsteady from tracing and reeling from the events of the night, but he needed to let Kristoff know that Ivo was in the New World. They needed to hunt him down and destroy him.

As Nikolai gazed down at his Bride he wondered how Ivo could *not* be searching for her.

He brushed her hair from her face, trying to get her eyes to meet his. “Make yourself comfortable here. Your clothes are here. This is your home now.”

When she nodded absently, her pupils were huge, her eyes stark, and he knew he couldn’t leave her like this. He would warm her with a bath then put her in bed.

He ran water, undressed her, and set her in it. She sat silently as he scrubbed the dirt and grass from her alabaster skin and held a cloth to her neck, to the bites that marred her.

Suddenly, she turned to him and placed her hands on his face. “Wroth, you said you would vow

never to hurt my family?”

“Yes. I make it again.”

“I believe you. You could’ve traced and attacked Regin and Lucia tonight and you didn’t. But please, if you take more memories from this night, don’t give others our weaknesses. Don’t allow others to hurt them either.”

Was his first loyalty to his king or to her? She was his Bride, and as he stared into her eyes, he realized that that meant she was his family. Nikolai’s family had always come first, and nothing had changed except that he’d now added to it.

“If I learn of other factions I will relate that information. But never about your kind.”

She pulled him to her and kissed him softly with trembling lips. “Thank you,” she whispered against him, then she gave him a shaky smile that made his turned heart do things he never remembered from being a human before.

Her shoulders tensed just as he heard voices sounding from downstairs.

Trespassers in his home. His fangs sharpened. That someone would dare enter his home when he had his Bride within it . . . “Myst, finish up, then go to the bedroom and wait for me. If anyone comes in that door but me, run faster than you’ve ever run and escape them.”

He traced downstairs, feeling his muscles tensing, his hands itching to kill. He was strong from her immortal blood, taken directly from her flesh, as powerful as he’d ever imagined, and he would use it to protect her. His fangs were like razors—

“Wroth, I pity the being who wishes to harm your Bride,” Kristoff intoned from his seat at the long table in the great room. Murdoch and a few Russian elders sat with him, and all their eyebrows rose at his appearance.

As Nikolai struggled for control, he imagined how they saw him. His clothing was filthy, his shirt stabbed and shot through, and God help him, Myst’s delicious blood marked his skin and clothing. He was fairly certain that she’d gotten in a few sucker punches at his face as well.

“I would not wish to attend you in such a condition. I’ll go wash and change—”

“No, we know you are eager to get back to her for the remains of the night.” Kristoff appeared proud. “Congratulations, Wroth. You’ve now been blooded *and* claimed your Bride.” He studied

him. “Recently. Though it appears she didn’t acquiesce to you.”

Nikolai stood, uncomfortable, reminding himself that she’d kicked him like she would spur a horse when he’d stopped.

“I’d like to meet her.”

“She is resting.”

“I suppose she would be. In fact, we’d wonder if she weren’t.” A couple of snickers. Nikolai shot them a look and they quieted. “And you drank her blood this night?”

His eyes narrowed. How had he thought this would escape Kristoff’s notice?

“Did you take her flesh as you did so?”

He could do nothing but admit to the most heinous crime among their order. Shoulders back, he said, “I did.”

“Take off your shirt.”

Murdoch caught his glance, tensing to fight, but Kristoff waved him down, saying, “Stand down, Murdoch, no one’s dying tonight.”

Perhaps Kristoff would only flail his skin from his back. Nikolai removed the shirt, hoping. For the first time in his life, he had his wife waiting for him and for the first time he truly cared if he lived or died.

“Toss it on the table.”

Frowning, he did. The elders’ eyes widened, their hands going white on the table. Kristoff had scented Myst’s blood, and now the others did as well.

“And what was it like?” Murdoch asked, his voice hoarse.

Nikolai didn’t answer. Then Kristoff raised his eyebrow in a silent order.

After a moment, Nikolai grated, “There is no description strong enough.”

“And how did she feel about your bite?” Kristoff asked.

He didn’t want them to know how she reacted to that, how it had made her come with an intensity that had staggered him.

“You resist answering your king on the heels of confessing to our most reviled crime?”

This was his Bride they spoke of. He wanted to lie, to say he wasn’t sure, didn’t know, and he

couldn't. Answering this wouldn't be breaking his vow to her, and if Kristoff ordered him killed, he couldn't protect Myst from Ivo. Though it disgusted him, he bit out, "She found extreme pleasure from it."

Kristoff appeared pleased. Or even relieved. "Do you think I should forgive Wroth his transgression? For which one of us could have resisted the temptation when she was our Bride and her exquisite blood called?"

Nikolai hid his shocked expression. Kristoff would've normally called for him to be chained in an open field until the sun burned him to ash.

"Continue as you were, but if your eyes turn red, know that we will destroy you." He was still staring at the tattered shirt stained by a Valkyrie's blood.

Nikolai recovered enough to say, "I was coming to Mount Oblak tonight to tell you that Ivo was spotted in New Orleans. He's looking for someone, and I suspect it could be Myst. I need to—"

"We'll take care of it," Murdoch said sharply. "For God's sake, you stay here and . . . enjoy . . . everything."

"Find out as much as you can from her." Kristoff eyed him shrewdly as he stood to leave. "And you will tell us if the memories follow the blood."

A short, quick nod. As Nikolai left the room, stunned from the events, he heard Kristoff say, "Now which one of you will volunteer to accompany Murdoch to New Orleans where this coven full of Valkyrie is located?" Nikolai heard every chair scrape the floor as they shot to their feet.

* * *

Like a cat licking her wounds, Myst sat in the large bath, replaying the fight.

Since she'd pulled her punches, she wondered if she could've won, wondered if she'd truly been bested. But then she flexed the fingers of the fist he'd caught. They were sore. They were *not* broken. He'd held back as well.

She sighed, unable to work up the outrage that should be exploding within her or even concern over the possible threat downstairs. Wroth would take care of it. He was strong. She shrugged, her mind easily returning to tonight's stunning developments. Now her sisters knew her chain was gone *and* that she'd been claimed by a vampire.

What they couldn't know was how much she'd *loved* it. His bite had turned her inside out, made

her toes curl. Even now she shivered to think of it, knowing something was woefully wrong with her for craving it. It might be twisted, but she yearned for him to do it to her again. And again.

In addition to that, Wroth had taken her as no other had before. Though she acted as if she'd had tons of lovers, she'd actually had only a couple of steady partners.

She'd dated a wonderful warlock for centuries, but it was long-distance—in those days, it took a half a year to reach each other—and they'd parted ways amicably. She'd only slept with two others, both long-term, and they'd been fun and enjoyable.

But she'd seen a lot, and knew a lot, and she knew Wroth moved and used his body on hers—in hers—in a way that was nothing short of divine.

And she believed it would only get better. She shivered again, unable to imagine how she could feel more pleasure without dying. Then there was a very compelling fact. . . .

He'd unchained her where none other could.

Did that mean he was *supposed* to have it? To have her? Was he supposed to possess her, to command her like a genie with a bottle? She'd always pitied the plight of genies until once when she'd freed one from a young berserker. Instead of thanks, the chit had laid into her, screaming, "*To each her own, lightning whore!*"

After Myst dried off, she dressed in an emerald-green, understated nightgown that said neither "do me" nor "don't do me." She lay back in his bed, realizing she was just so relaxed about everything. Strange, but she felt so at home here in this cold, bare mansion.

Less than half an hour later he returned and showered. There'd been no threat? Probably his brother visiting just in time to see Wroth looking like she'd fought him for her life. He should see when she *didn't* pull her punches.

When Wroth joined her, she wondered if he was going to make love to her again. Their time in the field had only set a fire for her—lit a pilot light, so to speak, as it had never been lit before. She was sore, but if he commanded her not to hurt again . . . Yet he only clasped her into his arms to rest on his chest. She saw he was hard, but he made no advance.

Finally, he curled a finger under her chin and raised her face to his. He drew her hair back to reveal his bites. He let her hair fall, then stared at the ceiling, rumbling the words, "I regret hurting

you. The number of bites, the lack of care before . . .”

She knew what he meant by the latter—he regretted not taking time to prepare her body and ease into her. When she thought about how he’d learned to do this, or thought about the first time he’d ever realized that he would even need to, she felt a scorching flare of *jealousy*—so strong it rocked her. Jealous? When he could never want another but her for the rest of his life?

“I can’t believe I lost control like that. I am unused to being blooded. I am unused to being a husband. But I vow to you that things will be different—I will be gentler.”

That statement was the first thing to threaten her lackadaisical mood since she’d returned here. She didn’t want their sex to be different. *Their sex*. Great Freya, was she thinking about keeping him? She would get used to his size, and then she would demand that he be anything but *gentle*. She couldn’t have ordered up a better match for her in bed, and she’d be damned if she let him hold back all that magnificent strength.

He was everything she could ever dream of physically. His scars alone . . . she stifled a moan, but her claws were curling. He was a warrior, with a warrior’s mentality, which she appreciated. None of her lovers before had been warriors. No, they’d been the warlock, an immortal sultan, and an architect. Perhaps that was why she was so attracted to Wroth.

She and Wroth were kindred.

“Speak to me,” he commanded, then immediately amended, “Will you not speak to me?”

“I want my chain back. I want to choose.” If he gave it to her, she would stay awhile. Her sisters had already seen her screwing a vampire—she might as well enjoy the pleasure for a time.

He moved to his side, pressing her to hers as well. There they lay, gazes locked. Dawn was nearing and she didn’t want this to end for some reason. He put his hand on her shoulder and stroked her. His palm was rough from hardships and the grip of his sword, and she relished the feel of it. “I can’t lose you. The very thought makes me crazed. I can’t even allow myself to imagine you leaving me.” His hand squeezed her now.

“Are you so certain I would?”

“Yes. I am,” he rasped. His tone wasn’t blaming, but more like he was explaining something regrettable but inevitable.

She didn't deny it, because he was probably right. He called himself her husband, but she didn't recognize him as such. She didn't recognize him as the one whose arms she would forever run to get within.

– 10 –

The harsh light of day. Or night, Myst mused. The harsh light of waking was upon her.

Instead of the shame and disgust she should be feeling, she was treated to big, warm hands massaging her back until she was a boneless heap of bliss. She moaned, her mind dimly registering that vampire lovers might be vastly misunderstood. Perhaps *she* was in the know and enjoying early-adaptor status.

“I have to go meet with my brother for a couple of hours. Can you content yourself here?”

“Uh-huh,” she mumbled.

“Don’t leave.”

Huh? She wasn’t going anywhere. She was too at home and relaxed here.

He bent down to murmur in her ear. “I’ve left clothes laid out. Will you dress for me, *milaya*?”

And then he disappeared.

Strangely lazy, it took her another hour before she finally got up. She raised an eyebrow at what he’d set out for her—a stiff satin bustier fringed with transparent lace that just covered her nipples, intricate garters, fishnet hose, and thong—all in jet black. She shivered. General Wroth had a wicked streak.

He wanted her to dress for him, and she didn’t have a problem with that—she was pleased that someone would finally enjoy her fabulous silks and lace. And it made a huge difference that he’d asked when he could have commanded. But as she soaked in a bath, she mused that she was still in a position where she had to *depend* that he would continue to show the same consideration. Which

was intolerable for a creature like her.

She'd half-expected her sisters to have arrived already—Nix often could find her—but knew if they hadn't come by now, she would have to win her freedom with her own tools and talents. He'd said he would return the chain when he was confident she would never leave. How hard would it be to act as though she wanted to stay forever?

After drying off, she tilted her head at the lingerie laid out. Why not use seduction to let him think she desired him above all others? Play at love and act at surrender. As she smoothed the hose up her legs, she wondered if deception had ever sounded so delicious.

She began trembling as she donned the bustier, and the material at the top skimmed over her hard nipples so sweetly. She was already wet with anticipation.

Once dressed, she lay on the bed, fantasizing about him inside her as his big hands palmed her breasts. Would he drink her? She pictured him driving into her from behind, the length of his body stretched over hers to take her neck as well.

Her fingers found their way down her belly and into her panties. He was supposed to be back soon, but did she really care if he caught her? She'd already done it for his pleasure, and what would he do if he found her like this and didn't like it—break up with her?

A stroke on her clitoris had her back arching. Had she ever been so wet? No, not until she'd impatiently waited in a vampire's lair, in tight black satin to seduce a warlord.

Her eyes closed and her legs fell wide as she ran her finger lower. When she opened her eyes, half-lidded, she found Wroth staring at her from the foot of the bed.

"Couldn't wait?" His voice was husky, his eyes dark. He was already ripping off his clothes, his shaft bulging against the material of his pants.

* * *

Nikolai had known his Myst was a pagan, but she'd never truly looked it until he found her pleasuring herself, in his bed in black hose, garters, and satin, legs spread in abandon. Her glorious red hair haloed out along the pillow and her hand was in her panties delicately stroking her sex.

She hadn't stopped with his arrival.

"I couldn't have dreamed you'd be like this. I believe I'm dreaming now."

She arched her back.

“Were you thinking of me?” *Say yes.* . . . He didn’t think he’d ever wanted to hear anything so badly.

Her whiskey voice was as sexy as her body. “*Yes, Wroth.*”

He groaned. “What were you thinking of?”

“Of you drinking me while you were inside me,” she said, moaning the last words.

Craving his bite too? “A dream.”

She licked her lips. “In your dream do you make me wait for you much longer?”

“You want this freely?” He reached to unbuckle his belt, surprised to find how difficult it had become. Finally, he just tore it apart. Her hips rolled in reaction.

“*Yes.*”

“No games?”

“No,” she panted, “just need you inside me.”

“Your body wants to be fucked?”

She gasped, her fingers teasing quicker. “Yes.”

“By me?”

“*Yes,*” she moaned.

He’d anticipated it would take months of planning to wear her down until she truly wanted him, and they wouldn’t have to play at commands and power.

Yet here she was stroking herself in his bed as she awaited his return. *In his bed, waiting.* It was too impossible, and he grew suspicious. “Convince me.”

Her gaze flickered over his face, her eyelids heavy as she slowly, sensuously drew her fingers away from herself. She rose, sauntered to the wall, then tugged aside the flimsy string of her wisp of underwear.

Without a word, she simply spread her legs and leaned forward until her forearms rested against the wall. When the position raised her ass and bared her lush sex, he rasped, “You make a compelling argument.” He was overwhelmed by the sight of her flesh waiting to be filled and by the fact that *she* began this, had masturbated to thoughts of him fucking her. . . .

He kicked his boots off, ripping his clothing away, then stood behind her. He slipped his thumb into her tightness, briefly closing his eyes to find her so luscious and slick. Her entire body was trembling, which affected him so much. With a groan he replaced his thumb with one, then two fingers. “In my dream I do fuck you. But I start slowly, feeding my cock into you inch by inch. When you’re dripping wet and ready, I fuck you with all the strength in my body.”

With a little cry, she bent down more, raising her ass up higher. “What do I do?” she breathed.

“You come again and again from no command, just from pleasure.”

He spread her, grasped himself, then fought not to plunge into her when the head touched her dewy heat. He shuddered violently from the battle, but wouldn’t reward this gift from her by hurting her tight little sheath.

Yet the head was barely inside her when lightning exploded outside—because she was already coming, clawing furrows into the wall, gasping, “*Wroth*, now . . . please!”

“*I am*. . .” he groaned, clutching her hips, straining his every muscle to enter her slowly, to make this good for her—

His eyes widened when he felt her claws sink into his ass to yank him into her.

“*Hard*,” she growled in a throaty voice.

“*Don’t hurt*,” he choked out, then with an answering growl, he thrust into her, forcing his cock through the squeezing spasms of her orgasm as though through a tightened fist. Even when he was seated deeply, she continued to climax around him. He could have stilled and let her body milk him.

But he wanted to *fuck* her. To take her so fiercely she would forget other men. To brand her as his own. He clenched her hips, withdrew, then rocked into her, hitting the end of her sex.

“*Yes!*” she cried.

“Can you know what that does to me?” he rasped, grinding his hips, stirring her. She moaned, hanging on to the wall. “To see you finger yourself to thoughts of me?” He withdrew completely then fell into her with another brutal thrust.

“Ah, *Wroth* . . . yes!” She came again suddenly, the manor shaking from the lightning. “*Drink*,” she sobbed to his disbelief. “Oh gods, please *drink from me*.”

He ripped the lace to bare her breasts, then covered them with his hands, fingers pinching and

tugging her nipples as he pulled her to his chest.

“You want my bite?”

“Yes,” she moaned.

“As much as you want my cock?”

“Yes! Wroth, put *everything in me*, yes, yes, yes,” she repeated, panting between her words, shoving and circling her hips back into him. His fangs pierced her skin just as he thrust.

She cupped his head to her neck hard so he wouldn’t stop—then came again, moaning his name so that he felt her words as he bit her. He didn’t stop, just snarled into her skin as he ejaculated, mindlessly grinding against her, hands squeezing her heavy breasts. Her blood scorched him inside as he pumped his come into her in wave after wave.

Afterward, when thought returned, he caught her up to his chest because she was unsteady, but then so was he. He withdrew slowly, then scooped her into his arms, crossing to the bed.

When he gazed down at her, he saw her eyes were silver and her lips were curling into a smile.

He stared, still disbelieving. “Like that, did you?”

She nodded.

“Want more?” he asked as he tossed her on the bed.

In answer, she went to her knees, pulled aside her hair and offered him the unbitten side of her neck.

His voice was ragged with lust. “That wasn’t quite what I meant, but we can work something out. . . .”

The more hours toward dawn that they spent licking, fucking and both of them biting, the more overwhelming the mind-boggling pleasure, the less he could believe that this was his Bride, happily—no, aggressively—partaking.

And at the end of the night, he stared down at her in puzzlement. He didn’t know which facet of her he liked better. The siren in black satin that made his cock and fangs ache or this angel with her bright red hair spread across his pillow—who made his chest ache.

She brushed the backs of her fingers along his face. “Wroth, I want this to grow naturally between us without the chain,” she whispered up to him. “Vow you’ll give it back in two weeks

time. Just give us a chance, give me a chance to want this freely.”

He wanted to believe in her—and in himself, that he could convince her to stay. He’d already wanted to command her to close her eyes and open her palms, and then see her face once he’d poured the chain into them.

Two weeks to win her. “Yes, *milaya*, I vow it.”

– 11 –

Nothing in his human life or his vampire existence had prepared him for living with a Valkyrie.

Myst had boundless energy, she was powerful, and she exuded an almost otherworldly sensuality that set his blood on fire. Each night he traced her to different locations to make love to her. He'd had her against the foot of a pyramid, gazed in awe as she rode him on a moonlit beach in Greece, and licked her sex beneath a redwood until she begged for mercy. . . .

Throughout those nights, once he and Myst worked the edge off their need, they talked for hours, and he learned more about her and her kind. He'd given her the cross she'd admired at Oblak, but when the jewels glinted in their room's gaslight, she'd seemed to go into a trance. Finally, he'd covered it, and once she'd shaken herself, she'd admitted, "We all inherited Freya's acquisitiveness. Shining things, jewels and gems . . . We can't tear our gaze away without training for years and sudden glittering is sometimes irresistible."

Nikolai had inwardly cursed that she had this vulnerability. At first he'd thought the Valkyrie were a perfect creature—no need to eat, immortal, strengthening with age—but he'd since learned that the Valkyrie were one of the few species of the Lore that could die of sorrow. And if one was weakened, the others suffered since they were all connected with a "collective" power.

He couldn't always be there to protect her. Though he'd tried to use the chain as little as possible, he'd whispered to her as she slept that she would no longer have these weaknesses.

Nikolai would have been content to hear only about her, but she'd been surprisingly curious about his past. He found himself revealing things he never had to anyone, yet feeling unburdened

from it.

He'd told her of the pain he and Murdoch had felt to return home and see their other six siblings and their father dying. Myst's eyes had watered as he'd spoken of the gut-wrenching decision to make them drink. Then came the agonizing vigil as they wondered if their family would be reborn, any of them. In the end, they'd lost their father and sisters, but regained their two brothers.

The night he himself had "died" seemed to fascinate her, and she repeatedly asked him to tell her the story of how he'd made demands of Kristoff.

She never failed to tell him how proud she was of him. That comment had made him feel particularly uneasy. These days there wasn't much he was proud about. He avoided Kristoff, telling him little when they did meet. He was coercing his Bride to stay with him, and he suspected that if, at the end of the two weeks, she wanted to leave him, he'd break his vow to her in a heartbeat's time.

He sought any hint that might tell him how she felt and what she might decide. At times he was optimistic. When they fought mock battles with a game based on military strategy, she seemed to enjoy herself—and to like the fact that he always beat her. She wasn't a strategist, she'd explained to him. She was "front-line badassness" but she appreciated his talent. One time she'd sidled over to straddle him, placing his hands on her breasts. As she slid down his shaft, she whispered in his ear, "My wise warlord. You make my toes curl you're so good." He'd shuddered violently and had to fight not to come in an instant.

In fact she seemed to delight in every reminder that he'd fought and warred. She'd admired his sword, eyes widening at the considerable weight of it, only to narrow on him and grow silver with want. Her eyes had only to flicker silver and he went hard as iron.

And last night, as they lay spent in bed, he'd finally asked her, "What do you find attractive about me?" That could possibly compete against a demigod with a "mind-shattering kiss."

Without hesitation, she answered, "Your scars."

His brows drew together in surprise. "What? Why?"

"They're evidence of the pain you've survived. Pain survived builds strength." She traced down his stomach. "This is the one that killed you?"

"Yes."

“Then this one I admire the most.” She brushed her lips so tenderly over it. “It brought you to me.”

But his contentment was never whole. He’d never been in love, didn’t believe he’d even slept with the same woman twice, yet now he wanted *everything* from this pagan immortal, was sick with wanting her. He wanted to strip her soul bare and make her give all of herself, all of what she’d been in the beginning before time twisted her.

His dreams reminded him of her past, preventing him from falling for her completely. Though he’d thankfully never seen her making love to another—and for some reason he believed he never would—he drove himself mad with the mere idea of the lovers she’d taken into her body. He made himself crazed wondering how he compared to them. Each wicked thing she did to him that had him staring at the ceiling in an agony of pleasure and shock had him wondering later where she’d learned it.

How many had she had? She was nearly two thousand years old. One bedmate a year? Two a year? One lover a month. . . ?

And how could he compete with *gods* for her? She was a creature so passionate and beautiful, it was clear she’d been made to be loved by them alone.

The dreams kept him from believing and falling into the life they could share—the life he wanted so badly he could taste it.

He dreaded sleep and took no succor from it, growing weary with each day though her blood built his muscle, making him physically stronger than he’d ever imagined. Each sunset, he treated her coldly, so she asked about his dreams. But he lied.

She would accept his reassurance, smiling over at him from her window seat. Her smile could bring down an army. *Probably had.*

How had he thought he was a match for it?

* * *

My apologies, Myst thought as she gazed down at Wroth, rolling her hips on him, but she was enjoying the hell out of her vampire.

His eyes were so fierce, his gorgeous, sculpted muscles rigid beneath her claws as she leaned

forward to cup her breast to his mouth. He suckled and groaned around her nipple as he tensed to come, and when she exploded, he shot hotly inside her. She fell limp on top of him, loving it when he put his arms around her and clenched her into his chest as he shuddered for long moments afterward.

When he finally let her go with a kiss so he could dress and leave for Oblak, she said, “Okay. I’m down with being your dirty little secret out here—for now. But I can’t just sit in this room for hours when you leave.”

“What do you need, love?” he asked, piling her curls atop her head. He seemed fascinated by her hair, always touching it.

Wait, he’d called her *love*? Cool. “Do you know what an Xbox is? No? Well, your Bride has a teeny little addiction to it . . .”

She wrote down the model of the console and the games she wanted as he showered and dressed. Just before he traced, she took his hands and gazed up at him solemnly. “Bring this back and you might as well have slayed a dragon for me.”

As she waited, she painted her toenails—Valkyrie loved painting their nails since it was the only way they could semi-permanently alter their appearance—and reflected on how easily she’d settled in here.

In fact, there were only three things that prevented her from being truly comfortable in this situation. The first? Though they traveled most nights, he wouldn’t take her to meet his friends and family and wouldn’t let her see hers either. He’d explained that he wanted her undivided attention for these two weeks.

She suspected he was waiting until their relationship was cemented, which he believed would be in three days—the end of what she called the two-week vampire demo. Had it resulted in a sale? She knew it would mean pariah-hood in the Lore and having to give up her family. She could just imagine bringing Wroth to the coven. Her sisters would thank her for the surprise then pounce on him, swords and claws flying with glee.

As twin sister to Furie, Cara alone would fight him to the death simply for what he was. And though Wroth was incredibly powerful, Cara was quick, with thousands of years more experience and the boiling hatred of a separated twin. The two of them together would be like Godzilla versus

Mothra, or some serious epic shite.

Her second concern was her worry for him. He often traced to Oblak, and each time she wondered if he would face some faction of the Lore intent on killing him just for being a vampire. She believed him when he told her of Kristoff's agenda and saw no conflict of interest with her covens, so call her an awful person, but she'd turned informant, teaching him how to protect himself.

Her third beef was that each sunset when they woke he was unbearably surly and curt with her. She feared he'd seen memories of her flirting or even making love—though Nix had once told her that recipients of visions never saw things they couldn't recover from and usually only witnessed major, life-changing events. He'd assured her again and again that it was nothing, but Myst had suspicions. Yet she could tolerate his moods because he spent the rest of the night treating her like a queen.

Just when her toenails had dried, he returned with the slayed dragon and its attendant games and set them at her feet. He looked at her with his brows drawn like he'd missed her, and her heart did funky twisty things in her chest. The impulse came to jump him, so she did.

Only after he'd squeezed her up in his arms did she realize she'd run to get within them.

– 12 –

Nikolai shot up in bed, feeling nauseated, physically ill from his nightmares.

He'd been lashed by the usual dreams of her gloating at a gravesite, then the Roman stroking himself as she slowly dragged her skirt up her thighs. "I'll possess Myst the Coveted . . ."

But details of the memories became more evident each time. This time he'd heard Myst's amused thoughts at his words—*No one possesses me, but in their fantasies. I'll kill you as easily as kiss you . . .* "And I'll be yours, only yours," she purred, though she detested him.

Now he'd seen something new. A different, more recent memory. Myst was smoothing on hose, her foot daintily placed on his bed, as she made a decision to . . . *trick him?* To act as though she'd capitulated easily in order to get her chain back.

Play at love and act at surrender.

He gripped his forehead in his hand. Irrationally, he waited for the soft touch of her hand on his back. She was his Bride, his *wife*, and she offered him no comfort.

Even had she truly had that urge, she couldn't, since he was still secretly commanding her to sleep throughout the day. So she wouldn't run away from him and leave him in torment again.

Kill you as easily as kiss you . . .

He'd thought they'd had a place to start from, to move forward from, but he'd been fooled by her beauty and abandon. She'd seduced him, made sure he "caught" her working her body that same night, knowing he would lose his mind at the sight.

He was as much a fool as the Roman, besotted with a fantasy that didn't exist. At least that

long-dead Roman had suffered no delusions that she could care for him. He'd known that she was incapable of feeling and had wanted possession only.

Nikolai had been falling for a fantasy, one that easily manipulated him.

She desired her freedom and she would use whatever means she had available to get it, leaving him as soon as she'd succeeded.

Fool.

* * *

When Myst woke, she burrowed down into the covers, feeling relaxed and content to her toes.

Today was D-day—delivery day for the chain—the end of the demo that she realized *had* resulted in a sale.

She snuggled into his pillow, loving his scent, and considered her new feelings. She'd feared her life as she'd known it had ended the minute he'd vowed to give her the chain back. It was a leap of faith on his part and she'd *responded* to it. Responded in kind. It was a bit ironic that she'd smugly planned to punk him only to get snared in her own machinations. She'd lasted only a few days playing easy till she *went* easy, her femme fatale plans culminating in the oh-so-nefarious leap into his arms.

She grinned into the pillow. She'd take back her chain, but only because it looked so damned sassy on her.

When she rose and stretched, she found him watching her. Her grin widened, but he didn't return her smile, just glanced at her bare breasts and snapped, "Put on some clothes."

She drew her head back, frowning. "Are you angry with me?" He was usually brusque when they woke, but she could tell this was much worse. She was baffled by what could have happened since she'd gone to sleep, tucked against his chest, secure under his heavy arm. His eyes were somehow crazed and bleak at the same time, his face exhausted. Alarm began to build inside her.

"We have a lot to discuss tonight." He tossed her a robe. "Put it on and sit here."

She had no choice but to comply. He traced away and was back seconds later, holding the chain fisted in his whitened grip. "Tonight we're going to make some adjustments between us—or more accurately, in you."

Her eyes widened. “Wroth, what are you doing?” she asked slowly. “You vowed to give it back today.”

“A woman like you should understand broken vows.”

“What are you talking about? How can you do this to me now?” The evening she’d decided to stay.

His face was crueler than she’d ever seen it. “You mean after the last two weeks? Just because you wanted to be fucked and I complied doesn’t mean I won’t treat you as you deserve.”

She put the back of her hand to her face as if she’d been struck. He didn’t say “treat you as a whore,” didn’t call her that, but somehow he made her feel it. “As I deserve,” she repeated dumbly.

He grasped her arm, squeezing it hard. “I can’t live like this, Myst. *With* this.” At her confused expression, he said, “I’ve seen your past. I know what you were, what you are.”

“What I was?” Her frown deepened. She hadn’t lived her life perfectly—there’d been missteps and misjudgments—but she’d done little to be *ashamed* of. Was the killing too much for him to handle? He’d been a freaking warlord! “If you find me lacking, know that I regret very few of my actions over my long life.”

That seemed to enrage him. “No? What about playing at love and acting at surrender?”

“Wroth, that was—”

“*Silence.*” He kissed her harshly, though she struggled against him before he pulled back. “I’ve realized you are heartless.” His eyes appeared tortured, his entire body tight with tension. “But what if I just ordered you to be kinder, then made you forget all the men that came before me? Made you forget all that, forget your vicious sisters who kill without remorse?”

She gasped, eyes watering, but she couldn’t speak after his command. Her hands clenched. She’d never wanted to scream more in her life, and yet her lips parted silently when he said, “I believe I’ll just order you to want me so fiercely that you can’t think of anything or anyone else—”

A voice interrupted from downstairs. “General Wroth, you’re needed at Oblak immediately.”

“*What?*” he bellowed. She felt his eyes on her as she staggered to the window seat, tears beginning to fall. She curled up, leaning her forehead against the glass.

“Your brother’s been badly injured.”

He pointed at her. “Stay here,” he bit out, then disappeared. She heard him downstairs, locking away her freedom again, then he was gone once more. *Stay here?* In the room or the manor? He’d been so thrown by the news that he hadn’t elaborated.

So stumbling, clutching at the wall as energy funneled out of her, she finally made her way to his study. She pulled aside the cabinet, finding the safe behind it. When she reached for the lock, her hand veered off course as though pushed by an unseen force. She bit her lip and tried again, fighting to simply brush the metal.

Commanded not to touch it. Just like he would command her to forget who she was, that she even had a family. Lightning cracked outside in time with a sob. He’d been about to do it.

It was true then. Vampires couldn’t be trusted—he’d seemed out of his mind with rage. Why had she gone against all she’d ever learned to be with him?

The years had been weighing on her and she’d been overwhelmed by the yearning to simply lean on someone, just for while, to have a partner to watch her back and hold her when she needed it. Surely she’d convinced herself to accept him because he was strong and she had grown so weak. No longer.

There were ways she could get around his orders—nimble thinking, creative reasoning. As tears poured from her eyes and the lightning grew to constant furious bolts, she tore at the wall, at the very stone that housed it.

So he would use her? Like a toy. A mindless slave. *Adjustments?*

Toy, bait, whore . . . *Just because you wanted to be fucked*, he’d sneered.

Two millennia of people thinking they could use her. Always using her.

She’d take this safe with her teeth if she had to.

* * *

“You should see the other guy,” Murdoch grated from his bed when Nikolai traced into his room.

Nikolai shuddered to see his brother’s face torn and limbs broken like this, even while knowing he couldn’t die from anything short of a beheading or sunlight. He shook himself. “What has happened to you?” he asked, his voice a rasp.

“I was about to ask you the same. My God, Nikolai, you look worse than I do.”

He thought about how he’d left Myst at the window, crying, staring out at the lightning storm that came from within her. It pained him so much to think of her hurting alone. . . . “We’ll talk of my problems later. Who has done this to you?”

“Ivo has demons. Demons turned vampires. They are strong—you can’t imagine it. He is looking for someone, but I don’t think it’s your Bride. They mentioned something about a ‘halfing’.”

“How many?”

“There were three demonic vampires in his party, other vampires as well. We took down two of the demons, but one remains.” He glanced behind him. “Where’s your Bride?”

After a hesitation, he explained everything, seeking the same unburdening he felt when he spoke with Myst. His brother’s expression grew stark.

Long moments of silence passed before Murdoch said incredulously, “You took away the free will of a creature who has had it for upward of two thousand years. A good wager says she’s going to want it back.”

“No, you don’t understand. She’s callous. Incapable of love. It eats at me, her deception, because it’s the only thing that makes sense.” More to himself, he muttered, “Why else would she want me?”

Murdoch weakly grabbed Nikolai’s wrist. “For all these years I’ve seen you continually choose the best, most rational course, even if it’s the most difficult. I’ve been proud to follow your leadership because you’ve acted with courage and always—always—with rationality. I never thought I would have to inform you that your reason and judgment have failed you, Nikolai. If she’s as bad as you say then you have to . . . I don’t know, just help her change, but you can’t *order* this. Get back to her. Explain your fears to her.”

“I don’t think I can. You saw her, Murdoch. Why would she so quickly acquiesce?”

“Why don’t you just ask her?”

Because I don’t want to show her again how craven I’ve become with wanting her.

“And about the other men—this isn’t the seventeen hundreds anymore,” Murdoch said. “This isn’t even the same plane. She’s immortal, not an eighteen-year-old blushing bride straight from a convent. She can’t change these things, so if you want her, you have to adjust.”

Nikolai ran a hand over his face. “When did you get so bloody understanding?”

Murdoch shrugged. “I had someone explain a few rules of the Lore to me and learned we can’t apply our human expectations to the beings within it.”

“Who told you this?” When he didn’t answer, Nikolai didn’t push, not with all the secrets he’d been keeping. “Will you be all right?” he asked.

“That’s the thing about being immortal. It’ll always look worse than it is.”

Nikolai attempted a grin, but didn’t manage it.

“Good luck, brother.”

Outside of the room, Nikolai spoke with those watching over Murdoch and emphasized what would happen to them should his brother worsen, then contemplated tracing back. He was almost glad when Kristoff called a meeting about this newest threat, grateful for the time to cool off before he faced Myst again.

Kristoff didn’t hesitate to ask, “Why didn’t your Bride tell you about the turned demons?”

“I don’t know. I will ask her when I return.” He wondered as well. Had she known? No, she’d been teaching him everything she knew—teaching him constantly.

Why would she do that if she only planned to leave him?

When he cringed, he realized Kristoff was still studying him.

“Something to add?”

He owed Kristoff his life and the life of his brothers. Three brothers and for Myst herself, he owed his king. He would withhold information on Myst’s kind but relate the rest. “I’ve learned a good deal about the Lore from her and want to discuss it with you, but I left my wife feeling poorly. I’d like to get back to her.”

“By all means,” Kristoff said, his face unreadable. “But tomorrow we’ll talk of this.”

Nikolai nodded, then traced back to Myst, frowning as a hazy idea surfaced in the turmoil of his mind. Had his brother’s heart been beating earlier? But before he could contemplate this further, Nikolai’s attention was easily distracted by Myst’s sleeping form. He gazed down at her, chest aching as usual. Sometimes he damned his beating heart because of the pain that seemed to follow it.

Murdoch was right. She couldn’t change what she was, and he’d wronged her today. If only

he could *think* more clearly where she was concerned instead of reacting viscerally. *Primitively*. Before, he'd never understood when men talked about of madness and love in the same breath. Now he understood.

He only hoped that when he asked her to forgive him *his* weakness, she could.

After undressing, he climbed into bed with her. He pulled her close to him, running his hand down her arm, burying his face in her hair and smelling her soft, sweet scent. Finally at dawn, he passed out with exhaustion. When he dreamed, he opened his mind to her memories, to what had become his nightmares. They superseded all his other visions of battle and famine because these hurt him the most. *See her in a sordid light. Punish yourself.*

See them all.

– 13 –

The dream of the Roman appeared first. Nikolai impatiently waited through the usual scene, seeking to see more. Did he truly want to? Could he ever turn back from this?

Too late, it was done. He knew that he'd unlocked the floodgates and that these dreams were going to play out, each spinning to their gruesome, perverted endings.

Myst slowly lifted her skirt up. Yet then Nikolai felt something new—chills crawling up her spine as she peered down at the Roman with his wet lips and furious stroking.

She was ashamed at her disgust and closed her mind off it. She was the bait. She'd be whatever it took to *free her sister*.

“I'll possess Myst the coveted . . .”

No one possesses me, but in their fantasies. I'll kill you as easily as kiss you . . . The Roman sought to make her his plaything just as he had Daniela for weeks.

Suddenly Myst glanced up and Nikolai saw through her eyes. Lucia had Daniela in her covered arms, the girl's body limp and burned over most of her icy skin. Daniela had been tortured, Myst realized, by this animal at her feet, by his very touch. The familiar rage erupted within her. *Control it . . . Just a moment longer. . .* “And I'll be yours, only yours,” she somehow purred.

When Lucia signaled, Myst nodded, extracting her foot, his lips producing a loud sucking sound that made her cringe. She tapped the man's bulbous nose with her big toe. In a tone dripping with sexuality, she said, “You probably won't live through what I'm about to do”—her voice had

gone to a breathy whisper belying the words and confusing the man—“but if you survive, learn and tell others that you should never”—a tap with the toe—“ever”—tap—“harm a Valkyrie.”

Then she punted him across the room—

Another scene began, the one with the raiding party, the one he’d always dreaded seeing the most. The men were nearing; he could hear her feigning heavy breathing, a stumble. All a part of the game.

One tackled her hard into the snow. The others pinned her arms. She was pretending fear, weakly struggling. While others cheered, a burly Viking knelt between her legs and told her, “I hope you live longer than the last ones did.”

Lightning streaked behind the man’s head, and the wind seemed to follow it. A few looked around uneasily with nervous laughter.

“The last ones’ names were Angritte and her daughter Carin,” Myst informed him. Carin, so young, simple in the mind, had for some reason immediately recognized Myst for what she was. “*Swan maiden*,” the girl had whispered, uttering one of the Valkyries’ more beautiful names.

Both the careless mother and her innocent daughter had been killed, smothered under the weight of these men as they brutalized them. “I will live longer than them—and you.” A change came over her, like a bloodlust, thoughts turned feral, the rage . . .

The frown on the attacker’s face was the last expression he’d ever make. She rose up, easily shaking off the powerful men. She had loved Carin for her very innocence and joy, and these beasts had stolen these things from Myst, from the world, which was poorer from the loss.

As lightning painted the sky, she mindlessly slashed her way through them. When all but one were felled she told the one she allowed to live, “Any time you think to hunt down a woman, wonder if she’s not like me. I’ve spared you, but my sisters would unman you with a flick of their claws, their wrath unimaginable.” She wiped her arm over her face, found it was wet.

She crouched over the man and could see her reflection in his eyes. “There are thousands of us out there. Lining these coasts, waiting.” Her eyes were silver, and blood marked the side of her face. He was frozen in terror. “And I’m the gentle one.”

She turned from him, dusting off her hands and said to herself, “This is how rumors get started.”

But her swagger disappeared at the site of the rough gravestones atop the hill by the sea—Carin’s beside her mother’s. “You stupid human,” she hissed at the mother’s. “I’ve cursed you to your hell.”

“Why did you disobey me? I told you to take Carin inland in the spring when they come down. *Stay far from the coasts,*” she said, her voice breaking on a sob as she flew to the girl’s tombstone. She curled up against it, her face resting against the crude inscription. Then she hit it, her blood trickling along the new jagged fracture.

She stayed like that, unmoving for days, as villagers held a vigil at the base of the hill, offering up tributes fit for a goddess for her protection and benevolence. Nikolai shuddered at the physical pain Myst didn’t seem to feel—her hand frozen in blood to the stone, her muscles knotted and skin raw from cold.

On the third day, her sister Nix found her and lifted her from the snow as easily as a pillow. Tears were ice on Myst’s face.

“Shhh,” Nix murmured. “We’ve already heard the tales of your revenge. They’ll never harm another maid. In fact, I doubt that league of men will ever trouble this coast again.”

“But . . . the girl,” Myst whispered, awash in confusion, tears streaming anew, “is simply *gone*.” The last word was a sob.

“Yes, darling,” Nix said. “Never to return.”

Myst was weeping. “But . . . but it *hurts* when they die.”

Nix pressed her lips to Myst’s forehead, murmuring, “*And they always do.*”

Nikolai’s chest ached with Myst’s sorrow as no physical wound had ever hurt him. She’d run from the men because the ones who would chase a “helpless” maiden were the ones who would die. Nikolai wanted to stay with that memory, to make sure she recovered from this hellish pain, but another familiar dream began. Snow outside, packed so high it covered half of the window. The meeting around the hearth. “. . . *teach her to be all that was good and honorable about the Valkyrie . . .*”

Myst closed her eyes against a memory—the one he’d struggled to see—that she could never erase, never alleviate. She remembered and she vowed again that she would be worthy.

She was in the middle of her first field of battle, there as a Chooser of the Slain. She’d been sent

young, barely fifteen, because she'd been born of a brave Pict who'd plunged a dagger into her own heart. Myst was supposed to be like that.

But she wasn't. Not yet. She was sick with terror.

One hundred thousand men, cut to pieces, blood like a river up to her ankles. "They were all brave," she said, peering around her, dizzily turning in circles as electricity rolled from her in waves. Sounding lost, she whispered, "How am I to choose? A beggar handing out coins . . ." She began trembling uncontrollably with fear.

He wanted to be there to protect her, comfort her.

Another memory. New to him. Could he withstand another?

Myst ran to him when he returned to Blachmount from some errand, and as he'd squeezed her up into his arms and kissed her, she'd thought, "*I just ran to get in his arms. I just . . . Whoa. Whoa. Uhn-uh.*"

Nikolai remembered she'd clambered down from him, looking flushed and panicky, joking about the Xbox, saying she felt "a little like Bobby Brown" for introducing him to the addictive game.

Now he knew why she'd panicked. Myst, along with all her sisters, had been taught that she would know her true partner when he opened his arms and she realized she'd forever run to get within them.

Nikolai woke to his own yelling, thrashing over, clutching for her. Everything he'd thought about her was wrong. His chest hurt with the loss and anguish she'd experienced. "*You're free. Myst . . .*"

The bed was empty.

He shot to his feet, scanning the room, finding a bloody note on the table by the bed, under the cross. *A heart for a heart. . . .*

Dread settled over him, numbing his mind, even as panic was sharp, stabbing at his body like a blade. He half-staggered, half-traced into the study, eyes falling on the safe wall.

To his horror, he saw no safe, but as he neared, growing more sickened, he found blood on the stone that had housed it, clawed away in a frenzy. She'd dug through it to get to her chain, to her

freedom.

Nikolai fell to his knees, head bowed as a guttural sound of pain erupted from his chest. At the first opportunity, he'd offered her torture, only to follow it by stealing her freedom from her.

And then . . .

A heart for a heart. She'd made his beat. Had he broken hers?

He'd lost her. And he'd deserved to.

– 14 –

The coven met around the safe, all of them waiting for Regin to swing the Sword of Wóden to cut through the vampire's mojo-protected metal. Wóden's sword cut through anything. Well, anything but the chain, as Myst and Regin could attest to after one scary experiment that nearly made Myst a good deal shorter.

The sisters were still debating on who would accept the responsibility of the chain because Myst was no longer allowed, not as long as Wroth lived. But no one wanted the thing, and killing that vampire seemed a bingo solution to them.

Regin raised the sword above her, and even the wraiths flying outside that they'd hired to guard Val Hall against intruders—like Wroth—seemed to slow their circling to catch a window. With a dramatic breath, Regin sliced through the safe as easily as powder, though sparks flew. When all was clear, Myst wearily reached forward to collect her torment.

She frowned to find a small, ornate box of wood inside as well. All of her sisters seemed to realize at the same time that it was about the size of those velvet jewelry boxes—because the room went quiet, then they dove for it like a wedding bouquet. “Shiny, in the box, shiny,” one of the younger sisters whimpered. Myst was closest and snagged it, and even if she hadn't been able to, she would've bitch-slapped anyone who made a run with it.

“Open it, then,” Regin cried, out of breath.

Myst did.

And light seemed to blaze from it.

“Great Freya,” someone breathed. “Diamond. Big. Glittery.”

Another said, “That’s not a rock, that’s real estate. When did vampires start coming off with the four C’s? No. Really.”

Myst closed her fingers over what had to be a perfect four-karat diamond, so she could look at the actual ring. It was inscribed with her name.

Suddenly feeling exhausted, she rose, dragging her feet to her room away from the excitement, though they booed her for taking away “My Precious.” The chain was heavy and cold in her other hand.

Nix followed her up. She was a good listener, and even though her lucidity came in erratic spurts, she’d been a boon to talk to.

Myst eyed her sister as she raised the ring. “You didn’t look surprised about this.” Nix’s pupils enlarged at it before Myst tucked it and the chain in her jewelry case. “You knew what was in the safe?”

“I’m not predeterminationally-abled for nothing,” she said as she dug two bottles of fingernail polish and some cotton from her pocket. She hopped on the bed and set them up to paint each other’s toenails, patting the bed for Myst to come sit.

Myst had missed this little ritual, but she had no interest just now. Instead she crossed to the window and said, “Nix, why didn’t you come for me? You knew how to find me.”

“You were fated to spend that time with Wroth.”

Wroth. Who had found her so lacking that he’d needed to change her.

What had he seen that disgusted him so much? She’d wracked her brain for the last three days, but found nothing she’d be truly ashamed of, certainly nothing that would make a vampire *lose his freaking mind*. “He’s out there right now.” Myst stared out into the fog-shrouded yard. “Watching this house, waiting for a chance to take me again. But if I stay behind the wraiths, then I’m just as contained here as I was there.”

“Without the weakness of the chain, you could fight him, yes?” Nix asked. “I even imagine kicking some vampire tail might be good for you.”

A few moments later, Regin popped her head in. “Lucia and I are going out to canoodle ghouls.

You in?”

Myst frowned, then turned to Nix. “Any reason I shouldn’t?”

She bit her lip, staring at the ceiling as if trying to recall a memory when it was just the opposite.

“No, I believe it would be just the thing.”

Myst nodded slowly. “Yeah, I think I could use a little goo.”

Regin beamed, then bounded across the landing to scream downstairs, “Myst is back online!”

Ready to fight, needing it, she quickly dressed as Nix did a buff-job on her neglected sword.

Myst had no doubt Wroth would be out there watching her and that she would sense him every hour.

How long would he follow his “tarnished” Bride? she wondered, but she knew the answer, had felt the wild emotion roiling within him.

He’d follow forever.

* * *

Nikolai crept among the shadows as Myst split up from Regin and Lucia at a sprawling cemetery.

Myst easily vaulted to the top of a mausoleum to observe the field below her, where ghouls snapped and clashed against each other or lazed in the dampness of the night.

He was spellbound, watching as she rested on the edge of the roof, eyes swirling silver, claws curling into the clay tile, perched down as a gargoyle might. She was clearly eager for the kill but waited, studying them. This was the first time he’d seen her in days.

After Nikolai had found her gone from Blachmount, he’d traced to her eerie home, but found it had just gotten eerier. Ghostly, howling creatures in ragged red cloth circled the manor like a tornado.

He’d shrugged and traced to her room, but the things caught him. They had a grip he couldn’t have imagined, and when he’d finally landed, his lesson had been learned. He rotated his arm, pleased he’d finally been able to force it back into its socket.

Those beings circled the house to protect it, and did so without cease and without fail, as he could well attest to. But the sentinel that protected Myst from threats like Ivo kept Nikolai from her as well. Myst stayed behind them for night upon night, yet now he’d finally found her outside of their protection, no doubt waiting for her sisters to return so they could attack.

But dawn was coming soon and he needed to—

She leapt from the roof, drawing her sword from her back sheath as she dropped into the middle of the group of ghouls. There were at least fifty of them.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he bellowed, tracing to her side, unsheathing his own sword.

“This isn’t happening,” she said to herself. “You’re not going to ruin my personal life *and* my fast-track career, Wroth.”

“But in the middle?”

“I’m enraged enough to do this. You have no idea”—she struck out, slicing a ghoul from crotch to neck—“how much I need this.”

“I do have an idea.” A perfect one. He’d felt her rage and her need to fight from inside him. And yet he’d told her that as his wife she would never again fight.

“You had better leave, because once I finish with them, I won’t stop there.”

“I deserve your anger. I’ve wronged you and seek to make amends.” He wasn’t optimistic about his chances for that. She couldn’t be all things to him already and then forgiving on top of that.

“You think?” When one ghoul’s claw came close to his neck, he leapt back and she snapped, “Don’t let them scratch you!”

“Concerned for me, Myst?” He didn’t dare hope.

“Of course I don’t want you to get scratched.” She eyed him. “Vampires are easier to kill.”

“If I help you will you speak with me?”

“Don’t need your help.” And she didn’t. She was merrily felling them one after another with a skill that awed him, her sword flying so fast it was a barely visible.

“Then you’ll have to listen here,” he grated, digging into the fight with her. “I’d had five years of torment. I’d had a hell of wanting you and feared you would leave me at the first opportunity. Then I had dreams of your memories.”

These ghouls were irritating him, especially when they got between him and Myst while he was trying to convince her about something so critical. He began killing them more quickly. “In each one you were evil . . . a seductress.”

“Still am, Wroth.” She kicked a ghoul in the belly, freeing her sword from his chest.

“No you’re not—”

“Duck!” Her sword whistled over his head to decapitate a ghoul behind him. “Yeah, well, as I recall, every sunset I asked you about your dreams and you brushed away my concerns.”

He slew two with one sword thrust. “I know. I should have asked you, because all those excruciating scenes of you . . . doing things were all out of context.” When the largest ghoul out there howled and attacked him, Nikolai stabbed the thing in the face, dropping it. She raised her eyebrows as if impressed, then scowled, remembering herself.

“Myst, even then I was still falling for you.”

That at least got her to pause. She blew a curl out of her eyes and just when he tensed to trace behind her, she took two hands and plunged her sword back along her side to kill the ghoul at her back.

Now he raised his eyebrows, but continued, “I was angry when I saw your plan to trick me, but I finally understand that you rightly wanted your freedom back. I know what and who you are now. I saw all the memories, clearly at last. Not out of context.” Goddamn it, more ghouls? “Myst, can we not just speak about this? Away from here? Dawn nears and all I ask is for a chance to—”

“I gave you a chance. Freely. And you threw it away. You were about to brainwash me.”

With one hand, he carved at a ghoul. “I couldn’t have lived with myself for that. I was wrong in many ways. I took your freedom when you needed it, and I hurt you just when you’d given yourself to me.” Never had he regretted his actions so much.

He could have *won* her. *A heart for a heart.*

“I wanted you so badly I resorted to anything I could and treated you ill when you didn’t deserve it,” he said with a glance around. He’d been so intent on her, he’d scarcely noticed they’d cut such a swath that the others had run. “If you give me a chance, I will make it up to you.”

“Oh, you got it, Wroth. Just let me go gift wrap my chain for you.”

* * *

Wroth’s eyes flickered black and his voice went low. “I’d destroy the thing if I saw it.”

His reaction surprised her. “You’ll certainly never get within arm’s reach of it.”

“Myst, I felt your feelings for me, felt you struggling against them. I know you care for me.”

Long moments passed as they stared into each other's eyes.

She was weak, undeserving of her family, she knew, especially when her heart had leapt at the sight of him. But she shook her head. "I can't. It's just too late. I have a lot to lose from this. I won't hurt my family by accepting you."

"Kristoff seeks peace. He would fight the Horde with you. There would be no conflict with them. And I would . . . make an effort with your sisters, Myst. I know how important they are to you now. Believe me, I know."

She tapped her chin. "So you can see why the idea of being forced to forget them made me cranky? Huh? And what if you saw more out of context? This would just happen again and again."

"I would not drink from you."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, just like I'm going to finally beat my Xbox addiction."

"I'm pleased you feel the same about that option. I've already vowed never to use the information to harm the Valkyrie in any way. And I would have to tell you everything I was thinking as if you could read my mind as well. We are wed. We *should* know each other's secrets. Myst, we are kindred."

That made her hesitate. She'd felt that way too. Kindred.

What the hell was she thinking? He'd been about to brainwash her.

Making her voice firm, she said, "Wroth, I'm sorry, but I could never trust you—" Her words were cut off by a massive arm squeezing the breath from her throat. Not a ghoul. *A demon?* she thought wildly. *A turned demon?*

Wroth raised his sword, a savage, killing look in his eyes, but the arm tightened and he froze.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Ivo said as he sauntered to the front of his gang of vampires. "He'll snap her head right from her neck." Ivo's red gaze flickered over her. "Now Myst, I thought I told you to wait in my dungeon." To the demon, he said, "She's not the one."

He narrowed his eyes at Wroth. "So you're the turned human who took my castle from me. Grenades? Guns? I'll kill you just for bastardizing our war." He glanced from Wroth to Myst then back again, smiling to see Wroth's body seeming to vibrate with tension. "I believe I have something he wants very badly indeed. I'll take his life in exchange."

The demon held her neck tight in his grip. She struggled against him until she could breathe, but he was unbelievably powerful. He was a turned demon, supposed to be a true myth. Apparently, the Horde had just upped their game. She'd known he'd been up to something. . . .

Wroth could trace away in a heartbeat. They couldn't get him, unless they had her. Wroth's eyes were assessing, and she could see him studying the situation.

"You walk into the sun, and I'll vow to the Lore that I'll free her," Ivo said. "I'll hunt her again, but for this dawn I vow that she'll live. If you trace instead, I'll take her back to Helvita and dine on her perfect flesh every night for eternity."

"Fight me, coward," Wroth bit out, his eyes black with rage, his muscles tense and knotted with it.

"Why would I do that?" Ivo sounded confused. "Fight you for the cards I already hold?"

Wroth was so big and powerful, and yet that strength was useless to him now because they wouldn't fight. She could feel frustration roiling from him in waves.

"You know we've got the power here. And you know my vow will compel me to release her."

She'd seen Wroth examining the situation and recognized the exact moment he determined his options. A calm seemed to wash over him.

"Your life for hers, Wroth?"

One tight nod. "Done." No hesitation. "It is done."

"Catch and release?" Myst sneered to Ivo as he and his gang traced back into the shade to ready for the dawn. Birdsong had begun. "Are you kidding me?" To Wroth, she said, "Are you eager to be ash?"

The sunlight hit the tops of the trees, descending inch by torturing inch. He stood sure and so brave, as if he was proud to make this ultimate sacrifice.

The morning breeze blew his hair from his face. His eyes were riveted to hers.

The sunlight was inches away from him, almost reaching the moss of the great oaks that buckled the feet of the mausoleums. Now *she* felt frustration as she'd never known. "Wroth, don't be stupid."

In a low, steady tone, he said, "I love you, Myst."

Feeling erupted in her chest to answer his words. Yes, he'd wronged her, and yes, he was a

vampire, but . . .

The light hit him. He did not close his eyes to the extreme brightness that would have hurt even her eyes.

And she knew it was because he wanted to see her longer.

Soon the intensity of the sun was too great; he fell to his knees, his hands curling in agonizing pain. He opened his eyes once more. Glowing, bare. A last look.

He's going to die.

They always do.

Just . . . gone.

"No." Saying the word out loud was like blasting a mountain to free an avalanche. An immortal like him didn't have to die. He could stay with her. "No, no, *no*."

"*Milaya*, don't fight," he bit out. "It is done."

The demon holding her smelled of rotting flesh. The cowardly gang of vampires smirked at Wroth's death when Wroth was so much greater than they. How dare they?

She'd waited millennia to love—she'd waited for *him*—and they dared take him from her. From Myst the Coveted. She screamed long and loud with the shriek her kind was known for. The one that preceded death. The demon cursed and fought to snap her neck, but her muscles had lain in perfect concert and alignment to prevent it.

Wroth struggled toward her, trying to get to her even as he burned as though from the inside. Battling to save her as he *died*.

He was hers.

She freed her arms and raised them up. Lightning leapt to enter her grasp and filled her body. That they would *dare* . . .

The two holding her were blown from her, percussive thunder exploding them from within. Her hand shot down to collect one's sword just as he was cast into the light.

She struck out, slashing and clawing at the others with the rare gift of direct lightning from the Sleeping Ones pouring strength into her. She cut through the number, barely flinching when her arm was broken and the butt of a sword cracked her cheekbone. *Don't look through that eye, switch*

hands. She cut a swath to Ivo, who alone remained.

“And here I thought you were merely the pretty one.” With a mock bow, the coward traced.

Arm shattered, face beaten to a pulp, she flew to Wroth. She vainly tried to cover him, dragging him into the cool shade even as she bit her wrist open for him to drink. He was unconscious, his body twisting in pain, his skin looking like lava burned within him.

“Seems like we missed the party,” Regin said as she and Lucia strolled over to Myst. “Why does Myst get to kill all the vampires? No. Really. This was just supposed to be ghouls.”

“Myst, what are you doing? We heard your scream and thought it was something *important*,” Lucia said. She waved a dismissive hand at Wroth’s writhing form, clearly unable to comprehend why Myst was frantically dragging him with one arm while shoving her gashed wrist at his lips. “The being dies. Leave him.”

Regin added, “Oh for Freya’s sake, Myst. He’s a vampire. Let him fricassee.”

Myst shrieked and snapped her teeth at her sisters. Then she screamed two words she’d never uttered in her entire life—

“Help me.”

– 15 –

Nikolai woke to wetness on his chest.

He was in a bed? With silky hair tumbling over his arm. “Myst?” he rasped. When he opened his eyes, he realized she was crying over him. Impossible.

Her head shot up, and she gave him a watery smile that quickly faded. She slapped him, a hard, cracking blow. Then she leapt on him, nuzzling, squeezing, as if she couldn’t get close enough to him, as if she wanted *in* him.

“Don’t you ever do anything so stupid again.” She slapped at his chest, which he was surprised to find was healed.

He flexed and tensed his muscles throughout. He was bandaged in places, but he had all his limbs. This was good. Now if he could just get his wife to cease slapping him. “If you do not stop, *milaya*, we will have words.”

So she turned to kissing him again with whispers in his ear and tears dropping to his face, each one like a gift. “You’ve been out for five nights. And you wouldn’t *wake the hell up*.”

“Where are we?”

“In Val Hall.”

He stiffened.

“No, you’re safe.” She leaned back and raised an eyebrow. “Do you think I would just let my sisters fall on you like a carcass?”

He winced at the image. “Can’t wait to meet them all. How did you get away?”

“Ivo traced, but Lucia and Regin are on his trail.”

“I’m just glad I was there to save you,” Nikolai said solemnly, making her grin. “Did you kill the turned demon?”

“The lightning and I did.”

He remembered then. She’d been hit directly, hair whipping, eyes silver, the most awing sight he’d ever witnessed. “I *saw* you get struck.” His voice went low. “You smiled.”

“It feels good. It’s very rare to get a direct hit—”

Outside, something, some male, howled with fury. Nikolai tensed to trace her away.

“Oh, don’t worry. Just another crazy day at the manor.” She waved away his tension. “A Lykae nabbed little Emmaline and took her back to Scotland—thinks she’s his werewolf queen or something.”

“Werewolf queen?”

“Uh-huh. So Lucia trapped the Lykae’s brother for leverage, but apparently he’s proving most uncooperative. Anyway, if you knew Em you’d see how ridiculous the idea is. She’s terrified of her own shadow, much less a roaring Lykae’s unique . . . appetites.”

He’d have to ask her about that later. “She’s the halfling—the one that’s part vampire.” When her brows drew together he rushed to assure her, “I will never tell Kristoff about her, but I suspect that Ivo’s searching for her.”

“They know. They’d already sent a retrieval party after her, and once they bring her back, she’ll be safe here. The wraiths will shut out any threat.” One flew by the window at that moment cackling to punctuate her statement.

He raised his eyebrows and when she grinned, he cupped her face with a bandaged hand. “I love you.”

“I know.”

“Could you . . . could you feel the same way? Before you answer, I want you to know that I meant what I said. I am sorry for forcing you to stay and for losing my head. I will always be shamed by my actions.”

“Wroth, I wanted to stay with you after, oh—*about a day!* I’d planned to play you, but realized early that I was falling in love with you.”

He hadn’t heard her correctly. Yes, she’d been upset over his injuries, but that didn’t mean she *loved* him. “You’re saying you love me too?”

She nibbled her lip and nodded. “I’d always had a crush on you, you know.”

When he frowned, she said, “I used to adore hearing tales about you. And was saddened when we’d heard you’d died. Then to meet you in person?” She blushed a little. “I found that you lived up to my fantasy of you.”

He was bewildered to hear this from his fierce, stunningly beautiful wife. In a gravelly voice, he spoke an utter understatement, “That gives my ego a bit of a boost coming from you.”

Her lips curled. “Among other things, the uncommon gift of a direct strike of lightning, *and* the fact that you were the only man able to free me from my chain, *and* the fact that you were so sodding eager to give up your life for mine—though mind you, if you try that again, I’m going to kill you—have all convinced me that we should be together.”

“Always, Myst. I’d do it easily.” When she was about to protest, he asked, “What about your family? I will try if they will.”

“For all the reasons I just listed, a couple of my sisters have decided they’ll try to overcome their repugnance of you.”

He scowled at that. “Big-minded of them.”

“Yet they want nothing to do with Kristoff or any among your order. You’re the exception because they felt like they knew you as a human and because of what has happened between us. But if, say, your brother showed up here, they’d . . . it would be . . . bad.”

“I understand.”

“If you can make a genuine effort, I believe they will all come to accept you in time.”

He wanted to be clear on this. “Accept you as my wife and me as your husband?” He wanted everything from her. Not just a few decades. He wanted forever. And as long as she was in a giving mood . . .

She nodded, a smile playing about her pink lips. “We still have a lot to muddle through, mind

you. Our families and our factions, and who controls the remote, and living logistics—because Blachmount needs TLC *and* lightning rods in a bad way. But I suppose I have to take possession of you, since I’ve already taken possession of my engagement ring.”

He grinned. “You liked that, did you?”

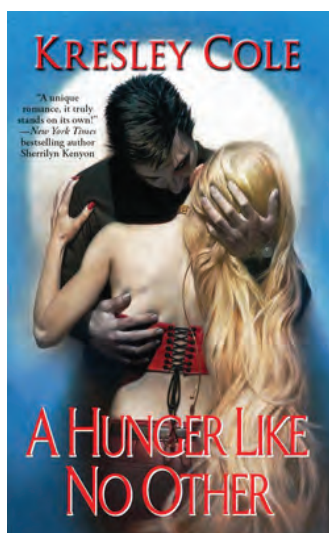
“I couldn’t take my eyes off of it,” she said with a saucy smile.

He clasped her to him and pulled her close, knowing she craved being wrapped tight and secure in his arms as much as he needed her soft and trusting within them. “I can’t quite believe this. Even after everything?” If she could give him another chance, Nikolai thought they could do anything together.

“Yes. But . . .” She stroked the smooth backs of her claws down his arm. “You’ll have to spend eternity making it up to me.”

He released her to lever himself above her, cupping the back of her neck. His gaze flickered over her face, then met the eyes of his wife as she smiled up at him. Feeling love for her so strong it hurt him, his voice ragged with it, he rasped, “*Milaya*, it is done.”

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Excerpt from
A HUNGER LIKE NO OTHER

Prologue

Sometimes the fire that licks the skin from his bones dies down.

It is *his* fire. In a recess of his mind still capable of rational thought, he believes this. His fire because he's fed it for centuries with his destroyed body and decaying soul.

Long ago—and who knows how much time has toiled past—the Vampire Horde trapped him in these catacombs deep beneath Paris. He stands chained against a rock, pinned at two places on each limb and once around his neck. Before him—an opening into hell that spews fire.

Here he waits and suffers, offered to a column of fire that may weaken but is never-ending—never-ending, just like his life. His existence is to burn to death repeatedly, only to have his dogged immortality revive him again.

Detailed fantasies of retribution have gotten him this far; nursing the rage in his heart is all he has.

Until her.

Over the centuries, he has sometimes heard uncanny new things in the streets above, occasionally smelled Paris changing seasons. But now he has scented her, his mate, the one woman made for him alone.

The one woman he'd searched for without cease for a thousand years—up until the day of his

capture.

The flames have ebbed. At this moment, she lingers somewhere above. It is enough. One arm strains against its bonds until the thick metal cuts into his skin. Blood drips, then pours. Every muscle in his weakened body works in concert, striving to do what he's never been able to for an eternity before. For her, he can do this. He must. . . . His yell turns to a choking cough as he rips two bonds free.

He doesn't have time to disbelieve what he's accomplished. She is so close, he can almost feel her. *Need her.* Another arm wrenches free.

With both hands he clenches the metal biting into his neck, vaguely remembering the day the thick, long pin was hammered into place. He knows its two ends are embedded at least three feet down. His strength is waning, but nothing will stop him when she's so close. In a rush of rock and dust, the metal comes loose, the recoil making him fling it across the cavernous space.

He yanks at the bond wrapped tight around his thigh. He wrests it and the one at his ankle free, then begins on the last two holding his other leg. Already envisioning his escape, not even glancing down, he pulls. Nothing. Brows drawn in confusion, he tries again. Straining, groaning with desperation. Nothing.

Her scent is fading—*there is no time*. He pitilessly regards his trapped leg. Imagining how he can bury himself in her and forget the pain, he reaches above his knee with shaking hands. Yearning for that oblivion within her, he attempts to crack the bone. His weakness ensures that this takes half a dozen tries.

His claws slice his skin and muscle, but the nerve running the length of his femur is taut as a piano wire. When he even nears it, unimaginable pain stabs up its length and explodes in his upper body, making his vision go black.

Too weak. Bleeding too freely. The fire will build again soon. The vampires return periodically. Will he lose her just when he's found her?

"*Never,*" he grates. He surrenders himself to the beast spirit inside him, the beast that will take its freedom with its teeth, drink water from the gutters and scavenge refuse to survive. He sees the frenzied amputation as though watching a misery from a distance.

Crawling from his torture, abandoning his leg, he pulls himself through the shadows of the dank catacombs until he spies a passageway. Ever watchful for his enemies, he creeps through the bones littering the floor to reach it. He has no idea how far it is to escape, but he finds his way—and the strength—by following her scent. He regrets the pain he will give her. She will be so connected to him, she'll feel his suffering and horror as her own.

It can't be helped. He is escaping. Doing his part. Can she save him from his memories when his skin still burns?

He finally inches his way to the surface, then into a darkened alley. But her scent has faltered.

Fate has given her to him when he needs her most, and God help him—and *this city*—if he can't find her. His brutality had been legendary, and he will unleash it without measure for her.

He fights to sit up against a wall. Clawing tracks into the brick street, he struggles to calm his ragged breaths so he can scent her once more.

Need her. Bury myself in her. Waited so long. . . .

Her scent is gone.

His eyes go wet and he shudders violently at the loss. An anguished roar makes the city tremble.

– 1 –

One week later . . .

On an island in the Seine, against the nighttime backdrop of an ageless cathedral, the denizens of Paris came out to play. Emmaline Troy wound around fire-eaters, pick-pockets, and *chanteurs de rue*. She meandered through the tribes of black-clad Goths who swarmed Notre Dame like it was the Gothic mother ship calling them home. And still she attracted attention.

The human males she passed turned their heads slowly to regard her, frowns in place, sensing something, but unsure. Probably some genetic memory from long ago that signaled her as their wildest fantasy or their darkest nightmare.

Emma was neither.

She was a co-ed—a recent Tulane grad—alone in Paris and hungry. Weary from another failed search for blood, she sank onto a rustic bench beneath a chestnut tree, eyes riveted to a waitress drawing espresso at a café. If only blood poured so easily, Emma thought. Yes, if it came warm and rich from a bottomless tap, then her stomach wouldn't be clenched in hunger at the mere idea.

Starving in Paris. And friendless. Was there ever such a predicament?

Couples strolling hand in hand along the gravel walk seemed to mock her loneliness. Was it just her, or did lovers look more adoringly at each other in this city? Especially in the springtime.

Die, bastards.

She sighed. It wasn't their fault that they were bastards who should die.

She'd been spurred to enter this fray by the prospect of her echoing hotel room and the idea

that she might find another blood pusher in the City of Light. Her former hookup had gone south—literally—fleeing Paris for Ibiza. He’d given little explanation for abandoning his job, saying only that with the “arrival of the risen king,” some “serious epic shit” was brewing in “gay Paree.” Whatever that meant.

As a vampire, she was a member of the Lore, that stratum of beings who’d convinced humans they existed only in imagination. Yet though the Lore was thick here, Emma had been unable to replace her pusher. Any creatures she could scout out to ask fled her solely because she was a vampire. They scurried without knowing that she wasn’t even a full-blooded one, nor that Emma was a wuss who’d never bitten another living being. As her fierce adoptive aunts loved to tell everyone, “Emma cries her pink tears if she dusts a moth’s wings.”

Emma had accomplished nothing during this trip that she’d insisted on taking. Her quest to uncover information about her deceased parents—her Valkyrie mother and her unknown vampire father—was a failure. A failure that would culminate in a call to her aunts to get them to retrieve her. Because she couldn’t feed herself. Pitiful. She sighed. She’d be razzed about this for another seventy years—

She heard a crash, and before she even had time to feel bad for the waitress getting docked, another crash and then another followed. She tilted her head in curiosity—just as a table umbrella across the walk shot fifteen feet up to be batted high in the sky, fluttering all the way to the Seine. A cruise boat honked and Gallic curses erupted.

Half-lit by the walk’s torchlights, a towering man turned over café tables, artists’ easels, and book stands selling century-old pornography. Tourists screamed and fled in the wake of destruction. Emma shot to her feet with a gasp, looping her satchel over her shoulder.

He was cutting a path directly to her, his black trench coat trailing behind him. His size and his unnaturally fluid movements made her wonder if he could possibly be human. His hair was thick and long, concealing half his face, and several days’ growth of beard shadowed his jaw.

He pointed a shaking hand at her. “*You*,” he growled.

She jerked glances over both of her shoulders looking for the unfortunate *you* he was addressing. Her. Holy shite, this madman had settled on her.

He turned his palm up and beckoned her to come to him—as if he was confident she would.

“Uh, I-I don’t know you,” she squeaked, trying to back up, but her legs immediately met the bench.

He continued stalking her, ignoring the tables between them, tossing them aside like toys instead of varying his direct pursuit of her. Furious intent burned in his pale blue eyes. She could sense his rage more sharply as he neared, unsettling her, because her kind were considered the predators in the night—never the prey. And because, at heart, she was a coward.

“*Come.*” He bit out the word as though with difficulty and motioned for her again.

Eyes wide, she shook her head, then leapt backward over the bench, twisting in the air. She landed facing away from him and began speeding down the quay. She was weak, more than two days without blood, but terror made her quick as she crossed the Archevêché Bridge to exit the island.

Three . . . four blocks covered. She chanced a look behind her. Didn’t see him. Had she lost him—? Sudden glaring music from her purse made her cry out.

Who in the hell had programmed the Crazy Frog ring tone into her cell phone? Her eyes narrowed. Aunt Regin. The world’s most immature immortal, who looked like a siren and behaved like a frat pledge.

Cell phones in their coven were for dire emergency only. Ringers would disturb their hunting in the back alleys of New Orleans, and even a vibration would be enough to trigger a twitching ear in a low creature.

She flipped it open. Speak of the devil: Regin the Radiant.

“Little busy right now,” Emma snapped, taking another peek over her shoulder.

“Drop your things. Don’t take time to pack. Annika wants you at the executive airport immediately. *You’re in danger.*”

“Duh.”

Click. That wasn’t a warning—that was narration.

She’d ask the details once she was on the plane. As if she’d needed a reason to return home. Just the mention of danger and she would scamper back to her coven, to her Valkyrie aunts who would

kill anything that threatened her and keep malice at bay.

As she tried to remember her way to the airport where she'd landed, the rain started to fall, warm and light at first—April lovers still laughing as they ran under awnings—but swiftly turning to pounding cold. She came to a crowded avenue, feeling safer as she wound through traffic. She dodged cars with their wipers and horns going full-force. She didn't see her pursuer.

With only the satchel slung around her neck, she traveled quickly, miles passing beneath her feet before she spied an open park and then the airfield just beyond it. She could see the diffused air around the jet engines as they warmed, could see the shades on every window already drawn tight. Almost there.

Emma convinced herself she'd lost him, because she *was* fast. She was also adept at convincing herself of things that might not be—good at pretending. She could pretend she took classes at night by choice, and that blushing didn't make her thirsty—

A vicious growl sounded. Her eyes widened, but she didn't turn back, just sprinted across the field. She felt claws sink into her ankle a second before she was dragged to the muddy ground and thrown onto her back. A hand covered her mouth, though she'd been trained not to scream.

"Never run from one such as me." Her attacker didn't sound human. "You will no' get away. *And we like it.*" His voice was guttural like a beast's, breaking, yet his accent was . . . Scottish?

As she peered up at him through the rain, he examined her with eyes that were golden in color one moment, then flickering that eerie blue the next. No, not human.

Up close, she could see his features were even, masculine. A strong chin and jaw complemented the chiseled planes. He was beautiful, so much so that she thought he had to be a fallen angel. Possible. How could *she* rule out anything?

The hand that had been covering her mouth roughly grasped her chin. He narrowed his eyes, focusing on her lips—on her barely noticeable fangs. "*No*," he choked out. "No' possible. . . ." He yanked her head side to side, running his face down her neck, smelling her, then growled in fury, "*Goddamn you.*"

When his eyes turned blue sharply, she cried out, her breath seeming to leave her body.

"Can you trace?" he grated as though speech was difficult. "Answer me!"

She shook her head, uncomprehending. Tracing was how vampires teleported, disappearing and reappearing in thin air. *Then he knows I'm a vampire?*

"Can you?"

"N-no." She'd never been strong or skilled enough. "Please." She blinked against the rain, pleading with her eyes. "You have the wrong woman."

"Think I'd know you. Make sure, if you insist." He raised a hand—to touch her? Strike her? She fought, hissing desperately.

A callused palm grasped her nape, his other hand clenching her wrists as he bent down to her neck. Her body jerked from the feel of his tongue against her skin. His mouth was hot in the chill, wet air, making her shudder until her muscles knotted. He groaned while kissing her, his hand squeezing her wrists hard. Below her skirt, drops of rain tracked down her thighs, shocking her with cold.

"Don't do this! *Please . . .*" When her last word ended with a whimper, he seemed to come out of a trance, his brows drawing together as his eyes met hers, but he didn't release her hands.

He flicked his claw down her blouse and sliced it and the flimsy bra beneath open, then slowly brushed the halves past her breasts. She struggled, but it was useless against his strength. He studied her with a greedy gaze as rain splattered down, stinging her naked breasts. She was shivering uncontrollably.

His pain was so sharp it nauseated her. He could take her or he could tear open her unprotected belly and kill her. . . .

Instead he ripped open his own shirt, then placed his huge palms against her back to draw her to his chest. He groaned when their skin touched, and electricity seemed to flash through her. Lightning split the sky.

He rumbled foreign words against her ear. She felt they were . . . *tender* words—making her think she'd lost her mind. She went limp, her arms hanging while he shuddered against her, his lips so hot in the pouring rain as he ran them down her neck, across her face, even brushing them over her eyelids. There he knelt, clutching her; there she lay, boneless and dazed, as she watched the lightning slash above them.

His hand cradled the back of her head as he moved her to face him.

He seemed torn as he watched her with some fierce emotion—she'd never been looked at so . . . consumingly. Confusion overwhelmed her. Would he attack or let her go? *Let me go. . . .*

A tear slipped down her face, warmth streaking down amidst the drops of rain.

The look disappeared. "*Blood for tears?*" he roared, clearly revolted by her pink tears. He turned away as if he couldn't stand to look upon her, then blindly swatted at her shirt to close it. "Take me to your home, vampire."

"I-I don't live here," she said in a strangled tone, staggered by what had just occurred, and by the fact that he knew what she was.

"Take me to where you stay," he ordered, finally facing her as he stood before her.

"No," she amazed herself by saying.

He, too, looked surprised. "Because you doona want me to stop? Good. I'll take you here on the grass on your hands and knees"—he lifted her easily until she was kneeling—"till well after the sun rises."

He must have seen her resignation because he hauled her to her feet and pushed at her to get her moving. "Who stays with you?"

My husband, she wanted to snap. *The linebacker who's going to kick your ass*. Yet she couldn't lie, even now, and never would have had the nerve to provoke him anyway. "I am alone."

"Your man lets you travel by yourself?" he asked over the downpour. His voice was beginning to sound human again. When she didn't answer, he said with a sneer, "You've a careless male for yourself. His loss."

She stumbled in a pothole and he gently steadied her, then seemed angry with himself that he'd helped her. But when he led them in front of a car a moment later, he threw her out of the way, leaping back at the sound of the horn. He swiped at the side of the car, claws crumpling the metal like tinfoil, sending it skidding. When it finally stopped, the engine block dropped to the street with a thud. The driver threw open the door, dived for the street, then darted away.

Mouth open in shock, she frantically scrambled backward, realizing her captor looked as though he'd . . . *never seen a car*.

He crossed to her, looming over her. In a low, deadly tone, he grated, “I only hope you run from me again.”

He snatched her hand and again lifted her to her feet. “How much farther?”

With a limp finger, she pointed out the Crillon on Place de la Concorde.

He gave her a look of pure hatred. “Your kind always had money.” His tone was scathing. “Nothing’s changed.” He knew she was a vampire. Did he know who or what her aunts were? He must—otherwise how could Regin have known to warn her about him? How could he know her coven was well-off?

After ten minutes of her being dragged across avenues, they pushed past the doorman of the hotel, garnering stares as they entered the palatial lobby. At least the lights were dimmed. She pulled her soaked jacket over her ruined blouse and kept her head down, thankful that she’d braided her hair over her ears.

He released the vise-grip on her arm in front of these people. He must know that she wouldn’t attract attention. *Never scream, never draw the attention of humans.* They were always more dangerous in the end than any of the thousands of creatures of the Lore.

When he draped his heavy arm across her shoulders as if they were together, she glanced up at him from under a wet lock of hair. Though he walked with his broad shoulders back, like he owned this place, he was examining everything as if it was new to him. The phone ringing made him tense. The revolving doors had done the same. Though he hid it well, she could tell he was unfamiliar with the elevator and hesitated to enter. Inside the lift, his size and his energy made the generous space seem cramped.

The short walk down the hall to her room was the longest of her life, as she devised and rejected plan after plan of escape. She hesitated outside the door, taking her time retrieving the key card from the inch-deep puddle in the bottom of her purse.

“Key,” he demanded.

With a deep exhalation, she handed it to him. When his eyes narrowed, she thought he was about to demand “key” again, but he studied the door lever and gave it back to her. “You do it.”

With a shaking hand, she slid it in. The mechanized buzz and then the click of the lock were

like knells to her.

Once inside her room, he checked every inch of it as though to make sure she was in fact alone. He searched under the brocade-covered bed, then tore back the heavy silk drapes to reveal one of the best views in Paris. He moved like an animal, with aggression at every turn, though she'd noticed he favored one leg.

When he slowly limped to her in the hallway, her eyes widened and she eased backward. Still he continued toward her, studying her, weighing . . . before his gaze settled on her lips.

"I've waited a long time for you."

He continued to behave as if he knew her. She would *never* forget a man like him.

"I need you. No matter what you are. And I'll wait no longer."

At his baffling words, her body inexplicably softened, relaxing. Her claws curled as if to clutch him to her, and her fangs receded to ready for his kiss. Frantic, she rapped her nails against the wall behind her and tapped her tongue against her left fang. Her defenses remained dormant. She was terrified of him. Why wasn't her body?

He placed his hands against the wall on each side of her face. Unhurriedly, he leaned in, brushing his mouth against hers. He groaned from the small contact and pressed harder, flicking her lips with his tongue. She froze, not knowing what to do.

Against her mouth, he growled, "Kiss me back, witch, while I decide if I should spare your life."

With a cry, she moved her lips against his. When he stilled completely as if to force her to do all the work, she slanted her head and brushed his lips lightly again.

"Kiss me like you want to live."

She did. Not because she wanted to live overmuch, but because she thought he would make sure her death was slow and torturing. *No pain. Never pain.*

When she darted her tongue against his as he had done to her, he groaned and took over, cupping her neck and head so he could hold her as though for the taking. His tongue stroked hers desperately, and she was shocked to find it was . . . not unpleasant. How many times had she dreamed about her first kiss, even knowing she would never receive one? But she was. Now.

She didn't even know his name.

When she began shivering again, he stopped and broke away. "You're cold."

She was freezing. Being low on blood did that to her. Being tackled into the wet earth and soaked through hadn't helped. But she feared that wasn't why she shivered. "Y-yes."

He raked his gaze over her, then gave her a disgusted look. "And filthy. Mud all over you."

"But you. . ." She trailed off under his lethal glare.

He found the bathroom, yanked her inside, then tilted his head at the fixtures. "Clean yourself."

"P-privacy?" she croaked.

Amusement. "You have none." He leaned his shoulder against the wall and crossed his muscled arms, as if awaiting a show. "Now, undress for me and let me see what's mine."

Mine? Bewildered, she was about to protest again, but he jerked his head up as though he'd heard something, then bolted out of the room. She slammed the bathroom door, locking herself in—another laughable gesture—then turned on the shower.

She sank down on the floor, head in her hands, and wondered how she would get away from this lunatic. The Crillon boasted foot-thick walls between the rooms—a rock band had stayed next door to her and *she'd never heard them*. Of course, she didn't envision calling for anyone—*never scream for a human's help*—but she was contemplating digging her way out through the bathroom wall.

Soundproof walls, ten floors up. The luxurious room that had been a haven, protecting her from the sun and nosy humans, was now a gilded cage. She was trapped by some being, and Freya only knew what.

How could she get away when she had no one to help her?

– 2 –

Lachlain heard a scarcely squeaking wheel, smelled meat, and limped for the room's door. In the hallway, an old man pushing a cart yelped with fright at the sight of him, then stared wordlessly as Lachlain snatched two covered plates from the cart.

Lachlain kicked the door closed. Found steaks and devoured them. Then pounded a hole in the wall at a sharp memory.

Flexing his now bleeding fingers, he sat on the edge of the strange bed, in a strange place and time. He was weary and his leg pained him after running the vampire down. He pulled up his stolen pants and inspected his regenerating leg. The flesh was sunken and wasted.

He tried to push away memories of that loss. But what other recent memories did he have? Only those of being burned to death repeatedly. *For what he now knew had been a hundred and fifty years. . . .*

He shuddered, sweating, and retched between his knees, but kept himself from vomiting the food he needed so badly. Instead, he ripped his claws through a table by the bed, just preventing himself from destroying everything in sight.

In the last week since his escape, he would be doing well, focusing on his hunt for her and his recovery, seeming to acclimate; then something would put him in a rage. He'd broken into a manor to steal clothes—then destroyed everything inside. Anything he didn't recognize and understand, destroyed.

Tonight, he'd been weak, thinking unclearly, his leg still regenerating, and still he'd gone to his

knees when he'd finally picked up her scent once more.

But instead of the mate he'd expected, he'd found a *vampire*. A small, fragile female vampire. He'd hadn't heard of a female being alive in centuries. The males must have been secretive about them, cloistering them all these years. Apparently the Horde hadn't killed off all of their own women, as the Lore told.

And Christ help him, his instincts still said this pale-haired, ethereal creature was . . . his.

The Instinct screamed inside him to touch her, to claim her. He'd waited for so long . . .

He put his head in his hands, trying not to lash out again—to get the beast back in its cage. But how could fate rob him once more? For more than a thousand years, he'd searched for her.

And he'd found her in what he despised with a hatred so virulent he couldn't control it.

A vampire. The way she existed disgusted him. Her weakness disgusted him. Her pale body was too small, too thin, and looked like she'd break with her first stiff fucking.

He'd waited a millennium for a helpless parasite.

He heard the squeaking wheel, going much faster past his door, but his hunger was sated for the first time since the ordeal began. With food like tonight's, he would shake off any physical trace of the torture. But his mind . . .

He'd been with the female for an hour. Yet it had been an hour during which he'd only had to push the beast back twice. Which was a considerable improvement, since his entire existence was of constant bleakness interrupted only by sharp rages. Everyone said a Lykæ's mate could soothe his any woe—if she really was his, she had her bloody work cut out for her.

She couldn't be. He must be delusional. He seized on that idea. The last thing he'd regretted before they forced him to the fire was that he'd never found her. Perhaps this was a damaged mind playing tricks. Of course, that was it. He'd always pictured his mate as a buxom redheaded lass with wolverine blood who could handle his lusts, who would revel in the raw ferocity with him—not this fearful wisp of a *vampire*. Damaged mind. Of course.

He limped to the door to the bathing chamber and found it locked. He shook his head as he broke the knob easily, then entered a room so thick with steam he could hardly spy her balled up against the opposite wall. He lifted her by her arms, scowling to find her still wet and dirty.

“You’ve no’ cleaned yourself?” When she only stared down at the ground, he demanded, “Why?”

She shrugged miserably.

He glanced at the cascade of water within a glass chamber, opened the door, and ran his hand under it. Now, this he could use. He set her away, then stripped.

Her eyes widened, focused on his cock, and she covered her mouth. You’d think she’d never seen one. He let her look her fill, even leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest while she stared.

Under her rapt gaze he grew hard, his length distending—his body, at least, must think she was his—until she gasped and lowered her gaze. His wasted leg caught her attention, seeming to startle her even more. That alone embarrassed him, and he stepped into the water to break her stare.

He closed his eyes with pleasure as the water ran over him, noticing that it did nothing to quell his erection. He sensed her tense as though to run, and opened his eyes. If he’d been stronger, he would’ve hoped she would try it. “Looking at the door like that? I’ll catch you before you make it from this room.”

She turned back, saw he’d grown harder, and seemed to choke on a cry.

“Take off your clothes, vampire.”

“I-I will not!”

“Do you want to come in here with them on?”

“Preferable to being naked with you!”

He felt relaxed under the water, even magnanimous after the excellent food. “Then let’s make a bargain. You grant me a boon and I’ll return one.”

She looked up at him from under a curl freed from her tight braids. “What do you mean?”

He put his hands on each side of the door and leaned forward out of the water. “I want you in here, unclothed. What do you want of me?”

“Nothing of value equal to that,” she whispered.

“You’ll be with me indefinitely. Until I decide to let you go. Do you no’ want to contact your . . . people?” He spat the word. “I’m sure you have much value to them, being so rare.” In fact, keeping

her from her vampire kin would just be the beginning of his revenge. He knew they'd find the idea of her being fucked repeatedly by a Lykae as revolting as his clan would find it. She nibbled her red bottom lip with one tiny fang, and his anger flared again. "I doona have to grant you anything! I could just take you in here and then in the bed."

"A-and you won't if I agree to be in there with you?"

"Come willingly and I will no'," he lied.

"What will you . . . do?"

"I want to put my hands on you. Learn you. And I'll want your hands on me."

In a voice so soft he could scarcely hear her, she asked, "Will you hurt me?"

"Touch you. No' hurt you."

Her delicate blond brows drew together as she weighed this. Then, as though in great pain, she bent down to her boots, unfastening them with a buzzing sound. She stood and grasped the edges of her jacket and ruined blouse, but she seemed unable to proceed. She shook wildly and her blue eyes were stark. But she was agreeing—in a flash of insight, he knew she wasn't agreeing because of any reason he could fathom. Her eyes seemed so expressive, yet he couldn't read her.

When he loomed closer, she peeled the wet jacket and blouse away, then the shredded undergarment beneath them, hastily draping a thin arm over her breasts. Shy? When he'd heard of the orgies of blood the vampires reveled in?

"Please. I-I don't know who you think I am, but—"

"I think"—before she could blink, he'd ripped her skirt clean from her body and tossed it to the ground—"that I should at least know your name before I set to touchin' you."

She shook harder if possible, her arm tightening over her breasts.

He studied her, his gaze drinking her in. Her skin was perfect alabaster covered only by her strange pantalettes, the black silk that was like a V on her body. The front was transparent jet lace and teased against the blond curls between her legs. He remembered his two fleeting tastes of her skin in the howling rain and unnatural lightning and his cock pulsed, the head growing slick with anticipation. Other men would find her exquisite. The vampires would. Human males would kill for her.

Her trembling body was too small, but her eyes . . . wide and blue like the daytime sky she would never witness.

“M-my name is Emmaline.”

“*Emmaline*,” he growled, slowly reaching forward one claw to slice away the silk.

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Excerpt from

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

Prologue

Blachmount Manor, Estonia

September 1709

Two of my brothers are dead, Sebastian Wroth thought, staring up from the floor as he fought to keep from writhing in pain. *Or half-dead.*

All he knew was that they'd returned from the battlefield . . . wrong.

Every soldier came back changed by the horrors of war—he himself had—but Sebastian's brothers were *altered*.

Nikolai, the eldest, and Murdoch, the next eldest, had finally returned home from the Estonian-Russian border. Though Sebastian could hardly believe it, they must have left behind the war that still raged between the two countries.

An angry storm boiled, lashed inland from the nearby Baltic Sea, and out from of the torrents of rain, the two strode into Blachmount Manor. Their soaked hats and coats stayed on. The door remained open behind them.

They stood motionless, stunned.

Before them, spread throughout the main hall, was the carnage that used to be their family. Four sisters and their father were dying of plague. Sebastian and their youngest brother Conrad lay battered and stabbed among them. Sebastian was still conscious. Mercifully, the rest weren't, not

even Conrad, though he still hissed with pain.

Nikolai had dispatched Sebastian and Conrad home to protect them mere weeks ago. Now all were dying.

The Wroths' ancestral home of Blachmount had proved too tempting a lure to marauding bands of Russian soldiers. Last night, the soldiers had attacked, seeking the rumored riches here, as well as the food stores. While defending Blachmount against dozens of them, Sebastian and Conrad had been beaten and then stabbed through the gut—but not killed. Nor had the rest of the family been injured by them. Sebastian and Conrad had held the soldiers off just long enough for them to realize the home was plague-stricken.

The invaders had run, leaving their swords where they'd plunged them. . . .

As Nikolai stood over Sebastian, water dripped from his long coat and mingled with Sebastian's congealing blood on the floor. He cast Sebastian a look so raw that for a moment Sebastian thought that he was disgusted with him and Conrad for their failure—as disgusted as Sebastian himself was.

And Nikolai didn't understand the half of it.

Sebastian knew better, though, knew Nikolai would shoulder this burden as he had all others. Sebastian had always been closest to his oldest brother, and he could almost hear Nikolai's thoughts as though they were his own: *How could I expect to defend a country, when I could not protect my own flesh and blood?*

Sadly, their country of Estonia had fared no better than this family. Russian soldiers had stolen harvests in the spring, then salted and scorched the earth. No grain could be coaxed from the soil, and the countryside starved. Weak and gaunt, the people easily succumbed when plague broke out.

After recovering from their shock, Nikolai and Murdoch drew away and conferred in harsh whispers, pointing at their sisters and father as they debated something.

They did not seem to be discussing Conrad, unconscious on the floor, or Sebastian himself. Had the younger brothers' fates already been decided?

Even in his delirium, Sebastian understood that somehow the two had been changed—changed into something his fevered mind could scarcely comprehend. Their teeth were different—their canines were longer, and the brothers seemed to bare them in fury and dread. Their eyes were fully

black, yet they *glowed* in the shadowy hall.

As a boy, Sebastian had listened to his grandfather's tales of fanged devils that lived in the nearby marshes.

Vampiir.

They could disappear into thin air and reappear at will, traveling easily that way, and now, through the still-open doorway, Sebastian spied no sweat-slicked horses outside, tethered in haste.

They were baby snatchers and blood drinkers who fed on humans as if they were cattle. Or worse, they turned humans into their kind.

Sebastian knew his brothers were now among those cursed demons—and he feared they sought to damn their entire family as well.

“Do not do this thing,” Sebastian whispered.

Nikolai heard him from too far across the room and strode to him. Kneeling beside him, he said, “You know what we are now?”

Sebastian nodded weakly, staring up in disbelief at Nikolai's black irises. Between gasping breaths, he said, “And I suspect that . . . I know what you contemplate.”

“We will turn you and the family as we were turned.”

“I will not have this for me,” Sebastian said. “I do not want it.”

“You must, brother,” Nikolai murmured. Were his eerie eyes glinting? “Otherwise you die tonight.”

“Good,” Sebastian rasped. “Life has long been wearying. And now with the girls—”

“We will try to turn them as well.”

“You will not dare!” Sebastian roared.

Murdoch cast a look askance at Nikolai, but Nikolai shook his head. “Lift him up.” He made his voice like steel, the same tone he had used as a general in the army. “He *will* drink.”

Though Sebastian struggled, spitting curses, Murdoch raised him to a sitting position. A sudden rush of blood pooled from Sebastian's stomach wound. Nikolai flinched at the sight but bit his wrist open.

“Respect my will in this, Nikolai,” Sebastian grated, his words desperate. He used his last

reserves of strength to clench Nikolai's arm and hold his wrist away. "Do not force this on us. *Living isn't everything.*" They'd often argued this point. Nikolai had always held survival sacred; Sebastian believed that death was better than living in dishonor.

Nikolai was silent, his jet eyes flicking over Sebastian's face as he considered. Then he finally answered, "I can't . . . I *won't* watch you die." His tone was low and harsh, and he seemed barely able to maintain control of his emotions.

"You do this for yourself," Sebastian said, his voice losing power. "Not for us. You curse us to salve your conscience." He could not let Nikolai's blood reach his lips. "No . . . damn you, *no!*"

But they pried his mouth open, dripped the hot blood inside, and forced his jaw shut until he swallowed it.

They were still holding him down when he took his last breath and his sight went dark.

– 1 –

Castle Gornyi, Russia
Present day

For the second time in her life, Kaderin the Coldhearted hesitated to kill a vampire.

In the last instant of a silent, lethal swing, she stayed her sword an inch above the neck of her prey—because she’d found him holding his head in his hands.

She saw his big body tense. As a vampire, he could easily *trace* away, disappearing. Instead, he remained, raising his face to gaze at her with dark gray eyes, the color of a storm about to be unleashed. Surprisingly, they were clear of the red that marked a vampire’s bloodlust, which meant he had never drunk a being to death. Yet.

He beseeched with those eyes, and she realized he hungered for an end. He *wanted* the death blow she’d come to his decrepit castle to deliver.

She’d stalked him soundlessly, primed for battle with a vicious predator. Kaderin had been in Scotland with other Valkyrie when they’d received the call about a “vampire haunting a castle and terrorizing a village in Russia.” She had gladly volunteered to destroy the leech. She was her Valkyrie coven’s most prolific killer, her life given over to ridding the earth of vampires.

In Scotland, on that trip alone, she’d killed three.

So why was she hesitating now? Why was she easing her sword back? He would be merely one among thousands of her kills, his fangs collected and strung together with the others she’d taken.

The last time she’d stayed her hand had resulted in a tragedy so great her heart had been broken

forever by it.

In a deep, gravelly voice, the vampire asked, “Why do you wait?” He seemed startled by the sound of his own words.

I don't know why. Unfamiliar physical sensations wracked her. Her stomach knotted. As though a band had tightened around her chest, her lungs were desperate for breath. *I can't comprehend why.*

The wind blew outside, sliding over the mountain, making this high room in the vampire's darkened lair groan. Unseen gaps in the walls allowed the chill morning breeze in. As he stood, rising to his full, towering height, her blade caught the wavering light from a cluster of candles and reflected it on him.

His grave face was lean with harsh planes, and other females would consider it handsome. His black shirt was threadbare and unbuttoned, displaying much of his chest and sculpted torso, and his worn jeans were slung low at his narrow waist. The wind tugged at the tail of his shirt and stirred his thick black hair. *Very handsome. But then, the vampires I kill often are.*

His gaze focused on the tip of her sword. Then, as if the threat of her weapon were forgotten, he studied her face, his eyes lingering on each of her features. His blatant appreciation unsettled her, and she clutched the hilt tightly, something she never did.

Honed to masterly sharpness with her diamond file, her sword cut through bone and muscle with little effort. It swung perfectly from her loose wrist as though it were an extension of her arm. She'd never needed to hold it tightly.

Take his head. One less vampire. The species checked in the tiniest way.

“What is your name?” His speech was clipped like an aristocrat's, but held a familiar accent. Estonian. Though Estonia bordered Russia to the west and its inhabitants were considered a Nordic breed of Russian, she recognized the difference and wondered what he was doing away from his own country.

She tilted her head. “Why do you want to know?”

“I would like to know the name of the woman who will deliver me from this.”

He wanted to die. After all she'd suffered from his kind, the last thing she wanted to do was oblige the vampire in any way. “You assume I'll deliver your death blow?”

“Will you not?” His lips curled at the corners, but it was a sad smile.

Another tightening on the sword. She would. Of course, she would. Killing was her only purpose in life. She didn’t care if his eyes weren’t red. Ultimately, he would drink to kill, and he would turn.

They always did.

He stepped around a stack of hard-bound books—some of the hundreds of texts throughout the room with titles imprinted in Russian and, yes, Estonian—and leaned his massive frame against the crumbling wall. He truly wasn’t going to raise a hand in defense.

“Before you do, speak again. Your voice is beautiful. As beautiful as your stunning face.”

She swallowed, startled to feel her cheeks heating. “Who do you align with. . . ?” She trailed off when he closed his eyes as though listening to her were bliss. “The Forbearers?”

That got him to open his eyes. They were full of anger. “I align with no one. Especially not them.”

“But you were once human, weren’t you?” The Forbearers were an army, or order, of turned humans. They refused to take blood straight from the flesh because they believed that act caused bloodlust. By forbearing, they hoped to avoid becoming like crazed Horde vampires. The Valkyrie remained unoptimistic about their chances.

“Yes, but I’ve no interest in that order. And you? You’re no human either, are you?”

She ignored his question. “Why do you linger here in this castle?” she asked. “The villagers live in terror of you.”

“I won this holding on the battlefield and rightly own it, so I stay. And I’ve never harmed them.” He turned away and murmured, “I wish that I did not frighten them.”

Kaderin needed to get this killing over with. In just three days, she was to compete in the Talisman’s Hie, which was basically a deadly, immortal version of *The Amazing Race*. Besides hunting vampires, the Hie was the only thing she lived for, and she needed to confirm transportation and secure supplies. Yet she found herself saying, “They told me you live here alone.”

He faced her and gave a sharp nod. She sensed that he was embarrassed by this fact, as if he felt lacking that he didn’t have a family here.

“How long?”

He hiked his broad shoulders, pretending nonchalance. “A few centuries.”

To live solitary for all that time? “The people in the valley sent for me,” she said, as if she had to explain herself. The inhabitants of the remote village belonged to the Lore—a population of immortals and “mythical” creatures kept secret from humans. Many of them still worshipped the Valkyrie and provided tributes, but that wasn’t what made Kaderin travel to such an isolated place.

The chance to kill even a single vampire had drawn her. “They pleaded for me to destroy you.”

“Then I await your leisure.”

“Why not kill yourself, if that’s what you want?” she asked.

“It’s . . . complicated. But you save me from that end. I know you’re a skilled warrior—”

“How do you know what I am?”

He gave a nod at her sword. “I used to be a warrior, too, and your remarkable weapon speaks much.”

The one thing she felt pride in—the one thing in her life that she had left and couldn’t bear to lose—and he’d noted its excellence.

He strode closer to her and lowered his voice. “Strike your blow, creature. Know that no misfortune could come to you for killing one such as me. There is no reason to wait.”

As if this were a matter of conscience! It wasn’t. It couldn’t be. She had no conscience. No real feelings, no raw emotions. She was coldhearted. After the tragedy, she’d prayed for oblivion, prayed for the sorrow and guilt to be numbed.

Some mysterious entity had answered her and made her heart like ash. Kaderin didn’t suffer from sorrow, from lust, from anger, or from joy. Nothing got in the way of her killing.

She was a perfect killer. She had been for one thousand years, half of her interminable life.

“Did you hear that?” he asked. The eyes that had been pleading for an end now narrowed. “Are you alone?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “I do not require help from others. Especially not for a single vampire,” she added, her tone growing absent. Oddly, her attention had dipped to his body once more—to low on his torso, past his navel to the dusky trail of hair leading down. She had a flash imagining of grazing the back of one of her sharp claws along it while his massive body clenched and shuddered

in reaction.

Her thoughts were making her uneasy, making her want to wind her hair up into a knot and let the chill air cool her neck—

He cleared his throat. When she jerked her gaze to his face, he raised his eyebrows.

Caught ogling the prey! The indignity! *What is wrong with me?* She had no more sexual urges than the walking dead vampire before her. She shook herself, forcing herself to remember the last time she'd faltered.

On a battlefield, an age ago, she had spared and released another of this ilk, a young vampire soldier who had begged for his life.

Yet he had seemed to scorn her for her very mercy. Without delay, the soldier had found her two full-blood sisters fighting in the flatlands below them. Alerted by a shriek from another Valkyrie, Kaderin had sprinted, stumbling down a hill draped with bodies, living and dead. Just as she'd reached them, he'd cut her sisters down.

The younger, Rika, had been taken off guard, because of Kaderin's panicked approach. The vampire had smiled when Kaderin dropped to her knees.

He'd dispatched her sisters with a brutal efficiency that Kaderin had since emulated. She'd like to say she started with him, but she'd kept him alive for a time.

So, why would she repeat the same mistake? She wouldn't. She would not ignore a lesson she had paid so dearly to learn.

The sooner I get this done, the sooner I can begin preparing for the Hie.

Squaring her shoulders, she steeled herself. *It's all in the follow-through.* Kaderin could see the swing, knew the angle she would take so that his head would remain on his neck until he fell. It was cleaner that way. Which was important.

She'd packed her suitcase lightly.

– 2 –

As a young man, Sebastian Wroth had desired so many things from life, and having grown up wealthy among a large and supportive family, he had expected them as his due.

He'd wanted his own family, a home, laughter around a hearth. More dearly than all the rest, he'd longed for a wife, a woman to be his alone. He'd been ashamed to admit to this female that he'd managed none of those things.

Now all Sebastian wanted was to gaze at the fascinating creature just a little longer.

At first, he'd thought her an angel come to set him free. She looked it. Her long, curling hair was so blond it appeared almost white in the candlelight. Her eyes were fringed with thick black lashes and were dark like coffee, a striking contrast to her fair hair and wine-red lips. Her skin was flawless, light golden perfection, and her features were delicate and finely wrought.

She was so exquisite, and yet she carried a killer's weapon. Her sword was double-edged, with a *ricasso*, an unsharpened area on the blade just above the guard. A skilled user would loop a finger over the guard for better control. She confidently carried a sword not made for defense, not made for battle.

The creature carried steel forged to deliver quick, silent deaths.

Fascinating. An angel of death.

He'd considered it an undeserved blessing that hers would be the last face he would behold on this earth.

Yes, he'd thought her divine—until her smoldering gaze had strayed lower, and he'd recog-

nized she was very much flesh and blood. He'd cursed his useless, deadened body. As a turned human, he had no respiration, no heartbeat, no sexual ability. He could not take her, even though he thought . . . he thought this beauty might actually receive him.

The loss of sexual pleasure had never bothered him before. His experience as a human had been limited—very limited—by war, by famine, by the need merely to survive, so he'd never felt that his turning had deprived him of much. Until now.

He'd never been attracted to small women, because he'd known if he did somehow manage to bed one, he'd dread hurting her. Yet with this one, the most ethereal and fragile female he'd ever seen, he found himself wondering what it would be like to carry her to his bed and gently undress her. His mind began to riot with imaginings of his big hands cupping and stroking her slight body.

His eyes dropped to her slender neck, and then to her high, full breasts pressing against her dark blouse. Now, this part of her was far from slight. He wished he could kiss her breasts, run his face against them. . . .

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked in a halting, baffled tone, taking a step back.

"Can I not admire you?" Amazingly, he took a step forward. Where was this coming from? He'd always been awkward, unsure, around women. In the past, if he'd been caught staring like this, he'd have turned his face away, muttering apologies as he left the room. Perhaps he'd at last found freedom in imminent death.

Then again, he'd never stared, never hungered, as he did now for this slip of a woman with her lush breasts. "A dying man's last wish?"

"I know the ways a man looks at a woman." Her voice was sensual, a voice from dreams. It seemed to rub him from the inside. "You're not merely *admiring* me."

No, he was thinking at that moment that he wanted to rip open her shirt, pin her shoulders to the ground, and suck on her stiffened nipples till she came. Pin her shoulders hard and lick her—

"How dare you play with me, vampire!"

"What do you mean?" He met her gaze. Her eyes flicked over his face as though she were attempting to read his thoughts. Could she begin to guess the battle inside him? That in one instant the idea of being gentle was replaced with the impulse to cover her on the ground?

What is happening to me?

"I know you can't feel this . . . this . . ."—she made a small sound of frustration—"you can't feel what you are appearing to. It's impossible, unless—" She gasped. "Your eyes . . . they're turning black."

Black? His brothers' eyes had turned black with sharp emotion. He hadn't known his did as well. Was it because he'd never felt anything so sharply as his desire for this mysterious female?

He felt like he'd die if he didn't act on that desire—

A sudden explosion of sound made him swing his head around, his body tensing. "What was that?"

She took a quick glance around her, eyes alert. "What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"You do not hear that?" Another shaking like that, and the castle would collapse. He had to get her away, even into the morning daylight outside. The need to protect her had suddenly become critical, undeniable.

"No!" Her eyes went wide, her expression aghast. "It can't be!" She backed away from him, moving gingerly, as if he were a snake about to strike.

Another explosion. He traced to just in front of her, and her sword shot up in a blur. He snatched her wrist, but she struggled. Christ, she was strong, but he seemed to be stronger than usual himself, more powerful than he ever could have imagined. "I don't want to hurt you." He pried the weapon from her wrist and tossed it to his bed on the floor. "Do not fight me. The roof is about to fall—"

"No . . . no!" She stared at his chest—at his heart—in horror. "I am not a . . . Bride."

Bride? His jaw slackened. He remembered his brothers explaining that when he found his Bride, his eternal wife, she would *blood* him. With his blooding, his body would come back to life. He'd always believed they'd lied to dull the bitter sting of what they'd made him.

Yet it was true. The sound he'd heard was the rush of his own heart beating for the first time since he'd been turned into a vampire. He rocked on his feet as he inhaled deeply, breathing at last after three hundred years.

His heartbeat grew stronger, faster, and his sudden erection was tight and throbbing, pulsing with each beat of his heart. Pleasure seemed to course through his veins. He'd found his Bride—the

one woman he was meant to be with for eternity—in this hauntingly fine creature.

And his body had awakened for her.

“You know what is happening to me?” he asked.

She swallowed, backing away farther. “You’re changing.” Her blond brows drew together, and in a barely audible whisper, she added, “For . . . for *me*.”

“Yes. For you.” He crossed to her until she stared up at him. “Forgive me. If I had known this was true, I would have searched for you. I would have found you somehow—”

“No . . .” She swayed on her feet, and he laid one palm on her slim shoulder to steady her. She flinched but allowed the touch.

He realized then, that just as he was changing, so was she. He thought he saw silver flash in her glinting eyes. A swift tear dropped down her cheek.

“Why do you cry?” Women’s tears had always wrecked him as a mortal, but hers made him feel as if a thousand knives twisted inside him. When he brushed her hair back, he sucked in a ragged, unpracticed breath. Her ear was sharply pointed. Up closer, he could see the smallest fangs.

Sebastian didn’t know what she was, and he didn’t care. “Please do not cry.”

“I never cry,” she whispered. Frowning in confusion, she patted the back of her hand against her cheek and drew it down to see that it was wet from a single tear. Her lips parted, and she stared, first at the tear, and then at her sharply curling fingernails, which were more like elegant claws. Her gaze darted back to him, and she swallowed as if with fear.

“Tell me what troubles you.” He had a purpose now: to protect her, to care for her, to destroy whatever threatened her. “Bid me to help you, Bride.”

“Not a Bride to one of your kind. Never—”

“But you’ve made my heart beat.”

She hissed back, “You’ve made me *feel*.” He didn’t understand the meaning of her words or her reactions during the next several moments as he gazed down at her, greedily learning her features—the sweep of her thick lashes when she glanced down, the full red pout of her lips. Waves of emotion shimmered in her eyes and seemed to pain her. Her body shook. As abruptly as they’d started, her tears dried.

Then she smiled up at him, a heartrending curling of her lips. Her eyes were merry, darkly teasing. Nothing had ever aroused him so much as that look, and he wondered how much more he could take. But her smile faded far too soon. She shuddered violently, lowering her forehead to his chest.

Just as his aching erection was becoming impossible to deny, she lifted her face, and her expression had changed once more. A flush tinged her high cheekbones, and her lips subtly parted. Her fingers clutched at his shoulders. As she gazed at his mouth, her tongue dabbed at her bottom lip and left no question about what she was thinking of doing.

She was . . . aroused. For him. He didn't understand what was happening to her—or to himself.

His eyes widened, then narrowed, when she placed her delicate arms around his neck. *I could touch her. . . . She would accept my touch. . . .* His shaft had never been this hard. He wanted to bury it inside her so badly he'd give anything.

She tilted her head, still staring at his mouth. "I miss this," she murmured in a whiskey voice. He didn't have time to ponder her words, because she tightened her arms, bringing their bodies together. He groaned to feel her breasts pressing against him. They were so full and plump—he knew they would fill his palms perfectly.

Christ, he'd suffered centuries without contact with others, much less touch, and now he was feeling his Bride, soft and pliant in his arms. He was afraid he was dreaming. Before he lost his nerve, his hands dropped to her waist, dragging her more firmly against him. "Tell me your name."

"My name. . . ?" she murmured absently. "My name is Kaderin."

"Kaderin," he repeated, but it didn't fit her. As he stared down into her shimmering eyes, he thought the name was too cold, too formal, for the fiery creature in his arms. "*Katja*," he rasped, surprised to find that his thumb was slowly brushing her bottom lip. The urge to kiss her was overwhelming. "Katja, I . . ."—he began in a rough, breaking voice, and had to swallow to continue—"must . . . I must kiss you."

At his words, the dark hazel of her eyes turned completely silver. She seemed to go into a trance. He was not so far gone as not to notice this stunned reaction, but her full red lips were glistening, beckoning him.

“I used to love being kissed,” she whispered in a dazed tone, her breaths growing hectic.

Could he possibly stop with only that? With an unsteady hand, he cupped the back of her head, about to draw her to him. Surely she was strong enough to take him—she was some sort of warrior and would likely be quick to check him if he hurt her.

For some reason, he sensed she wouldn’t give him that teary, betrayed look women had cast him in the past if he’d accidentally stepped on their toes or collided with them coming around a street corner, that look that brought him so low.

“Vampire, please,” she murmured as he drew her to him, “make it worth it. Make it . . .”

When their lips touched, he groaned; electricity seemed to prick at his skin. He pulled back from her. “My God.” Nothing had ever felt so powerful, so right, as this kiss. Her hungry expression deepened.

If it took becoming a vampire to have just this one perfect moment, would he suffer it again?

When he set back in, lightly at first, she moaned, “More,” against his lips.

He clutched her tightly in his arms, then somehow remembered himself. *No, fool.* . . . He eased his hold.

At once, her claws bit into the backs of his arms, making him shudder. “Don’t hold back. I need *more.*”

She needed more, needed him to give it to her. Because she was . . . his. When this finally sank in, his shyness burned away. In the course of a heartbeat, he now had a woman of his own. He wanted to roar with triumph. The feel of her claws sinking into him—as if she feared *he* would get away—was ecstasy. *She needs me.*

“Kiss me more, vampire. If you stop, I’ll kill you.”

He couldn’t help but grin against her lips. A female threatening him if he should *stop* kissing her?

So he did, tasting her tongue, teasing it, then claiming her mouth hotly, wetly. He savored the slow undulation of her hips against him, in time with each thrust of his tongue.

He kissed her with all the passion long denied him, with all the hope that had been wrenched from him returning. Weariness of life had just been replaced by purpose—because of her. He let her

know how thankful he was . . . by kissing her until she panted and sagged against him.

Yet he was losing control. Impulses came for him to do things to her body, wicked things, and he knew that soon he would obey them. "I'll always give you more, until I die."

And now, for the first time in three hundred hellish years, Sebastian desperately wanted to live.

— 3 —

As if she'd been hurled down from a great height, all the emotions lost to Kaderin, denied to her for the last millennium, crashed into her. Fear, joy, longing, and an undeniable sexual hunger warred within her—until he stoked her lust hot enough to drown out all other feelings.

She was reeling, confused. All she knew for certain was that she needed release so badly her yearning pained her, made her whimper. And each of his fierce, possessive kisses increased her agony.

As she threaded her fingers through his thick, tousled hair, she couldn't think, couldn't begin to reason out why this was happening to her. Inexplicable wants wracked her—to lick his skin, to have his body pressing heavily on hers.

She brought her parted lips to his neck, kissing up from his collar. In turn, he thrust his erection against her, as if he couldn't help himself, then seemed to be willing himself not to do it again. But she was thrilled to find his shaft was huge and rigid, insistent against her. It made her body grow wet, wanting it.

Unable to stop herself, she flicked her tongue out to taste his skin. Sensation spiked within her, and she moaned. Had any male ever tasted so good? His taste made her body react with animal needs so strong, she twitched as she resisted them. She wanted to rip his jeans from him, take that thick shaft in both hands, and lick its length in a frenzy.

Imagining that made her roll her hips against him, and after a shuddering hesitation he met her. He hissed in a breath and rumbled foreign words in her ear. The entire castle shook—from *her*

lightning, a Valkyrie's lightning produced by her emotion.

Lightning, pleasure of any kind, had been denied her for so long.

She knew this was forbidden, knew she would regret it, but at that moment, she didn't care. For some unknown reason, she'd been granted a window of opportunity with this male, enabling her to know passion once more. Just once more, that was all she wanted, before cold and nothingness crept over her again . . .

So she took his kisses and returned them. Even as her ardor overwhelmed her, she tried to justify her actions. They wouldn't do more than this. This was forgivable. They were still clothed.

He clutched her ass, fingers splayed, holding her firmly so he could thrust. *Strong male, immortal male. . . .*

With a body like a god's.

"Harder," she whispered, then somehow she was backed against the wall, his hand behind her head to take the impact as he pressed her into it. His entire rigid body covered hers. Good, he was getting more aggressive. *No! If he takes the reins, I'm lost . . . lost to him.*

It had been so long.

A tight and aching coil was rapturously unfurling with each of the vampire's determined shoves. "Don't stop," she pleaded between ragged breaths. For the first time in a millennium she was going to climax.

Reading her mind, he rasped, "Can I make you . . . come like this?"

"Yes!" she cried against his mouth. "Keep going! I need you to!"

"Need?" He groaned as if excited by the word. "The problem is . . . I will, too." His voice rough with lust, he said, "I've got to take you, Bride."

* * *

She stiffened at his words, as if she were waking up, then turned her face away. "Wait! I can't . . . I can't do this!"

"I can give you what you need, I swear it," he grated, even as he cursed his lack of experience. He'd figure it bloody well out. "Just let me have you."

She shook her head wildly, thrashing in his arms. "Noooo!"

As a human, he would have let her go immediately. But instinct told him not to. While understanding so little about what was happening, he somehow knew it was critical to have something shared between them, even a brief morning of pleasure.

He couldn't allow this to stop—not before he'd given her release and taken his from her body as well. "Then we'll only be as before." If this was all she'd permit before she came to her senses, then he'd take what he could get.

"You don't understand—"

Shocking himself, he cut off her protest, hands cradling her face so he could take her mouth hard. She tensed, seeming merely to endure his kiss. Then, after a moment, she gave an answering moan that made him sweat with relief. Her claws were back into his shoulders. He rocked into her, and his thoughts grew murkier, replaced by urgent want.

The rougher he became, the more she gave cries into his mouth that drove him wild, urging him on. Yet even as she took his aggression with obvious pleasure, the wall was crumbling behind them.

Suddenly, she hopped up, wrapping her legs around his waist. "Ah, God, that's it, Katja." He clenched her generous, round ass in his palms, groaning at the feel. Here, too, she was in no way slight, and he loved it.

He squeezed her lush curves, kneaded her, and she panted in his ear, "Yes, yes, you're so strong."

Strong? He shuddered. That pleased her? "I've never felt anything so damned good as your body—"

His words died in his throat when she dropped lower, clutching his shoulders and hanging from her straightened arms to grind against him. She kept her silvery eyes on him, one tiny fang digging into her bottom lip as he stared down in disbelief. She was wild, making his cock twitch and pulse, nearing orgasm.

Hold on, he commanded himself. *She needs to come.*

She pulled herself up to kiss and nibble at his ear, putting her silken neck right before his mouth. *Bite her.* He licked her neck, wanting to take her there so badly. No. He couldn't do that to her.

Why not? She likely thought him a monster already—

She slapped her palm hard behind her, pushing off the wall so he went tripping back over books. Pages flew as they tumbled to the ground with her on top.

She was frantic, shed of inhibitions, grinding against his shaft while tonguing his mouth. Her ass moved so sensuously beneath his palms as she worked her body against his—never in his most fevered fantasies had he imagined this.

He no longer cared if he spilled his seed into his pants. He was going to come harder than he ever had. *Shameful, degrading.* He didn't care.

He rolled her onto her back, pinning her arms above her head, giving in to the most primal urge to rock his hips. He ached to thrust against her. He needed to master her, and from the way she reacted, with her eyelids fluttering closed as she moaned, she needed it as well.

"I didn't believe it was true," he groaned.

Her head thrashed, the blond silk of her hair filling him with her scent.

"Katja." He thrust harder and she writhed wildly beneath him. "You're *mine*."

"*Yes, yes . . . you're making me . . . come.*" She arched her back, crying out. He wrapped his arms tightly around her torso, trapping her against his body as he bucked furiously against her.

He groaned toward the ceiling, neck tensed, as his seed began to pump from him. With each shot, he gave a brutal yell. She was still coming, her claws sunk into his back.

He gave one last violent shudder, then collapsed on her, stunned to silence by the pleasure. His breaths, so new and astounding to him, were ragged.

But when he realized what he'd just done to her, he flushed, humiliated, pushing up from her and averting his eyes.

Bride or not, she was a stranger to him, but he'd shamed himself like a green lad in front of her. Much worse, he'd used all the strength in his body to hold her down and shove against her. How could he *not* have hurt her? How could he not have bruised her perfect skin? He dreaded meeting her eyes. To see that betrayed look . . .

Yet then, she tugged him back down and turned her head slightly, seeming to nuzzle the side of his neck. She began rubbing her face against his, almost like a cat. Though she had the strangest manner of showing it, he knew she was indeed giving him affection.

Affection. Another ecstasy for him. He hadn't been touched in so long.

He rested on his elbows as she gazed up at him with her eyes soft, flickering between silver and dark hazel, her expression satisfied. Holding her face with both of his shaking hands, he brushed kisses over her eyelids, her nose. She was the loveliest creature he had ever imagined—and the most passionate—and she was his.

His voice hoarse, he said, "I have not told you my name. I am Sebastian Wroth."

Still seeming entranced, she murmured, "*Bastian*," making him want to squeeze her.

He grinned down at her. "Only my family used to call me that. It pleases me that you would."

"Uh-hmm." She scratched his neck in languid circles.

Excitement was still drumming in him. The idea of learning everything about her filled him with anticipation, but first he had to know— "Did I . . . did I . . . hurt you?"

"I'll be sore." Her lips curled, then she rubbed her face against him once more, this time as if grateful. "But only in the most delicious places."

His cock was still semi-hard in the wet heat of his jeans, and the way she purred that one simple word, *delicious*, made it swell once more. He didn't understand how she could simply shake off being hurt, but there was no way he'd act on the need welling once more. He fought to ignore how good she felt beneath him.

He brushed back her hair, revealing her pointed ears. The tiny fangs, the claws, the eyes . . . "Katja, what are . . ." He cleared his throat. "What *are* you?"

Her brows drew together. "I'm a—" She tensed in an instant. Her eyes cleared completely, as though she'd just woken up. All the supple muscles of her body that had gone soft and pliant after her orgasm now grew rigid.

With a sharp inhalation, she kicked him off her—hard—sending him to the opposite wall, then shot to her feet. "Ah, gods, what have I done?" she whispered, bringing a tremulous hand to her forehead. Her face was cold, but her eyes burned wild as she backed away.

He stood, hands in front of him so as not to startle her.

But then she roughly ran her sleeve over her mouth, infuriating him. He recognized her disgust, recognized the sentiment.

He'd shared it about himself ever since he'd been turned.

* * *

"We're going to forget this happened, vampire." She couldn't believe she'd just felt gratitude toward him. Because he'd given her relief from desire? What the hell had happened? Reality was seeping in, and with it came shame so hot it stung her.

"How can I possibly forget this?"

Maybe a capricious power had played with her, forcing her to do things she would never do. Or had she caught a spell? She had to leave at once. "Vow not to tell anyone, and I'll let you live for now."

"Let me live—?"

He didn't finish the sentence, because in the space of three words, she'd collected her sword, then shot behind him to tuck it menacingly between his legs. She'd moved so quickly she was a blur.

"Yes, let you live," she hissed at his ear.

"You are unused to this." He traced across the room and stood, arms out, a hand on each side of the doorway. "As am I. We will find our way with this together. But you *are* my Bride."

She closed her eyes, astounded to find she was struggling for calm. "You're not my husband. And never will be."

"This can't be random, Kaderin."

Enough. As she started for the door, she could sense apprehension building in him. They both knew the sun would protect her. All she had to do was get past him—

Suddenly, she doubled over as sorrow for Dasha and Rika ripped through her like barbed wire dragged through her veins.

"Kaderin?" He strode toward her. "Are you hurt?"

Gulping air, she shoved her hand out to stop him before he reached her, and forced herself to stand. All Valkyrie were related, but she and her two sisters had been born together. Triplets. Inseparable for one thousand years, until two had died in battle. Because of Kaderin's weakness . . .

"Kaderin, just wait—"

She charged for the door, but he traced back to it and held his ground. She fainted left and

ducked right, moving so fast she knew he couldn't make out her form. As he blinked, she swooped around him, bringing the sword handle crashing back into his chest, deciding at the last minute not to crack his sternum.

He gave a bellow of fury when she barreled past him. She darted down a rotting landing, toward the three sets of winding stairs, running through massive cobwebs so thick he must have traced through them for centuries.

Half staggering, half tracing, he was right behind her as she bounded down the stairs. But she pushed a hand on the railing and vaulted over to the next flight of stairs, then once again to the ground floor.

With a hoarse yell, he leapt down behind her, lunging for her. At the last second, she shimmied out of his grasp, reaching the heavy front doors. She burst through them, wrenching them off their rusted hinges and sending splinters arcing into the air.

Even outside under the morning sun's protective watch, she didn't slow. She raced down the valley to the village—haggard breaths, leaves crackling beneath her boots, the warmth of the light. *Don't look back.*

Tears blurred her vision as she fought not to sob. The sorrow ached as unbearably as it had when she'd collected and buried the . . . pieces of her sisters. She ran away as if to forget that last night, as if to leave that memory back at that desolate castle. *Don't look back. . . .*

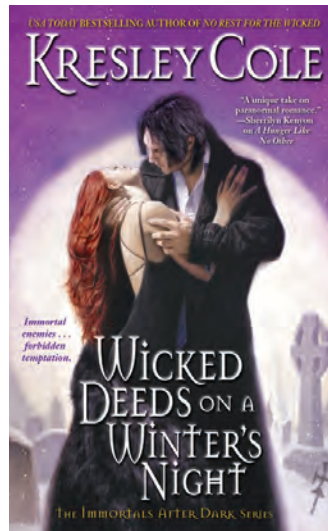
After the burial, she'd torn at her hair and clawed at her skin, alternately shrieking with fury and grief and yearning for the oblivion of death herself. Exhaustion finally rendered her unconscious, and in that heavy sleep, an unknown power had communicated with her as a voice in her mind, promising surcease from the pain—yet deadening all of her emotions.

Then, as now, the pain was unbearable. Just as she had before, she prayed for mercy.

But none came. Had Kaderin been forsaken? Had she angered the mysterious power? *Don't look back.* But she did.

The vampire had followed her.

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BOOK 3 in THE IMMORTALS AFTER DARK SERIES

HER BREATHLESS KISS HAUNTS HIM . . .

Bowen MacRieve of the Lykae clan was nearly destroyed when he lost the one woman meant for him. The ruthless warrior grew even colder, never taking another to his bed—until a smoldering encounter with his enemy, Mariketa the Awaited, reawakens his darkest desires. When sinister forces unite against her, the Highlander finds himself using all his strength and skill to keep her alive.

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If they defeat the evil that surrounds them, can Mari deny Bowen when he demands her body and soul—or will she risk everything for her fierce protector?



Excerpt from

WICKED DEEDS ON A WINTER'S NIGHT

Love spells are a lot like platform diving. Once you start the process, there's no going back, and the end will be fugly if you don't know what the hell you're doing.

—Mariketa the Awaited, mercenary of the Wicca, future leader of the House of Witches

Witches are good for one thing and only one thing.

Tinder.

—Bowen Graeme MacRieve, third in line for the Lykae throne

Prologue

The Forest of Three Bridges

Winter 1827

It wants to mark my flesh. . . . The full moon beat light down on a canvas of snow and barren trees, making Mariah's hunter green dress glow as distinctly as a beacon for the beast pursuing her.

Mark me with its teeth, she thought wildly as she leapt across an icy rivulet. When the beast's frenzied roar echoed through the forest, she stumbled at the embankment. Frantically scrambling up, she continued her flight for home.

Birch branches clawed at her hair and raked her cold-numbed face. As she twisted from their grasp, snow began to fall once more, blurring her vision. Another bellow in the dark silenced night creatures; the sound of her ragged breaths became deafening.

Bowen, the man she'd loved since she was a girl, had warned her of the full moon, preparing her: "I will change, Mariah. I canna control it. And you are vulnerable to harm still . . ."

She'd insisted on meeting him this night, because she'd known how critical this time was for him—and because she was anxious to make up for denying his desires again and again. But then, at this last hour, her courage failed her. She'd looked upon the face of her beloved, and the moon had revealed a monster in his place.

It had known she was horrified. Its eyes, glowing ice blue, had been filled with an animal-like yearning until they narrowed with comprehension. "Run . . . Mariah," it had grated in an unfamiliar rasp. "Get to the . . . castle. Lock yourself away . . . from me."

She could hear him crashing toward her, ever nearer, but she was almost there. Reaching the edge of the forest, she saw her home in the snowy plain below her—a castle towering amidst the confluence of their kingdom's three great rivers. *So close.*

Mariah raced for the familiar winding path that would lead her down. As soon as she alighted upon it, movement exploded before her eyes. Suddenly the air teemed with ravens, shooting up all around her, wings batting her numbed face. Swinging at them blindly, she stumbled and lost her footing on the icy, root-strewn path.

Weightlessness . . . falling . . . tumbling down the side of the ravine . . . The impact wrenched the breath from her lungs and made her sight darken. Falling still . . .

When she landed at the bottom, it was to a sickening wet sound as some force punched through her stomach. Unimaginable pain erupted through her. She gaped in incomprehension at the sharp stump jutting up from her body. *No . . . No . . . cannot be.*

As the pain dimmed to only a chilling sensation of pressure within her, she weakly grasped the remains of an axed-down birch, felled by one of her kingdom's woodsmen.

With each breath, blood bubbled from her mouth. It dripped from her face into the snow, as softly as tears.

Mariah of the Three Bridges would die in the moon's shadow of her own home.

In a daze, staring at the sky, she listened while the beast crashed toward her impossibly faster, as if scenting the blood. Before it could reach Mariah, she recognized she was no longer alone.

Just after she spied more ravens circling overhead, icy lips meet hers. Emptiness and chaos seeped through her like a disease. As she writhed futilely, a voice inside Mariah's head spoke of this night, a wintry eve brimming with purpose.

"Die," the voice whispered against Mariah's bloody mouth. Immediately, she perceived the stillness of her heart. Her lungs ceased their labors and the mask of pain on her face slackened.

The presence faded, replaced by another. Mariah's last sight was the beast, roaring in agony to the moon, clawing at its chest with wild sorrow.

– 1 –

Present day

Tomb of the Incubi, the jungles of Guatemala

Day 3 of the Talisman's Hie

Prize: Four Mayan sacrificial headdresses, each worth seven points

“Stalking me, Mr. MacRieve?” Mariketa the Awaited asked the Lykae behind her without turning around. In the dark of a corridor leading to a burial chamber, Bowen MacRieve had been following her silently. But she’d *felt* him staring at her—just as she had at the Talisman’s Hie assembly three nights ago.

“No’ likely, witch.” How could such a rumbling Scots’ burr sound so menacing? “I only stalk what I want to catch.”

Mari did turn to slant him a glance at that, even knowing he couldn’t see her face under the hood of the scarlet cloak she always wore. But by the light of her lantern hanging over her shoulder, she could see his, and used the cover to disguise her long, appreciative look.

She inwardly sighed. Lykae males were notoriously good-looking, and the few she’d seen had lived up to their reputation, but this one was heart-poundingly sexy.

He had black hair, stick straight and thick, reaching to the collar of his obviously expensive shirt. His body—which she’d found herself thinking about frequently over the past few days—was sublime. He stood a good bit over six feet tall, and though the corridor was wide enough for two normal-size people to pass, his broad shoulders and big, rangy build filled the space.

But even with all his many attractions, his eyes were what made him so unique. They were the

color of rich, warm amber, and yet there was a kind of sinister light to them, which she liked.

She was a little sinister, too.

“Look your fill?” he asked, his tone scathing. Yes, he was sexy, but unfortunately his dislike of witches was well known.

“I’m done with you,” she answered and meant it. She didn’t have time to pine after brusque werewolf warriors if she planned to be the first of her kind ever to win the Hie, an immortal scavenger hunt à la *The Amazing Race*.

With an inward shrug, she continued on toward yet another burial chamber. This was the tenth she’d investigated over the hours she and several other competitors had been down deep inside this never-ending Mayan tomb.

She might have surprised him with her curt dismissal because a moment passed before he followed her. The only sounds in the echoing space were his heavy footfalls that he no longer bothered to muffle. The silence between them was grueling.

“Who opened the stone slab to the tomb?” he finally asked, trailing far too closely behind her.

“The three elven archers and a couple of demons.” The archers, two males and a female, were deadly shooters with lightning-quick speed, and the male rage demons were incredibly powerful—second in physical strength only to the Lykæ. Yet even for them, the stone portcullis sealing the tomb’s entrance had been nearly impossible to budge.

They’d realized the entire pyramidal structure had shifted from time and earthquakes and now rested on the portcullis, making it weigh tons. Raising it had taken all of the others cooperating—with the two demons lifting it and the archers shoving an enormous boulder under it to prop it open.

“And they just let you enter after their effort?”

She stopped and faced him again. “What should they have done, Mr. MacRieve?” The others had not only allowed her to enter. Though she barely knew any of them, they had wanted to work together since there were four prizes. Cade, one of the demons, had even helped her climb down the dozen feet from the outer entrance into the first anteroom. Then they’d all split up to cover the maze of chambers and vowed to the Lore to alert the others of a find.

MacRieve’s smile was a cruel twist of his lips. “I know exactly what I would have done.”

"I know exactly how I would have retaliated." He seemed surprised that she didn't fear him, but the truth was that she didn't spook easily—when not faced with heights or unnecessarily large insects. And she was well aware of how vicious the Hie competitors could be as they raced around the world for prizes.

This ruthlessness in the Hie was why Mari had been sent by the House of Witches to compete, even though she was only twenty-three and hailed from the shady New Orleans coven, the slacker Animal House of witches. And even though she had not yet made the turn from mortal to immortal.

But Mari was not above trickery, and unlike many witches, she would not hesitate to use magic to harm another if they deserved it—and if she could manage it with her volatile powers.

MacRieve closed in until nearly seven feet of seething werewolf male loomed over her. He was at least a foot taller than she was and hundreds of times stronger, but she forced herself to stand her ground.

"Watch your step, little witch. You doona wish to anger one such as me."

The grand prize for the Hie was an object called Thrane's Key, a key which allowed its possessor to go back in time—not just once but *twice*. For a tool like that, she knew he was ready to take her out of the contest. So she had to convince him that it was impossible for him to do so.

"Likewise, you shouldn't anger me." Her voice was steady as she looked up at him. "Remember that I could turn your blood to acid as an afterthought," she said, baldly lying.

"Aye, I've heard rumors of your power." He narrowed his eyes. "Curious though, that you dinna open the tomb with one flick of your finger."

Yes, she might have managed to lift the portcullis—with concentration, an unprecedented bout of luck, and the absence of a hangover. Oh, and if she were in mortal danger.

Unfortunately, her power was adrenaline-based, making it as infinite as it was uncontrollable.

"You think I should use magic like mine to open a tomb?" Mari asked in a scoffing tone. *Mistress of bluffing, working it here.* "That'd be like calling you in to lift a feather."

He tilted his head, sizing her up. After what seemed like an hour, he began walking again.

Mari gave an inward sigh of relief. If anyone in the Lore found out how vulnerable she really was, she'd be doomed. She knew this, but no matter how hard she worked, whenever she manifested

and unleashed significant power, things ended up *exploding*.

As her befuddled mentor Elianna explained, “Horses have powerful legs—but that doesn’t mean they’re prima ballerinas.” The ancient Elianna trained with Mari daily to control the destructive nature of her spells, because she believed the subtle magics invoked the most fear in their enemies.

And the House of Witches brokered in fear.

The corridor finally ended at a broad, high wall, covered in carvings of ghoulish faces and animals. Mari lifted her lantern high and the reliefs seemed to move in shadow. They’d apparently been put there to guard a small tunnel opening near the floor, which itself was made out like a gaping mouth with fangs dropping down.

She waved the Lykae forward. “Age before beauty, Mr. MacRieve.” She sized him up again, then studied the small opening, which couldn’t be more than three feet square. “If you think you can fit.”

He stood motionless, clearly not about to be directed. “Only humans call me Mr. MacRieve.”

She shrugged. “I’m not a human.” Her mother was a fey druidess, and her late father had been a warlock of questionable repute. So Mari was a fey witch or a “weylock,” as her buddies teased. “So would you like me to call you Bowen, or Bowe for short?”

“Bowe is what my friends call me, so you doona.”

What an ass. . . “No problem. I have a slew of other more fitting names for you. Most of them end in *er*.”

He ignored her comment. “You in the tunnel first.”

“Don’t you think it’d be unbecoming for me to be on my hands and knees in front of you? Besides, you don’t need my lantern to see in the dark, and if you go first, you’ll be sure to lose me and get to the prize first.”

“I doona like anything, or anyone, at my back.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a shoulder against a snarling visage on the stone wall. She’d never seen a Lykae turn into its towering werewolf form, but knew from those who had that this male could be as frightening as any monster real or imagined. “And you’ll have your little red cloak on,” he continued, “so I will no’ be able to

see anything about you that might be . . . unbecoming.”

“Twisting my words? I’ll have you know that I am criminally cute—”

“Then why hide behind a cloak?”

“I’m not *hiding*.” In fact, that was precisely what she was doing. “And I like to wear it.” She *hated* it.

Even before her birth, she’d been predicted to be the Awaited One, the most powerful born to the House of Witches in centuries—but four years ago, it was also foretold that a male from the Lore would recognize her as his own and claim her. He would seek to lock her away, guarding her with a ferocity that no magics could defeat, thus robbing the House of her powers.

Since the prediction, she’d been forced to cover herself every single time she set foot outside her home. Needless to say, the robust dating life of her late teens had taken a hit.

She sported the cloak—a red one because she was a Scarlet Letter-type rebel at heart—and as a backup, she also hid behind a magical glamour that disguised her looks, the tone of her voice, and her scent.

If a male like MacRieve did see her, he would perceive a brunette with blue eyes—when in fact she was a redhead with gray eyes—and he would have difficulty recalling anything that *was* the same, like her features, her figure, or the length of her hair. The glamour was so second nature that she hardly thought about it anymore.

Even with all these precautions, it followed that unattached males in the Lore were to be avoided. Yet Mari had heard at the Hie assembly—a gossip fest if she’d ever seen one—that MacRieve had already found his mate and lost her more than a century ago.

Mari had felt sympathy for him. A Lykae’s entire existence centered around his mate, and in his long immortal life, he would get only one—just one chance in an eternity to find happiness.

When she saw he wasn’t budging, she muttered, “Fine. Beauty before age.” She unlooped her lantern strap and crawled in. The space was tighter than she’d imagined, but she didn’t have time to rethink her decision because he climbed in directly after her. Resigned, she exhaled and held her lantern up to light her way.

The stone was cool and moist and she was glad for her cloak—until she caught her knee on the

end, and the tie around her neck yanked her head down. When it happened again, she shimmied, working the material back so that it flowed behind her as she made progress forward. *There. Better.*

Five seconds later: “MacRieve, you’re on my cloak. Let up—”

Before she could react, he reached between her knees and then up against her chest to slice the tie at her neck with one claw. Her eyes went wide and she dropped her light to snatch fistfuls of cloth, but he jerked the cloak out of her grasp.

“Give it back!”

“It was slowing you—and therefore me—down.”

She gritted her teeth, struggling to control her temper. “If *you* had gone first—”

“I dinna. If you want it, why no’ use magic to take it from me?”

Did he suspect how volatile her power was? Was he sussing out her weaknesses? “You really do not want me to do that.”

“You really must no’ want your cloak back. Come then, witchling, just take it from me.”

Glamour or not, she had grown used to the physical security of the garment. And when she realized she wasn’t getting it back from him, Mari just checked the urge to rub her bared arms. All at once, she became very much aware of how high her hiking shorts were on her thighs and how her tank top was riding up, about to reveal the mark on her lower back.

She steeled herself and made her tone nonchalant. “Keep the cloak.” Though she knew he was ogling her, she forced herself to put one knee in front of the other. “It’ll be worth money one day.”

After a few moments, he said, “Doona fret, witch. You’re no’ so unbecoming from my angle. Bit scrawny where it counts, but no’ *too* bad.”

Yep, ogling. Many adjectives could be used to describe her ass, but scrawny was not among them. *He’s just making these comments and brushing up against you to unnerve you.* Knowing that didn’t make his efforts less effective! “Scrawny where it counts, MacRieve? Funny, I’d heard the same about you.”

He gave a kind of humorless half chuckle and finally followed. “No’ likely. Maybe you’re just too young to have heard the rumors about Lykae males. Tender wee ears and such.”

No, she’d heard. And over the last couple of days, she had wondered about that rumor and if it

applied to him.

How long was this damned tunnel—

“*Still, lass,*” he grated. Her eyes widened again when she felt his hot palm lying flat against the back of her thigh. “There’s a scorpion tangled up in all that hair of yours.”

“Get your hand off me, MacRieve! You think I can’t see what you’re doing? I’ve been scanning every inch of this tunnel—I would have seen a scorpion.” When she started again, he squeezed her leg. His thumb claw pressed against her skin, high on her inner thigh, sending an unexpected shot of pleasure through her. She had to stifle a shiver.

It was only after she felt a whisper of touch over her hair that she got her wits again. “Like I’m supposed to believe there’s a scorpion and it just happens to be in the tunnel we’re crawling in and then in my hair? Any other creature-feature props you’d like to reference? Is there a mummy’s hand tangled up in there? I’m really surprised you didn’t go with ‘classic tarantula.’”

His arm shot out between her legs—again—jostling against the front of her body as he tossed something in front of her. Something with *mass*. She held her lantern farther forward—

The sight of a scorpion as big as her hand had her scrambling back . . . wedging herself firmly against MacRieve—in a very awkward position to be in with anyone, but especially with a werewolf.

He stiffened all around her. Every inch of him. She felt his arms bulging over her shoulders and his chiseled abs taut over her back.

His growing erection strained thick against her backside. *So the rumors about werewolf males are true*, she thought dazedly. *Exhibit A is quite insistent.*

“*Move forward,*” he said, grating the words. He was breathing heavily right over her ear.

“No way. Kind of between a scorpion and a hard place here.” She bit her lip, wishing one of her friends had heard her say that.

He eased back from her. “I killed it,” he said between breaths. “You can pass, just doona let it touch you.”

“Why do you care?” She frowned to find herself feeling chilled without him over her.

“Doona. A sting will slow you down. And I’m behind you, remember?”

“Like I’m going to forget that anytime soon.” Then his callous words sunk in. “Hey, werewolf,

aren't you supposed to gnaw on your prey or play with it with shuffling paws or something? Want me to save it for you?"

"I could put it back where I found it, witch."

"I could turn you into a toad." Maybe an exploded toad.

Without warning, he fingered the small, black tattoo on her lower back. "What does this script mean?"

She did gasp then, as much from the shock of his touch there as from her visceral reaction to it. She wanted to arch up to his hand and couldn't understand why. She snapped, "*Are you done groping me?*"

"Canna say. Tell me what the marking means."

Mari had no idea. She'd had it ever since she could remember. All she knew was that her mother used to write out that mysterious lettering in all of her correspondence. Or, at least her mother had before she'd abandoned Mari in New Orleans to go on her two-hundred-year-long druid sabbatical—

He tapped her there, impatiently awaiting an answer.

"It means *drunk and lost a bet*. Now keep your hands to yourself unless you want to be an amphibian." When the opening emerged ahead, she crawled heedlessly for it and scrambled out with her lantern swinging wildly. She'd taken only three steps into the new chamber before he'd caught her wrist, spinning her around.

As his gaze raked over her, he reached forward and pulled a lock of her long hair over her shoulder. He seemed unaware that he was languidly rubbing his thumb over the curl. "Why hide this face behind a cloak?" he murmured, cocking his head to the side as he studied her. "No' a damn thing's wrong with you that I can tell. But you look fey. Explains the name."

"How can I resist these suave compliments?" He was right about the name though. Many of the fey had names beginning in Mari or Kari.

She gave his light hold on her hair a pointed look, and he dropped it like it was hot, then scowled at her as if she were to blame.

"Right now you're working your spells, are you no'?" He actually leaned in to *scent* her.

“No, not at all. Believe me, you’d know.”

As if he hadn’t heard her, he continued, “Aye, you are.” His expression was growing more savage by the instant. “Just as you were born to do.”

But for some reason she wasn’t afraid. She was . . . excited. He must have seen something in her eyes that he didn’t like, because he abruptly turned from her.

As he surveyed their surroundings, she scrutinized him, searching for a single thing about his appearance that she didn’t find sexy—and failing.

All immortals were “frozen” into their immortality when they reached the peak of their strength and were best able to survive. But MacRieve had turned later than other males she’d seen in the Lore. He appeared as though he’d aged to be at least thirty-five. And, damn, it was a good look for him.

His clothes were well made but raffish. A small, ancient-looking medallion hung from a short length of leather around his neck, and a large hunting knife was strapped to his belt. He made Indiana Jones look like a poser pretty boy.

MacRieve also wore a whip at his side, no doubt to be prepared for an encounter with the vampire who’d entered the Hie. Like many demons, vampires could teleport—or trace—making them impossible to vanquish. Mari knew that some younger vampires could be trapped with a whip, preventing them from tracing and making them easier to kill.

That night at the assembly, MacRieve had clashed against the vampire in a bloody, vicious brawl, yet never had Mari seen anything so beautiful as the way he’d moved. The fight had been broken up by a Valkyrie, but Mari could have watched him for hours. . . .

When MacRieve visibly tensed, she followed his gaze. There, toward the back wall was a sarcophagus, the first she’d seen. A headdress would have to be within!

They both raced forward, colliding right before it.

With a growl he grabbed her arms to toss her away, his gaze already back on the crypt, but then he did a double take, frowning at her. He faced her fully as his grip eased on her. “You actually think to play with me?” His hands skimmed down her arms, then rested on her hips.

She exhaled a shaky breath. “Why do you assume I’m working spells?” She might have the

requisite adrenaline flowing, but knew she couldn't focus it. Especially not since she could feel the heat of his rough hands through the material of her shorts.

"For one hundred and eighty years I've no' touched another." He leaned in closer to her. "Have never even given a woman a second look. But now I canna seem to keep my hands off a slip of a *witch*," he rasped at her ear. "A witch who has me feeling like I'll die if I doona find out what it'd be like to kiss her." He drew back, his face a mask of rage. "*O' course it's a goddamned spell.*"

He wanted to kiss her now? Why now? He'd been faithful to his dead mate all this time? The idea softened something inside her—even as alarm trickled in.

What if she *was* working a spell? Elianna had once advised Mari to be careful what she wished for. When Mari had nodded at the old truism, Elianna had added, "No. Really. Be careful. We don't know the extent of your powers, and many witches can effect their desires with a mere thought."

Did Mari want to kiss Bowen MacRieve so badly that she was enthralling him?

When he lifted her onto the sarcophagus and wedged his hips between her legs, she suspected she might. She swallowed. "I take it you plan to find out what it'd be like?"

The battle raging inside him was clear on his face. "*Stop this, Mariketa.*" The way he rumbled her name with his accent made her melt. He removed his hands from her, but when he rested them beside her hips, his fingers curled until his dark claws dug into the stone. "Can you no' ken why I'm in this contest? I seek *her* again and wish to be true."

He wanted his mate back. Of course. He wanted to use Thrane's Key to go back in time and prevent her death. Surprisingly, Mari resented the woman who'd engendered such loyalty in this warrior for so many years. "I'm not . . . or I don't mean to be . . . doing anything to you," Mari whispered, but the way she was reacting to his scent, his mesmerizing eyes, and his hard body between her thighs belied the words.

There was an aura about him that was staggering to her, making it difficult to think. It wasn't mere male heat and sensuality. It was raw sexuality, animalistic in its intensity—and she was starving for it.

Ah, gods, she *did* want him to kiss her. Wanted it with everything that she was and willed him to do so. *Want me as fiercely as I want you . . . desire me as you've never desired another.*

He cupped the back of her neck, staring down at her. As she gazed up in fascination, the amber of his eyes turned to ice blue. He seemed desperate to recognize something in her, and when he clearly didn't find it, his hand on her began to shake. "Damn you, witch, I doona want another."

She suddenly knew two things: He was about to kiss her so fiercely she would never be the same again.

And he would hate himself for it afterward and despise her forever . . .

– 2 –

The witch *seethed* with power. Spells and magics swirled about her. Bowe could sense them, could perceive them tangling around him, binding him to her—because she was beckoning him to kiss her . . .

No, he couldn't get distracted from his aim! He wouldn't. So much was at stake with this competition. His past, his future. He knew this—knew what he was fighting for—so why couldn't he drag his eyes away from the witch's face?

As she gazed up at him, her features seemed to shift. Her irises briefly flickered from an ordinary blue to a stormy, intense gray. She licked her lips, and right before him they turned from pink to the deepest, most enticing red. His shaft throbbed harder, straining against his pants.

Yes, he had to taste her. To walk away without knowing what those glistening lips promised . . . ? Impossible. Not after beholding the body she'd concealed beneath her cloak. She was lush, surprisingly curvy with high, plump breasts. And in that tunnel, when he'd gazed upon her crawling in front of him, the allure of her generous hips and arse had been as strong as a siren's call to him. He'd have followed her for miles, hard as rock, heart thundering in anticipation.

Then to be wedged against her in that position? Hell, he'd just stopped himself from thrusting uncontrollably against her—

"Bowen . . ." she whispered, an edge of need in her voice.

The witch wanted; he was helpless not to give.

His first kiss in nearly two centuries.

Pulling her closer with his hand at her nape, he leaned down and took her mouth with his.

The merest contact rocked him. From the first touch, he felt how giving her lips were, parting in welcome. She gave a cry against him, and her palms traced up his chest to rest at his neck, her fingers twining in his hair.

He slipped his tongue into her mouth, and she met it with her own, with slow, wicked laps that made him inhale sharply to groan against her. His free hand grasped her waist to hold her as he deepened the kiss, and she moaned her approval, going soft against him.

She was the one enthralling him, so why did she seem to be going out of her head with desire? She seemed . . . *lost* for him. When would she pull back? Surely he couldn't be expected to. She would tell him to stop, and he would somehow manage to relinquish what he desired, as he had hundreds of times before.

But she didn't tell him. Between licks, she whispered, "*Yes, Bowen, yes.*" Instead of checking his lust, she urged him on, as if she wanted him, a Lykae, to lose control.

He clutched her neck hard. For over a thousand years, he'd unwaveringly scorned witches. Yet now he was savoring the wanton, drugging kiss of one—a soft, ruby-lipped witch, who, he feared, could make all his sexual dreams come true. Having been without sex for so long, Bowe dreamed about it *constantly*.

To be lost after so long . . . *Follow her into oblivion. Follow her down.*

* * *

At last Mari sensed him letting go, growing more aggressive, turning as fierce as she'd expected.

His kiss was hard and heated as he claimed her mouth. And she was more than ready to match his need. She found herself going up on her knees, brazenly pressing her body into his, feeling his unyielding erection against her belly.

She would become an immortal soon, she sensed it, and everyone had told her the flood of desires she'd experience leading up to the change would be strong. So far it had proved *overwhelming*. Was that what was happening here? Was she enjoying her first taste of lust between two immortals?

He was the most sinful kisser she'd ever had, and she knew she wasn't going to get another chance with him ever. So she gripped his head, kissing him as if her life depended on it.

When she'd made love in the past, Mari had felt that something vital was missing, something she'd feared she couldn't do without for much longer. Now she knew what she'd missed. *Intensity*. That hectic passion so strong it made good sense—made thought itself—fade to nothing but feeling. He could give that to her.

With the hand gripping her waist, he rubbed his thumb up and down her torso. When he made contact with the small ring at her navel, he drew a quick, surprised breath against her lips.

His shaking hand finally trailed lower. . . .

Aching to touch him as well, she ran her fingers down his broad chest. Just as she reached the waist of his jeans, he began working his fingers into her shorts. Their kiss grew more desperate.

When she thought about them touching each other like this, pleasuring each other, she couldn't prevent her hips from rocking up to his hand. But when her curious fingertips dipped down, and she brushed the broad, slick head of his erection, he jerked as if in shock at the touch, as if she'd seared him.

He grabbed her wrist, seeming to decide if he should pull her hand away or press it against him. "Need this," he finally rasped, forcing her hand into the heat of his jeans to grip his thick shaft. "So damned much."

"Yes!" she cried, feeling him stroking at the lace edge of her panties.

He groaned and reached lower. When he cupped the wet flesh between her legs, he shuddered, thrusting himself into her fist.

Just when she had no doubt they were about indulge in each other, he stilled. Even as his erection throbbed in her grip, and his breaths were ragged, he withdrew his hand from her and shook his head hard. "But canna have it."

Suddenly, he snatched her hand from him, squeezing her wrist so tightly, magic began building in her palm in reflex. His ghostly blue eyes flickered over the light. Then, as if reminded of what she was, he looked disgusted with her. His voice low, he said, "Quit the Hie, witch."

She slowly shook her head. "Not on your life, MacRieve." Not after everything she'd done to get here. And not when the next Hie wouldn't be for another two hundred and fifty years.

His lips were subtly drawing back to bare his lengthening fangs. "Vow you'll quit, or I swear I

will make it so you do no' distract me again."

"I wasn't trying to distract you—"

"Bullshite!" He shoved aside the sarcophagus cover she was perched on, jarring her. His hand rooted down, and he plucked out the headdress—a stunning gold and jade piece. "You could almost make me forget what I *really* want." Fisting his fingers around it, he cast her a menacing smile. They both knew that all he had to do was lift the prize above his heart, and it would travel to Riora, the goddess of the Hie. He raised it, and the headdress disappeared; for a second afterward, Mari felt the magic, clear and true, and smelled the goddess's forest temple halfway around the world.

So easily, Mari had just lost those points—or had had them *taken* from her.

"Do you really think you can defeat me?" he demanded. "And if no' me, then the Valkyrie or the vampire?"

"A seer predicted Kaderin will lose the Hie for once. This is anyone's game."

He eyed her. "You know why I will win. What do you seek?"

To show everyone! "It's personal," she said instead. "Look, we could team up. The key works twice."

"Team with you? What could you possibly offer me?" The expression he gave her said he was *amused* by her statement. Her eyes narrowed. He shouldn't be amused.

"I'm not without skills, MacRieve. I won the first two tasks I undertook." Mari could be surprisingly effective for someone who rarely put herself in challenging situations. When she did decide to work for something, she worked *hard*. In the Hie, she had to work harder merely because she was a mortal. "And I do believe I beat *you* here."

"Do you have any idea how much I despise witches?"

Many Lorekind did. Witches were feared and mistrusted, used only for their purchased spells. And that disdain had never bothered her so much as it did now. "No, that fact escaped me when you were sticking your tongue in my mouth."

The reminder seemed to enrage him. "You will no' take yourself from the hunt? Then I'll take the hunt from you." He twisted away from her, then charged for the tunnel.

Suspecting what he planned to do, she felt panic—and magic—rising up within her. After a

sharp shake of her head, she hurried after him. “Wait, MacRieve!” When she got to the tunnel, he was already climbing out the other end. A concentration of magic built in her palm, and she threw a beam of it at him. Didn’t know what she expected . . .

Though it shot straight as a laser, it just missed him. Once the tunnel was cleared of everything but after sparks and residual power flares, he leaned down to give her a black look, then disappeared.

Snatching up her lantern, she crawled through that awful space, breaths panicked and sharp, magic cloying about her. Once freed of the tunnel, she dashed down corridors, finally reaching the first anteroom.

The tomb’s entryway was at least twelve feet above this chamber’s floor. She arrived in time to see him leap the distance, easily clearing it.

As he gazed down at her from the opening, his eyes looked crazed, and she saw he was turning more fully. An image of a furious beast flickered over him. He ducked down, positioning himself under the portcullis. When he raised his hands above him to grip it, she said, “Don’t do this, MacRieve.”

He hefted the weight—with difficulty, but by himself. Two demons had labored with that feat. And the colossal stone that the three archers had struggled to shove under it? MacRieve simply kicked it away, toppling it from the ledge into the space near Mari.

As if her thoughts of them brought the other competitors, the archers entered the outer chamber, their easy smiles lit in the glow of their lanterns. When the three saw her, they appeared shocked that she wasn’t in her cloak. Each gaze locked on her pointed ears. “Mariketa, you’re *fey*, like us?” Tera, the female asked. “It was rumored at the assembly. . . .”

Tera trailed off when Mari nervously jerked her chin in MacRieve’s direction. The archers eased farther inside. In a heartbeat, they’d swung three nocked bows up at him, yet they knew if they shot, he’d drop his burden, sealing them in.

But he’s going to do it anyway.

The demons arrived then, quickly comprehending the situation. Their fangs lengthened as they began to turn into their own enraged demon shape.

Their eyes grew black as their skin darkened into a deep red. Their elegantly turned horns,

which usually curved out from just past their temples to run along the sides of their heads, now straightened and sharpened into deadly points, the normally shell-like color blackening.

Rydstrom, the older demon grated, "Bowen, think on what you plan." The two obviously knew each other.

Tera murmured to Mari, "Can you get a call out, Mariketa?"

Mari raised her right palm, intending to send a psychic message to her coven. Nothing came. She shoved her palm out again.

When she failed once more, MacRieve *laughed* at her. His voice sounding like a beast's, he grated, "No' quite so powerful, witch."

Enough. Fury churned in her like she'd rarely known before. She wanted to hurt him, *needed* to, and suddenly a rare focus came to her wrath, control to her power.

She put her left hand behind her back, and a spine of red light rose up from her palm, taking shape like a dagger. Tera must have seen what she was doing because she sidled up to her and raised her lantern to camouflage the magic's glow.

Building . . . building. . .

In a flash, Mari threw the dagger of light overhand. MacRieve appeared shocked at the speed and twisted to dodge it, but it exploded into painless fragments over his heart.

Bull's-eye. Subtle like.

With a glance down, he smirked, thinking himself safe. "Keep your daggers to yourself, witchling, till they get some bite."

He calmly took one step back . . . then dropped the stone. As it slammed shut with a deafening boom, a volley of arrows sank into it, too late. Air, rock, and sand rushed over Mari's face, gritting into her eyes. She heard the elven males yelling with rage as they rushed forward and banged on the wall.

When Mari wiped the sand from her eyes, she blinked, disbelieving what she saw. The elves backed away in silence. Once, long ago, something had leapt up, desperately seeking release from this place.

Deep claw marks scored the back of the portcullis in frenzied stripes.

– 3 –

As Bowe slowly backed from the tomb, he was met with silence. He knew that inside they were cursing him, but he wouldn't be able to hear. Much of the pyramidal steps were coated with thick soil and draped with roots and towering trees.

Yet even the jungles surrounding this square perimeter of ruins were quiet.

He continued to gaze at the edifice, finding himself unaccountably reluctant to leave. Part of him wanted to charge back in there and vent more of his rancor at the witch. To his shame, part of him was burning to retrieve her and finish what they'd started together.

He thought back to that moment when the witch had comprehended he was going to seal them in. She'd seemed *hurt* and her glamour had flickered.

In that instant, Cade's predatory gaze had darted to her, even in the midst of his killing rage. Divested of her cloak, comely Mariketa had seized the demon's attention. His brother Rydstrom, too, had done a double take.

Bowe had been surprised to find that the two demons Mariketa had mentioned were ones he knew. He had a history with the brothers—they'd fought side by side centuries ago—and had noticed them at the assembly, vaguely, when he could drag his eyes from the witch.

He recalled that the demons had been extremely popular with females.

Why in the hell did the idea of either brother with her sit so ill with him? *They can have her.* . . . With a final look, he turned, loping away to his truck.

Bowe was not immune to a Lykae's marked sense of curiosity, and when he came across the line

of the others' vehicles, he decided to investigate the interiors.

Empty bottles of a local beer and crushed cans of Red Bull littered the demons' truck. The archers had water bottles, protein bars, and electronic gadgetry in theirs.

Then came the witch's Jeep. She'd driven these demanding mountain roads—mud coated all the way up to the soft top—alone. And she'd driven them through a hotbed of political unrest and danger. This densely jungled region had been simmering with the threat of war between two human armies—a turf war between an established drug cartel and a sizable band of narco-terrorists. The conflict surely would erupt soon.

What in the hell had she been thinking? The fact that she'd somehow arrived at the same time as the others—and before Bowe himself—didn't matter.

She'd left two maps spread over the passenger seat, both with highlights and copious notes scrawled on them. Four research books lay in the backseat—among them *Pyramids & Palaces*, *Monsters & Masks: The Golden Age of Maya Architecture*. Many of the pages were systematically flagged with colored paper clips.

Beside the books, she had a well-worn camouflage backpack. A muddy machete hung from one side of the pack with an incongruous bright pink iPod on the other.

A pink iPod with *stickers of cats* on it, for all the gods' sakes.

Exactly how young was she? It was possible she'd only recently become immortal, possibly wasn't even over a hundred.

Whatever her age, she obviously was too young and too foolish not to know better than to toy with a powerful, twelve-hundred-year-old Lykae.

And she had toyed with him, had enthralled him to kiss her. Bowen MacRieve despised witches; he did not go out of his mind with *desire* for them.

His own father had been a victim of one's machinations. Bowe remembered his father's eyes were haunted, even centuries later, as he'd recounted his meeting with a raven-haired witch of incredible beauty—and unspeakable evil.

Angus MacRieve had come upon her at a snowy crossroads in the old country. She'd been wearing a jet black ermine stole and a white gown and had been the most lovely female he'd ever

imagined. She'd told that she'd grant him a wish if he would direct her to a neighboring town. Angus was just seventeen and had wished what he always did: to be the strongest of his older brothers, who picked on him good-naturedly but unmercifully.

The next day, three of them had been crossing a frozen lake they traversed daily. In the dead of winter, the ice had broken and they'd drowned. The day after that, two more brothers had fallen ill with some kind of fever. They'd quickly passed away though they'd been hale, braw lads.

In the end, the evil witch had granted his wish. Angus was indeed the strongest of them.

Bowe's father would never outlive his debilitating guilt. Because of his actions—inadvertent though they might have been—only two of the Lykae king's seven sons would survive, Angus, and a much younger brother.

Worse, Angus had been sickened to realize he was now the heir, and readily abdicated the position.

That witch had *delighted* in ruining a mere lad who was not an enemy and hadn't yet raised a sword in anger or aggression.

Witches had no purpose but to spread discord, to engender hatred. To plant destructive seeds in a once proud family.

To enthrall a male to be untrue for the first time.

Rage engulfed Bowe when he comprehended what he'd just done—with a bloody witch.

He roared, the sound echoing through the jungle, then stabbed his claws into the side of her jeep, slashing down the length. After puncturing the thick tires and plucking the engine from the chassis, Bowe set to all of their trucks, mangling them until they were useless.

Out of breath, covered in metal slivers, he scowled down at his hands. He could claw through a half-foot plate of steel like it was tinfoil without feeling it.

Yet now he felt . . . *pain*. Unfathomable pain.

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Excerpt from
DARK NEEDS AT NIGHT'S
EDGE

*A femme fatale? With a history of burlesque dancing? You must have the wrong girl. I'm naught
but a humble ballet dancer, a mere delicate sparrow.*

—Néomi Laress, prima ballerina, former femme fatale and burlesque dancer
(b. approx. 1901—d. August 24, 1927)

*—I hereby vow to devote my life to annihilating the vampiir.
None shall know my presence and live.*

—Conrad Wroth, age thirteen,
upon being inducted into the Order of Kapsliga Uur in the year 1709

Prologue

*New Orleans
August 24, 1927*

I'll kill you for spurning me. . . .

Struggling to block out memories of Louis Robicheaux's latest threat, Néomi Laress stood at the top of her grand staircase and gazed out over the packed ballroom.

As she might cradle a babe, she held bouquets of roses swathed in silk. They were gifts from some of the men in the crowd of partygoers below, a motley mix of her rollicking set, rich patrons, and newspaper reporters. A sultry bayou breeze slid throughout the space, carrying strains of music from the twelve-piece orchestra outside.

. . . you'll beg for my mercy.

She stifled a shiver. Her ex-fiancé's behavior had become more chilling of late, his atonement gifts more extravagant. Néomi's long-standing refusal to sleep with Louis had frustrated and angered him, but breaking off their relationship had *enraged* him.

The look in his pale eyes earlier tonight . . . She gave herself an inward shake. She'd hired guards for this event—Louis couldn't get to her.

One admirer, a handsome banker from Boston, noticed her aloft and began to clap. The throng joined in, and in her mind she envisioned a curtain going up. With a slow, gracious smile, she said, "*Bienvenue* to you all," then began descending her stairs.

No one would ever sense her anxiety. She was a trained ballerina, but above all things, she was an entertainer. She would work this room, dispensing teasing nibbles of sarcasm and softly spoken *bons mots*, charming any critics and coaxing laughter from even the most staid.

Though her arms already ached from cradling so many bouquets, and flashbulbs went off in glaring succession, her smile remained fixed. Another gliding step down.

She'd be damned before she'd let Louis ruin her night of triumph. Three hours ago, she'd given the performance of a lifetime to a sold-out house. For tonight's soiree celebrating her newly renovated estate, *Elancourt*, the Gothic manor house was resplendent with the glow of a thousand candles. Through her dancing, she'd paid for the painstaking restoration of her new home and all the sumptuous furnishings inside it.

Every detail for the party was perfect, and outside, a sliver moon clung to the sky. *A lucky moon.*

Her dress for this evening was a more risqué version of the costume she'd worn earlier, the satin as black as her jet hair. It had a tight bodice that she laced up the front like a bygone corset and a slit in the skirt that almost reached up to where her garter belt snapped to her stockings. Her makeup was styled after the Hollywood vamps—she'd kohled her eyes with a smoky hue, donned lipstick of oxblood red, and painted her short nails a dark crimson.

With her jeweled choker and dangling earrings, the ensemble had cost a small fortune, but tonight was worth it—tonight all her dreams had finally come true.

Only Louis could ruin it. She willed herself to ignore her apprehension, inwardly cursing him in English and in French, which helped ease her tension.

Until she nearly stumbled on the stairs. He was there, standing at the periphery, staring up at her.

Usually so perfect and kempt, he had his tie loosened, his blond hair disheveled.

How had he gotten past the guards? Louis was filthy rich—had the bastard bribed them?

His bloodshot eyes were burning with a maniacal light, but she assured herself that he wouldn't dare harm her in front of so many. After all, there were hundreds of people in her home, including reporters and photographers.

Yet she wouldn't put it past him to make a scene or expose her scandalous history to everyone. Her uptown patrons winked at her and her friends' colorful antics, but they had no idea what she was—much less of her past occupation.

Chin raised and shoulders back, she continued down, but her hands were clenching the roses. Resentment warred with her fear. So help her, God, she'd scratch his eyes out if he ruined this for her.

Just before she reached the bottom step, he began elbowing his way toward her. She tried to signal the burly guard at the opened patio door, but the crowd enveloped her, effectively trapping her. She attempted to make her way to the man, yet everyone wanted "to be the first to congratulate her."

When she heard Louis pushing people behind her, Néomi's soft-spoken apologies—"Pardonnez-moi, I'll just be a moment"—turned to "Let me pass!"

He neared. Out of the corner of her eye she spied his hand fiddling with something in his jacket pocket. Not another gift? *This will be so embarrassing.*

When that hand shot out, she whirled around, dropping her bouquets. Metal glinted in the light of the candles. Eyes wide, she screamed—

Just before he plunged a knife into her chest.

Pain . . . unimaginable pain. She could hear the blade grating past her bones, felt a force so jarring the tip pierced through her very back. As she clawed at his arms, ugly sounds erupted from her throat; those nearest her backed away in horror.

This can't be happening. . . .

Only when he released the knife with splayed fingers did her body collapse to the floor. Rosebuds

scattered around her, their petals wafting around the jutting hilt. She stared dumbly at the ceiling as warm blood seeped from her back, pooling all around her. She perceived the silence of the room over Louis's harried breaths as he knelt beside her, beginning to weep.

This isn't happening. . . .

The first hysterical scream rent the quiet. People fled the scene, shoving and tangling all around them. She heard the guards finally yelling and fighting past the crowd.

And Néomi lived still. She was dogged, a survivor—she would not die in her dream home on her dream night. *Fight—*

Louis fisted the hilt once again, jarring the knife inside her. *Agony . . . too much . . . can't bear this . . .* But she had no breath to scream, no strength to raise her limp arms to defend herself.

With a choking bellow he twisted the blade in the pocket of her wound. "Feel it for me, Néomi," he gasped at her ear. Pain exploded, radiating out from her heart to every inch of her body. "Feel what I have suffered!"

Too much! The temptation to close her eyes nearly overwhelmed her. Yet she kept them open, *kept living.*

"See how much I love you? We'll be together now." The knife made a sucking sound when he yanked it from her. Just before he was finally tackled to the ground, he sliced his own throat ear to ear.

Her blood had begun to cool by the time a doctor crouched to grasp her wrist. "There's no pulse," he said to someone unseen, his voice raised over the commotion. "She's gone."

But she wasn't! Not yet!

Néomi was young, and there were so many things she had left to experience. She *deserved* to live. *I'm not dying.* Her hands somehow clenched. *I refuse to!*

Yet as the breeze picked up once more, Néomi's vision guttered out like a candle. *No, no . . . still living . . . can't see, can't see . . . so scared.*

Rose petals caught on the wind and tumbled over her face. She could feel each cool kiss of them.

Then . . . nothingness.

– 1 –

*Outside Orleans Parish
Present day*

Stay sane, act normal, he chants to himself as he strides down the rickety pier. On either side of him, water black like tar. Ahead of him, muted light from the bayou tavern. A Lore bar. A lone neon sign flickers over flat skiffs below. Music and laughter carry.

Stay sane . . . need to dull the rage. Until the endtime.

Inside. “Whiskey.” His voice is low, rough from disuse.

The bartender’s face falls. Like last night. Others grow skittish. *Can they sense that I ache to kill?* The whispers around him are like metal on slate to his ragged nerves.

—“Conrad Wroth, once a warlord . . . madder than any vampire I’ve seen in all my centuries.”

—“A killer for hire. If he shows up in your town, then folks from the Lore there’ll go missing.”

Missing? Unless I want them found.

—“Heard he drains ’em so savagely . . . nothing’s left of their throats.”

So I’m not fastidious.

—“I heard he eats them.”

Distorted rumors. *Or is that one true?*

Tales of his insanity spreading once more. *I’ve never missed a target—how insane can I be?* He answers himself: *Very fucking much so.*

Memories clot his mind. His victims’ memories taken from their blood toll inside him, their

number always growing. *Don't know what's real; can't determine what's illusion.* Most of the time, he can scarcely understand his own thoughts. He doesn't go a day without seeing some type of hallucination, striking out at shadows around him.

A grenade with the pin pulled, they say. Only a matter of time.

They're right.

Stay sane . . . act normal. Glass in hand, he chuckles softly on his way to a dimly lit table in the back. *Normal?* He's a goddamned vampire in a bar filled with shifters, demons, and the sharp-eared fey. Christmas lights are strung up in the back—through the eye sockets of human skulls that frame a mirror. In the corner, a demoness lazily strokes her lover's horns, visibly arousing the male. At the bar, an immense werewolf bares his fangs, bowing protectively as he tosses a small redhead behind him.

Can't decide if you should attack, Lykae? That's right. I don't smell of blood. A trick I learned.

The couple leaves, the redhead all but carried out by the Lykae. As they exit, she peers over her shoulder, her eyes like mirrors. Then gone. Out into the night where they belong.

Sit. Back against the wall. He adjusts the sunglasses that shade his red eyes, dirty red eyes. As he scans the room, he resists the urge to rub his palm over the back of his neck. *Watched by someone unseen?*

But then, I always feel like that.

He swoops up the drink, narrowing his eyes at his steady hand. *My mind's decayed, but my sword hand's still true.* A ruinous combination.

He takes a liberal swallow. *The drink.* The whiskey dulls the need to lash out. Not that it has disappeared.

Small things enrage him. An off look. Someone approaching too quickly. Failing to give him a wide enough berth. His fangs sharpen at the slightest provocation. *As though a living thing hungers inside me.* Ravenous for blood and a throat to tear. Each time he acts on the rage, others' memories blight more of his own.

He still has enough sanity to stalk his targets—his brothers. He will mete out retribution to Nikolai and Murdoch Wroth for doing the unspeakable to him. Sebastian, the third brother, was a

victim like him, but must be slain—simply because of what he is.

And my time grows nigh. Like an animal, he recognizes this. He's found them in this mysterious place of swamps and haze and music. He's seen Nikolai and Sebastian with their wives. He might have felt envy that his brothers laugh with them. That they touch them possessively, with wonder in their clear eyes. But hatred drowns out any confusing jealousy.

Offspring will follow. He'll kill their females as well. *Destroy them. Destroy myself. Before my enemies catch up with me.*

He adjusts the bandage under his shirt on his left arm. The slashed skin beneath it will not heal. Five days ago, he was marked by a dream demon, one who tracks him by this very injury. One who promised that his *most coveted dream and most dreaded nightmare* would follow the mark.

His brows draw together. The hunter will soon become the hunted—his life is nearing its end.

A whisper of regret. The thing he regrets most. He tries to remember what he covets so dearly. Another's memories bombard him, exploding in his mind. His hand shoots up to clasp his forehead—

Nikolai enters the bar, Murdoch behind him. Their expressions are grave.

They've come to kill me. As he expected. He thought he could draw them out by returning here again and again. He lowers his hand, and his lips ease back from his fangs. The bar empties in a rush.

Then . . . stillness. His brothers stare at him as if seeing a ghost. Insects clamor outside. Rain draws near and steepens the air. Just as lightning strikes in the distance, Sebastian enters, crossing to stand beside the other two. He's allied with them? This he hadn't expected.

He removes his sunglasses, revealing his red eyes. The eldest, Nikolai, stifles a wince at the sight, but shakes it off and advances. The three seem surprised that he'll stay to engage them, that he hasn't traced away. They are strong and skilled, yet they don't recognize the power he wields, the thing he's become.

He can slaughter them all without blinking, and he'll savor it. They haven't drawn their swords? Then they walk to their doom. *Can't keep them waiting.*

He lunges from his seat and hurdles the table, knocking Sebastian unconscious with a blow that cracks his skull and sends him flying into the back wall. Before the other two can raise a hand in defense, he snatches them by their throats. One in each tightening hand as they grapple to free

themselves. “Three hundred years of this,” he hisses. Their struggles do nothing. Their shocked expressions satisfy. Squeezing—

Wood creaks behind him. He shoves back and heaves his brothers at a new enemy. Too late; that Lykae’s returned and slashes out with flared claws, ripping through his torso. Blood gushes.

He roars with fury and charges the werewolf, dodging claws and teeth with uncanny speed to barrel him to the ground. Just as his hands are about to meet around the Lykae’s corded neck, the beast claps something to his right wrist.

A *manacle*? Clenching harder, he grates out a rasping laugh. “You don’t think that will hold me?” Bones begin to pop beneath his palms. The kill is near, and he wants to yell with pleasure.

The werewolf cuffs his left wrist.

What is this? The metal won’t bend. Won’t break. *They goddamned mean to take me alive?* He leaps to his feet, tensing to trace. Nothing. Sebastian on the floor, pouring blood from his temple, has him by the ankles.

He kicks Sebastian, connecting squarely with his brother’s chest. Ribs crack. He whirls around—in time to catch the bar rail the Lykae swings at his face.

He staggers but remains on his feet.

“What the fuck *is* he?” the Lykae bellows, swinging the rail again with all his might.

The brutal hit takes him across his neck. A split second of faltering. Enough for his brothers to tackle him.

He thrashes and bites, snapping his fangs. *Can’t break free . . . can’t . . .* They attach the manacles at his wrists to another chain. He kicks viciously, stunned when they trap his legs as well.

Choking with rage, he strains against his bonds with all his strength. The metal cleaves his skin to the bone. Nothing.

Caught. He roars, spitting blood at them, dimly hearing them speak.

“I hope you came up with a good place to put him,” Sebastian says between ragged breaths.

“I bought a long-abandoned manor,” Nikolai grates, “place called *Elancourt*.”

Chills course through him even through his fury; pain erupts from the injury on his arm. *A dream. His doom.* He can never go to this Elancourt—knows this with a savage certainty. He’s too

strong for them to trace him—there's still time to escape.

If they take him there, they won't take him alive. . . .

* * *

Under a clouded nighttime sky, the spirit of Néomi Laress knelt in the drive at the very edge of her property line, gazing hungrily at the newspaper, lying wrapped in wet plastic.

Today the deliveryman—that capricious fiend—had missed the drive again, this time tossing the bundle squarely onto the desolate county road.

Néomi was starving for that paper, desperate for the news, reviews, and commentary that would break up the monotony of her life—or her eighty-year-long *afterlife*.

But she couldn't leave the estate to seize it. As a ghost, Néomi could manipulate matter telekinetically, and her power was nearly absolute at Elancourt—she could rattle all the windows or tear off the roof if she wanted to, and the weather often changed with her emotions—but not outside the property.

Her beloved home had become her prison, her eternal cell of fifteen acres and a slowly dying manor. Among fate's other curses, each seemingly designed to torture her in personal and specific ways, Néomi could never leave this place.

She didn't know why this was so—only that it was, and had been since she'd awakened the morning after her murder. She recalled seeing her haunting reflection for the first time. Néomi remembered that exact moment when she'd realized that she'd died—when she'd first comprehended what she'd become.

A ghost. She'd become something that frightened even her. Something unnatural. Never again to be a lover or friend. Never to be a mother, like she'd always planned after her dancing career. As a storm had boiled outside, she'd silently screamed for hours.

The only thing she could be thankful for was that Louis hadn't been trapped here with her.

She stretched harder. *Must . . . have that . . . paper!*

Néomi wasn't certain why it continued to arrive. A past article had recounted the problems inherent with “recurrent billing of credit cards,” and she supposed she was the benefactress of her last tenant's credit card negligence. The delivery could end at any time. Every one was precious.

Eventually she gave up, defeated, sitting back in the weed-ridden drive. Out of habit, she made movements as if she was rubbing her thighs, yet felt nothing.

Néomi could *never* feel. Never again. She was incorporeal, as substantial as the mist rolling in from the bayou.

Thanks, Louis. Oh, and may you rot in hell—because surely that's where you went. . . .

Usually, at this point in the newspaper struggle, she'd be battling the urge to tear her hair out, wondering how much longer she could endure this existence, speculating what she'd done to deserve it.

Yes, on the night of her death, she'd refused to die, but this was ridiculous.

But even as desperate as she was for the words, she wasn't as badly off as usual.

Because last night a man had come into her home. A towering, handsome man with grave eyes. He might return this night. He might even *move in*.

She shouldn't get too excited about the stranger, to have her hopes crushed yet again—

Lights blinded her; the shriek of squealing tires ripped through the quiet of the night.

As a car shot forward onto the gravel, she futilely raised her arms to protect her face and gave a silent cry. It drove straight through her, the engine reverberating like an earthquake when it passed through her head.

The vehicle never slowed as it prowled down the oak-lined drive to Elancourt.

– 2 –

Néomi blinked, her strong night vision returning slowly. Even after all these years, she was still surprised that she was unharmed.

She recognized the sharp, low car from last night, so markedly different from the trucks that usually chugged by on the old county road. Which meant . . . which meant . . .

He's returned! The grave-eyed man who came here last night!

The paper forgotten, she materialized to Elancourt's landing, overlooking the front entrance. She moved as if to clutch the sides of the window there, her arms floating outspread.

And there sat his car in the drive.

Won't you move in? she'd wanted to beg last night as the man had examined the manor. He'd tested the columns, drawn sheets off some of the remaining furniture, and even yanked on the radiant heater in the main salon. Appearing satisfied that it was solid, he'd followed the contraption's underfloor pipes by stomping on the marble tiles.

The heater will work, she'd inwardly cried. Ten years ago, the manor had been modernized by a young couple who'd stayed for a time.

Yet she couldn't relate the merits of Elancourt to this mysterious stranger. Because she was a ghost. The act of speaking, or at least talking in a way that others could hear, had proved impossible for her, as had making herself visible to others.

Which was probably for the best. Her reflection was haunting even to her. Though Néomi's appearance was a close facsimile of how she'd looked the night she died—with the same dress and

jewelry—now her skin and lips were as pale as rice paper. Her hair flowed wildly with rose petals tangled in it, and the skin under her eyes was darkened, making her irises seem freakishly blue in contrast.

She focused on the car again. Deep masculine voices sounded from within it. Was there more than one man?

Maybe there'd be two more "confirmed bachelors" like the handsome couple who had lived here during the fifties!

Whoever was within the car needed to hurry inside. Autumn rains had been tentatively falling all night, and lightning had begun flaring in a building rhythm. She hoped the men didn't catch the front façade lit by the glow of lightning. With its arches and overhangs and stained glass, the manor could appear . . . forbidding.

The very Gothic traits she'd admired seemed to drive others away.

The vehicle began to rock from side to side on its wide wheels, and the voices grew louder. Then came a man's bellow. Her lips parted when two large boots kicked through the back window, shattering it, glass spraying out into the gravel.

Someone unseen hauled the booted man back inside, but then a rear door began to bulge outward. Were cars so weak in this age that a man could kick it out of shape? No, no, she'd dutifully read the crash test reports, and they said—

The door shot off its hinges, all the way to the front porch. She gasped as a wild-eyed, crazed man lunged out of the vehicle. He was manacled at his wrists and ankles and covered in blood. He immediately fell into a deep slick of mud, only to be tackled by three men.

One of them was her prospective tenant from last night.

She saw then that they all were covered in blood—because the chained one was spitting it at them as he thrashed.

"No . . . no!" he yelled, struggling not to enter the house. Could he possibly sense there was more here than could be seen? No one had before.

"Conrad, stop fighting us!" the tenant said through gritted teeth. His accent sounded Russian.

"We don't want to hurt you."

But the madman named Conrad didn't let up one bit. "God damn you, Nikolai! What do you want with me?"

"We're going to rid you of this madness, defeat your bloodlust."

"You *fools!*" He laughed manically. "No one comes back!"

"Sebastian, grab his arms!" this Nikolai barked to one of the others. "Murdoch, get his damned legs!" As Murdoch and Sebastian rushed to action, she realized that they both resembled Nikolai. All three had the same grim expression, the same tall, powerful bodies.

Brothers. Their captive must be one as well.

They carried the bloody and flailing Conrad toward the front double doors. Blood in her home. She shuddered. She detested blood, hated the sight of it, the scent of it. She'd never forget how it'd felt to be bathed in her own, to have it thicken and cool around her dying body.

Hadn't Elancourt seen enough of it?

In a panic, she raced downstairs and shot her hands up, exerting an invisible force against the doors. She used all her strength to keep them sealed tight. No one could bust through this hold—

The doors flew open. The men barreled through her, making her shiver as though she'd walked through a cobweb. A gust of wind rushed inside, following them in to stir the leaves and grit coating the floor.

Just how strong were they? Yes, they were huge, but she'd held the doors with what had to be the strength of twenty men.

Once inside the darkened room, Nikolai cast a chain across the floor with no care for her Italian marble.

The lunatic broke free once more, making it to his feet. He was towering! He lumbered toward the door, but his bound ankles ensured that he careened into an antique armoire covered with a sheet. It collapsed under the impact. *Crushed.*

She'd had to dance two performances to afford that piece, and remembered lovingly polishing it herself. It was one of the few original furnishings that remained.

After Murdoch and Sebastian hoisted him out of the wreckage, Murdoch wrapped his thick arm around Conrad's neck, cupping the back of Conrad's head with his free hand. She could see that

Murdoch was tightening this hold with all his might, his face drawn with the effort, the muscles in his neck standing out with strain.

Somehow Conrad was unaffected for long moments. Eventually, his thrashing eased and he went limp. While Murdoch laid him on the ground, Nikolai hastily affixed the chain to the same radiator he'd tested last night, then attached the other end to Conrad's handcuffs.

That's why Nikolai had been inspecting it? Because he intended to jail this lunatic here?

Why here?

"Could you have found an eerier place to keep him?" Sebastian said between breaths as they all stood. At that instant, lightning crackled just outside. The high stained-glass windows were broken in places and cast tinted light, distorting the shadows within. "Why not use the old mill?"

"Someone might come across him there," Murdoch answered. "And Kristoff knows about the mill. If he or his men discover what we're planning . . ."

Who's Kristoff? What are they planning?

Nikolai added, "Besides, Elancourt was recommended to me."

"Who would ever recommend this?" Sebastian waved a hand around. "It looks straight from a horror movie." She wished he was wrong, but a bolt flashed then; hued shadows appeared to slither and pounce. Sebastian raised his brows as if his point had been made.

Nikolai's gaze focused on his brothers' faces, studying their reactions as he answered, "Nix did." He hesitated, seeming not to know if they'd laugh, rail, or nod.

Murdoch shrugged and Sebastian nodded grimly.

Who's Nix?

Sebastian glanced around. "Raises my hackles, though"—another flash of lightning—"almost like it's . . . *haunted*."

Sebastian gets a cookie.

"And you know that's something for me to say. It's spooked Conrad as well."

Yes, because otherwise he clearly would be fine.

"The weather makes it seem worse." Nikolai ran his hand through his wet hair, then wiped his face with his shirttail. "And if there are spirits lingering about? You forget what we are—any ghosts

would do well to fear us.”

Fear them? No living thing could touch her.

“It’s actually ideal because the place scares people away,” Nikolai continued over another bout of thunder. “And the Valkyrie compound isn’t far from here—not many from the Lore will venture anywhere near their home.”

Valkyrie? Lore? She remembered a newspaper article a few years back on “Gang Speak.” These men were speaking Gang. They had to be.

Murdoch said, “Perhaps the Valkyrie won’t appreciate vampires so close to Val Hall.”

Vampires? Not Gang? They’re all mad. Mon Dieu, I need a bourbon.

“Is it even *habitable*?” Sebastian asked in a scoffing voice.

Nikolai nodded. “The structure and the roof are solid—”

As rock.

“—and once we do some modifications, it’ll be suitable for our purposes. We’ll fix just what we need: a couple of bedrooms, a shower, the kitchen. I already had the witches come around today to do an enclosure spell along the perimeter of the estate. As long as Conrad’s wearing those chains, he can’t escape the boundary.”

Witches? Oh, come now! Néomi moved to rub her temple, felt nothing, but was somewhat soothed by the familiar act.

In the lull, Murdoch cased the main salon, plucking at cobwebs. “Conrad knew we were going to be at the tavern.”

“No doubt of it,” Nikolai answered, crossing to a dirt-caked window to glance outside. “He was awaiting us. To kill us.”

“Obviously he’s gotten good at it.” Sebastian patted his ribs in an assessing manner and winced. Looking more closely, she could see that they all seemed injured in some way. Even Conrad appeared to have been clawed across the chest by some beast. “He likes it.”

Likes to kill? A murderer in my home. Again. Was he the same kind of man as Louis—one who would stab a defenseless woman through the heart? *Tamp it down, Néomi.* . . . The wind picked up. *Control the emotion.*

Murdoch said, "I suppose he'd have to, if the word about his occupation is true."

A professional killer?

"Finding him now . . . it couldn't come at a worse time," Sebastian said. "How are we going to manage this?"

"We fight a war, deceive our king, try not to worry about our Kaderin and Myst, all the while attempting to salvage Con's sanity," Nikolai replied evenly.

Murdoch lifted a brow. "And here I thought we would be busy."

The brothers began exploring nearby rooms, testing wood for rot and pulling sheets from furniture, examining their surroundings.

In the past, she'd been fortunate with those who'd occupied Elancourt. Nice families had come and gone, a few harmless vagrants. Nothing about these men said, *We're nice and harmless!*

Especially not the chained murderer. He lay on the floor, blood collecting at the corner of his parted lips to drip down.

Drip . . . drip . . . A crimson pool was stark against her marble. Just as before. *Tamp it down. Control it.*

The madman's eyes flashed open. She couldn't warn the others! In the space of a bolt of lightning, he somehow shot to his chained feet, hobbling forward with unnatural speed. Before she could even raise her arms to exert pressure against him, he'd stretched the chain taut . . . the radiator was bending under the pressure.

He couldn't break it. Imposs—

Like a whip, it snapped free as he charged across the room for the door—the door where she stood. As she stared in disbelief, the radiator trailed in his wake, destroying everything in its wildly sweeping path.

Suddenly, the underfloor web of attached heating pipes burst up through the floor, foot after foot of groaning metal and exploding marble and splinters.

The three men dove for him once more, the pile of them skidding to a stop right at her slippers.

She gaped. Her home, her beloved home. In fifteen minutes, the madman had wrought more destruction to Elancourt than it had sustained in the last eighty years.

Her hands fisted. *Control it.* But her hair had already begun to swirl about her face, rose petals floating in a tempest around her body. Outside, the wind kicked up, streaming through the holes in the high windows, sweeping the grit and dust until she was able to see all the destruction.

The marble! When her eyes watered with frustration, rain poured outside.

Tamp it down.

Too late. Lightning bombarded the house, illuminating the night like successive bomb blasts. From under the pile of men, Conrad yanked his head up at her.

In a flash, Néomi twisted round, sweeping her hair over her face as she dissipated. Reemerging on the landing, she gazed down at him.

Conrad continued to stare at the spot where she'd stood, blinking and easing his struggles as if dumbfounded.

Had he . . . had he possibly seen her?

No one ever had before. Ever. She'd been so uniformly ignored for so long that she'd begun to wonder if she truly existed.

Up close, she'd been able to see that the whites of his eyes were . . . red. She'd thought he'd been injured, with burst blood vessels shooting across, but in fact, they were wholly glazed with red.

What were these beings? Could they truly be . . . *vampires*? Even in light of what she'd become, she still struggled to believe in anything supernatural.

With a shake of his head, Conrad frenziedly renewed his flight for the door, gaining inches, even as the three wrestled with him.

"I didn't want to have to do this, Conrad!" Nikolai said, digging into his jacket pocket. As the others pinned Conrad, he bit the end off what appeared to be a syringe and injected its contents into Conrad's arm.

Whatever it was slowed him, making him blink his red eyes again and again.

"What did you give him?" Sebastian asked.

"It's a concoction from the witches—part medical, part mystical. It should knock him out."

For *how long* would it knock Conrad out? How long were they expecting him to stay here? To spit across her floor and roar within her halls? She'd be damned if she allowed another of Louis's

ilk to taint her home once more! This Conrad was an animal. He should be put down. Or at the very least, *put out*.

She'd show these trespassers power like they'd never seen, sweeping them into the yard like trash! She'd toss them by their feet all the way to the bayou!

Néomi would demonstrate what happened when a ghost went poltergeist—

“*Where . . . is she?*” Conrad grated between heaving breaths.

Néomi froze. He couldn't be talking about her, couldn't have seen her.

“Who, Conrad?” Nikolai demanded.

Just before the shot knocked him unconscious, he rasped, “Female . . . *beautiful*.”

– 3 –

Dawn had come and gone, and still Néomi was reeling. Because apparently Elancourt was filled to the rafters with real vampires.

Any lingering doubt had evaporated when she'd seen the brothers vanish and reappear as they'd gone about repairing parts of the house.

And this wasn't even the most astonishing development of the night. When Conrad had said, "*Female . . . beautiful*," had he possibly been talking about her?

Now she could only wait impatiently for him to regain consciousness so she could find out.

He remained as the brothers had left him last night—lying on the new mattress they'd brought in for him, with his wrists chained together behind him, his muddy boots and the ankle restraints removed. His ripped clothing had dried, the material stiff with dirt. The angry red gashes on his chest had healed within mere hours.

She floated in a sitting position above the foot of the bed, wondering how much longer he would be out. She'd thought all vampires would be comatose during the day, but his brothers were in and out downstairs, busily teleporting goods into the manor.

This waiting was unbearable. *Because he possibly . . . saw me.* Yes, no one ever had before, and, yes, this development was based solely on the idea that he'd deemed her beautiful. Maybe if he wasn't one to quibble about pink cheeks and the appearance of blooming health . . . ?

Néomi didn't necessarily seek an acknowledgment of her presence. She could float a sheet spray-painted with "*Bonjour! from le spectre!*" if she wanted bad attention, or a possible exorcism.

No, she wanted to be *seen*. She yearned to converse.

The possibility of this meant that all her grand plans to evict them had evaporated, her rancor over the damage to Elancourt temporarily soothed. Now she wanted to keep them close—especially Conrad.

Curiosity ruled her. Why after eighty years of sporadic tenants had the blood-spitting vampire been able to see her? Why not his brothers? When they'd been chaining up Conrad for the day, she'd waved her hands, yelling as loud as she could. She'd even thrown herself through their torsos, to no effect.

Was Conrad able to see her because he alone had red eyes?

She stood to float from one peeling blue wall to the other. The brothers had unerringly chosen for Conrad the Blue Room, the most masculine of all the guest rooms. The heavy curtains were a deep navy, and the spare pieces of furniture—the bedstead, the nightstand, and a high-backed chair by the fireplace—were dark and stout.

Though she'd expected them to sleep in coffins, they'd put Conrad in the made-up bed. She'd also believed that even indirect sun would burn them, but the room was aglow with enough pallid sunlight to illuminate the dust motes. And when the curtains wavered from a draft in the house, light would encroach all the way up to his feet.

He turned over on his back then, reminding her how massive he was, his broad shoulders seeming to span the bed, his feet hanging over the end. He must be over six and a half feet tall.

She floated above him, tilting her head as she peered down. He looked to be in his early thirties, but it was difficult to tell with the mud and blood covering his face. With a nervous swallow, she concentrated and used telekinesis to draw back his upper lip, jabbing his nose before she got it right.

She saw a slash of white teeth gleaming against his dirty face and . . . unmistakable fangs. Just like in the novels she'd read long ago. Just like in the vampire movies the last young couple had loved to watch.

How had these men become vampires? Were they turned? Or born that way?

At that moment a loud bang sounded from downstairs. Though she dearly wanted to investigate what they were doing to her house, she feared Conrad would wake in her absence.

The brothers had already boarded many of the windows that didn't have heavy curtains, and had brought in folding chairs, mattresses, and sheets—even a modern refrigerator. The plumbing had been repaired in the master bathroom. Earlier, electricity had surged to life so abruptly that the lightbulb and fixture overhead had popped and shattered, raining glass.

She'd floated the shards off the prisoner, a good move because he now began to twist in the tangled sheets.

When his ripped shirt rode up a few inches, she noticed a thin scar beginning just above the waistline of his loose pants. How long was it? She waved her hand to tug the shirt farther up his torso. The scar continued. Nibbling her lip, she painstakingly manipulated the buttons until she could unfasten them all and spread the sides wide.

The scar nearly reached up to his heart. It appeared as if a razor-sharp blade had entered at his stomach and slashed upward.

When she could drag her gaze from the mark, she surveyed his chest. It was broad and generously packed with muscle. With his hands behind his back, those rippling muscles seemed to flex even at rest. His entire torso looked hard as rock, with not a spare ounce on him.

She wondered what his skin would feel like. She would never know. . . .

His pants waist sat so low that she could see the line of crisp, black hair descending from his navel. That dusky trail taunted her to ease his pants lower, but she resisted—barely.

The men Néomi had been attracted to in the past had been older and handsome in a soft, cultured way. In contrast, this male was all hardness and sharp edges.

So why did she find his battle-scarred body so attractive?

"Oh, wake up, Conrad," she said with difficulty. Speaking was an arduous undertaking for her—she often felt like she was trying to shove elephant-sized sounds through a pinhole. To her, the words came out echoing and extended. *"Just . . . wake up."* She wanted to jump on the bed or scream in his ear. If she'd had a bucket of water—

Conrad's eyes shot wide open.

* * *

He comes to. The light is murder on his sensitive eyes. Pain shoots through him. He grits his

teeth against waves of it.

Get free. He fights his bonds. Limbs feel leaden. *Drugged.* Rage stabs him, the need to kill strangles him like clenched hands around his own throat.

How long have I been out? He remembers where he is. The manor—as forbidding as he’d sensed it would be. When he’d been in the car, the sight of it had made him sweat and thrash.

The feeling of being watched is multiplied here, the tingle on the back of his neck unrelenting.

He tenses. He’d seen . . . *had* he seen a spill of shining black hair as some female twirled round? *Can’t determine what’s real and what’s illusion.* Before she vanished, he’d thought he’d glimpsed blue eyes going wide with surprise. He’d smelled roses and had seen a bared shoulder—slim and impossibly pale. Yet no one else had reacted to her.

Which means she can’t be real.

Anything he sees that others don’t is suspect. She’s likely a figment in his mind from another’s memory. Someone that he’s drunk had known her as a wife, a mistress . . . or one of their own victims.

He strains harder against the chains. Nothing. Metal like this shouldn’t be able to hold him. Unless . . . *mystically reinforced.*

Damn his brothers to hell! Why in the fuck would they bring him here? This place feels wrong, menacing. He doesn’t know how or why. Doesn’t care. *Just know I have to get free.*

Suddenly the smell of roses surrounds him. *I’m not alone in this room.* Though he sees nothing, there’s another presence here. Is it the female from before? *Was* there a female before? He begins to sweat.

Something is inches from him, creeping closer . . . he could swear he feels warm breaths against his ear. He writhes, baring his fangs in warning. The need to kill seethes inside him.

Closer . . . closer . . .

From directly beside his ear he scarcely hears a voice. He can’t make out the faltering words.

But he senses *expectancy*—a yearning that hits him in roiling waves. His head feels like it’s about to explode. He’s supposed to do something. “What? *What?*” He doesn’t know . . . doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do . . .

He hates this need he senses.

“Seeeeeee meeeeeee?” the faint voice says. He jerks his head back and forth. Sees *nothing*.

He lunges upright, feeling a shock of something, like static electricity.

* * *

Conrad’s body drifted through hers, making her gasp and him shudder.

He stumbled to his feet. Confusion appeared to mount within him. “Someone’s here. Real?” His voice sounded even raspier than last night.

“Conrad, be calm,” she said slowly.

His eyes glowed a deeper red. “Show—yourself!” Could he possibly be responding to her words? Or did he merely have some kind of vampire’s sense that he wasn’t alone?

With a low growl, he backed against the wall as he worked on the manacles. Finally he looped his bound hands under his feet to bring them forward. Seeming to relish the chance to fight, he intently scanned the room for an enemy, for a kill.

As Néomi hovered about him, waving her hand in front of his face, his eyes darted wildly, his head jerking right, then left. Frowning, she brandished her forefinger, stabbing his eye, passing straight through it.

He didn’t blink.

She floated backward as if pushed. *He can’t see me*. Heavy disappointment settled over her.

Beautiful female? Just the ramblings of a madman. She’d seized on the words no matter how unlikely they were because she’d been desperate.

The elation of the night had set her up for the bitterest disappointment. She gave one last frantic wave at his eyes—

He snapped his teeth, the sound like a bear trap; she reacted with a startled cry and raised her hands, shoving him away, sending him like a cannonball into the high-backed chair. When the chair slammed into the opposite wall, it collapsed from the impact, exploding into a cloud of splinters, tufts of upholstery filler, and plaster.

Battling to be freed from the shambles, he yelled in a foreign language, what had to be oaths. Yet he appeared to *like* the violence—or at least to be accustomed to it.

“Conrad . . . wait!” she managed to bite out. *Where are the brothers? With their syringes?* Yes, the three men were in and out, but they were never gone long.

Once he made it to his feet, he began tearing through the room, banging on the walls with his chained hands, knocking holes in the brittle plaster.

“Stop hurting . . . my house!”

He didn’t. Instead, he snatched up the fireplace tools and swung them round, chucking them with so much force that the poker embedded itself into the brick of the fireplace, bobbing there. When his frenzied gaze landed on the defenseless nightstand, she said, “No closer.”

Conrad charged for it. Without thinking, she swept him up to the ceiling. He closed his eyes tight, then opened them, seeming astounded to be still regarding the floor.

He thrashed and fought her hold. He was strong, and soon she was forced to drop him, more hastily than she’d intended—he landed flat on his face. When he rose, she saw that his forehead was gushing blood into his eyes and alongside his nose.

She hadn’t meant to hurt him! “*Dieu, je regrette!*”

“Conrad!” Nikolai yelled from downstairs, appearing in the doorway a split second later. He swept a baffled glance over the chaotic scene. “What the hell are you—”

Nikolai never finished his question because Conrad swung his bound arms at him. As though hit by a battering ram, Nikolai flew out of the room and over the landing to the first floor.

Conrad charged out the door with a wide-eyed Néomi right behind him. Though his speed was still superhuman, he was slower than he’d been last night—even with his ankles free. They’d already weakened him drastically.

As Nikolai lumbered to his feet, Sebastian stood on the stairs, arms outstretched. But Conrad planted his chained hands on the railing and leapt down, evading any contact. When he turned toward the front entry, he found Murdoch barring his way.

Nikolai yelled, “Conrad, it’s impossible for you to leave! Damn it, the sun!”

What would happen to Conrad in the direct light of day? She gasped when he charged Murdoch, tackling him into the mahogany front doors. They wrenched one completely free of its hinges, flattening it onto the front porch.

Just before they surged into the morning sun, Murdoch traced back to the protective cover of the porch. Conrad continued. Should she try to stop him?

Nikolai started to follow, but Sebastian snatched his shirt and lugged him back to the shade. “He won’t get far, Nikolai.”

Néomi stood beside the brothers. Out of habit, she shaded her eyes as the four of them watched Conrad racing down the drive. *I didn’t mean to drop him like that. He must be so bewildered.*

“He’s going to burn,” Nikolai said, sounding in pain.

Just as Néomi had, Murdoch put his hand to his forehead. “And then he’s going to learn.”

* * *

The sun sears his eyes as if they’ve been doused with acid. *Fight on.* The bayou is just down the drive, then across the road. He can scent the dark water.

His skin begins to burn. He grits his teeth against the pain.

Bayou just across the road. He can make it, could survive in the shade there. *Flames growing.*

He nears the property line. Gaining distance away from whatever entity seems bent on tormenting him. A being he can’t see to fight, with no throat to savage. A disembodied voice had echoed all around him.

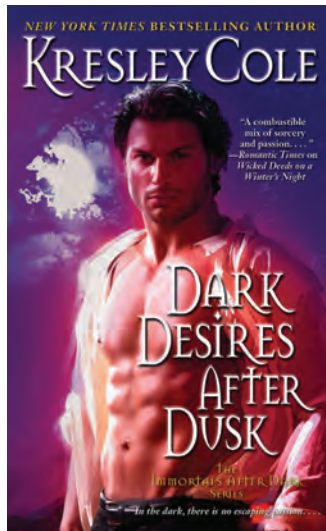
Almost there . . . *Burning . . . burning . . .*

Suddenly his sight goes black; a force shoves him back on his ass. Once his vision clears, his eyes widen. Crumbling blue walls surround him. He yells in disbelief. Confusion wells.

The same bedroom! He’s in . . . *the same goddamned room.*

Crouched on the floor, he knocks his head against the wall again and again until the needle pierces his arm.

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Excerpt from
DARK DESIRES AFTER DUSK

*“A lot of people fear change. And traveling. And disarray.
Sidewalk crack avoidance is more common than one would suspect.”*

—Holly Ashwin, Tulane math instructor,
PhD candidate with an emphasis on formal and computational cryptography

*“The first rule of being a mercenary? Find out what the client wants, then convince him that, a)
you can get it for him, and, b) you’re the only one who can get it for him. Second rule? Lie. Often.
The truth rarely serves you well in this business.”*

—Cadeon Woede, mercenary, second in line to the throne of the rage demons,
a.k.a. Cade the Kingmaker

Prologue

*Rothkalina, the Kingdom of the Rage Demons
In ages long past*

Cadeon Woede came upon the headless bodies of his foster father and brothers first, the three slain in a desperate defense of their home.

Their remains littered the ground near a demolished section of the barricades around their farmstead. Cadeon recognized the merciless slaughter as the work of revenants, corpse creatures dispatched by Omort the Deathless, their kingdom’s most dreaded enemy.

He shuddered in stunned disbelief, his mind refusing to accept this . . .

The girls—

Like a shot, Cadeon charged up a hillock to the smoldering shell of the family’s house. His

foster sisters might have escaped into the forest. Heart thundering, he searched the ruins, praying to find nothing within. Sweat rolled down his face and into his eyes, mingling with the swirling ash and soot.

In the area where the hearth used to be, he found what was left of his younger foster sisters. They'd been burned, and while they were still alive. Their muscles had contracted in the heat, their little bodies curling up on the floor.

He lurched outside, retching until his throat was raw. No one had survived.

Running his forearm over his face, he staggered to an old oak, sinking down against it. In the space of a day, everything he'd loved in the world was dead.

The threat of Omort had hovered idly for year, yet the dark sorcerer had chosen this time to attack. Cadeon feared he knew why.

Mine own fault. He buried his head in his hands. *All of this is my doing.*

To most who knew him, Cadeon was a simple farmer, with few cares. But he'd been born a prince, and was his brother's sole heir to the throne. He'd been ordered to return to Castle Tornin to defend the capital.

Cadeon had disobeyed. *The one who controls Tornin controls the kingdom—*

Cool steel suddenly pressed against Cadeon's neck. He glanced up without interest. A demon had hidden behind the tree, and now had drawn on him. A rage demon.

"My master said you would return," the swordsman said. By the look of his weapon and tunic, he was an assassin dispatched by Omort. A traitor to his own kind.

"Be done with it," Cadeon whispered as a stream of blood welled at the edge of the sword. He had no cares now. "What do you await—"

Without warning, an arrow embedded itself into the assassin's neck; he dropped his sword to futilely claw at it, ripping at his skin while Cadeon watched dispassionately. As the bastard slumped to his knees, still digging at the arrow, a troop of cavalry neared.

The leader, clad in light armor, wore a fearsome black helmet—a notorious one. It was King Rydstrom, leader of all the rage demons. Cadeon's true blood brother.

Rydstrom removed the helmet, revealing his battle-scarred visage. Most saw this sight and grew

weak with fear.

Resentment boiled in Cadeon's veins. His mind flashed to the last time he'd seen Rydstrom—when Cadeon had been only seven.

As his brother's heir, he'd been separated out of the royal family twelve years ago, sent to live hidden in anonymity far from the oft-targeted Tornin.

The memory of his banishment rushed over him. . . . As Cadeon's carriage had rolled away, Rydstrom—who'd once been more like a father to him—had stood with his shoulders back, his face expressionless.

Cadeon remembered wondering if his brother had cared at all that he was leaving.

Now the king wasted no breath on greetings to his younger brother, nor did he bother to dismount. "I'd commanded your presence at Tornin."

To sit as regent while Rydstrom had journeyed off to defend against the aggressing vampire Horde.

"Yet you refused to return with my guard?" Rydstrom said harshly. "And then you evaded them like a coward?"

Cadeon hadn't evaded the guards out of cowardice. His foster family had his first loyalty, and they'd needed his help. Because he could read and write and teleport, Cadeon was the natural choice to go afield and seek help for the blight on the area's crops.

And no one had ever suspected that Omort would truly attack.

"Have you come to kill me for that?" Cadeon asked, his tone indifferent.

"I should," Rydstrom said. "I've been advised to." Cadeon's gaze flickered over Rydstrom's trusted officers, staring down at him with thinly veiled hostility. "You've been branded a coward. And not only by our enemies."

"I'm no coward. That wasn't my life—I hardly know you or that family."

"None of that mattered. It was your duty to be there," Rydstrom said. "The castle had no leader within. Omort seized on that and launched his rebellion, sending this scourge across the country. He has wrested control of Tornin. He possesses my crown."

"I did not lose your crown because of one decision. 'Tis not so simple a thing," Cadeon said,

though he suspected otherwise.

“It *is*. The tides of war can be swayed by a word, an act, even the absence of a leader in the stronghold of a kingdom.”

If true, then Cadeon’s loved ones would still be alive.

“Let me explain this to you,” Rydstrom bit out. “A childless king goes off to defend a surprise attack, and his sole heir, the last male of their line, repudiates his responsibilities. We couldn’t have signaled our vulnerability more clearly.”

Cadeon swiped at the blood on his throat. “It was not my crown, nor my concern.”

With his fangs sharpened in aggression, Rydstrom dismounted. He drew his sword as he strode toward Cadeon, raised it—and seemed surprised when Cadeon refused to back up.

But his brother didn’t understand; Cadeon should’ve died here. He had nothing to lose.

Cadeon didn’t flinch, didn’t blink, when the sword sliced down. A flicker of interest arose in Rydstrom’s eyes as he beheaded the assassin behind Cadeon.

“Do you want to avenge the deaths of these people, brother?”

Rage filled Cadeon’s chest at the idea, determination welling inside him. He grated, “Yes. I want to kill Omort.”

“How do you expect to do that without training?”

Cadeon’s peaceful existence had left him ill-prepared for war. “If you train me, I won’t stop until I have his head,” he vowed. “And once I do, I’ll pluck your crown from it and return it to you.”

After a lengthy silence, Rydstrom said, “A life driven by revenge is better than a life driven by nothing.” He turned for his horse, saying over his shoulder, “We camp in the forest this eve. Tend to your dead, then find me there.”

Cadeon would, because he wanted to destroy Omort. But he also wanted to atone for his failure.

Because of his decision to turn his back on his blood kin, Omort controlled Rothkalina—and Cadeon’s foster family was dead.

Revenge and atonement. Cadeon couldn’t do one without the other.

Yet as Rydstrom mounted his stallion, his soldiers gazed at Cadeon with an expression of hatred, tinged with disgust. They clearly thought Cadeon should die.

I had best get used to that look, he thought. Even at his young age, he knew he'd be seeing it for the rest of his life.

Or until I get that crown back. . . .

New Orleans, Tulane Campus
Present day

“*Stupid . . . safety lock,*” Holly Ashwin muttered as she fiddled with the nozzle of the pepper spray in her bag.

With her free hand, she pushed up her glasses, casting another nervous glance over her shoulder. She’d thought she heard footsteps behind her in the night. Was she being followed—or paranoid?

For months, she’d had the sense that someone was watching her. Yet strangely it hadn’t bothered her before. She couldn’t explain it, but there had been an almost soothing quality to the presence she’d felt.

Tonight, all that had changed.

She sensed raw menace, and wished she hadn’t made the walk from the parking lot to Gibson Hall by herself. Usually her boyfriend escorted her to class, but Tim was at a symposium presenting their latest paper—alone, because her condition made it nearly impossible for her to travel.

The manicured lawns on the way to her classroom were unusually empty. No doubt there were widespread parties tonight celebrating the full moon, which hung heavy and yellow in the black sky.

There was enough light that she could see the bushes behind her trembling. In a growing panic, she broke off the nozzle of the spray.

“*Crap.*” She hastily abandoned her one weapon, tempted to snag one of the pill bottles in the pocket beside it for a dose of relief. Instead, she increased her pace toward her destination, the math

building, brightly lit like a beacon.

Almost there. Her heels clicked along on the sidewalk—though they never landed on a crack, even in her rush. Apparently, obsessive-compulsive disorder was panic-proof. . . .

She checked her watch. She was on time, of course, but she was late enough that her Remedial Math 101 students would be in the classroom already.

A few yards left. Almost to safety. . . .

Once she'd made it up the six stone steps to the doors, she exhaled in relief. Inside, the hall was ablaze with fluorescent light. *Made it.*

Her class was in the second room on the right and would be filled with thirty-three very large and very loyal Tulane football players. Anyone thinking to frighten her would soon learn how a tackle dummy felt at season's end.

Holly's colleagues believed she'd drawn the short straw to have to teach Digits for Idjits, as some of the instructors called it. But Holly had actually volunteered for jock duty.

If she was to teach math, then why not instruct the ones who had exponentially more to learn?

And in truth, they were on their best behavior ninety-nine percent of the time. Though each Tuesday and Thursday night, some of the players always got there early to scribble sprawling messages for her on the blackboard. A fellow instructor had related to Holly that "the boys"—who were all of five or six years younger than she was—enjoyed watching her erase things in "those skirts."

Holly wore old-fashioned pencil skirts with hemlines past her knees. Would she never catch a break?

She wondered what she'd be erasing tonight. Some of the past offerings included: "Got it bad, sooo bad, I'm hot for teacher," "I've been a naughty boy, Ms. Ashwin," and "Professor + Ginger = Holly Ashwin." They'd crossed the *l*'s to make them *t*'s.

So far she didn't think any of them had noticed her need to erase every millimeter of writing on the board, or to arrange the chalk in the tray into perfect trios, even breaking a stick to achieve a multiple of three. . . .

Outside the door to her room, she took a calming breath and smoothed her tight chignon. After

ascertaining that the clasp of her strand of pearls was directly in the center of her nape, she tugged each sleeve of her twinset sweater until the ends perfectly hit her wristbones. She checked the backs of her earrings, then opened the door.

Empty. Every chair sat empty.

CLASS IS CANCELED was scrawled across the board. They'd gone too far this time.

Or maybe it wasn't them? She swallowed, whirling around.

Rough cloth covered her face, reeking of fumes, drowning out her scream.

Just as her eyelids slid shut and her body went limp, she heard the unholy roar of a man in the distance.

* * *

Rogue demons have my female.

As Cade's old Ford truck tore through traffic to yet another demon lair, he grappled to control the rage his breed of demon was known for.

They've taken Holly. . .

Almost one year ago, Cade had crossed paths with Holly Ashwin and had recognized the human as his own fated female. Unable to claim a mortal, he'd had to content himself by following her, guarding her.

Which was the only reason why he'd been there when a group of demons had traced her, teleporting her to gods knew where. But they'd hunted on the campus; surely their lair would be near. Why would they want *her*? Because she was an innocent? Then they'd picked the wrong virgin—Cade would hang them by their own entrails and watch them dance if they touched so much as a hair on her head.

His phone rang just as he surged past a visibly drunk driver. When drunks drove slowly, it was exactly like they whispered—noticeably.

"What?" he barked in answer. Tonight he was supposed to receive the details of his latest job. It'd be the most important one he'd had since becoming a mercenary centuries ago.

"I've just left the meeting," his brother Rydstrom said. "I have the information we need."

Riding the bumper in front of him, tempted to give it a tap, Cade asked absently, "So who's the

pay?”

“The client is Groot the Metallurgist.”

Normally that would have had Cade raising his brows. Groot was the half brother of Omort the Deathless. “He intends to help us against Omort?” Cade’s truck overtook another car, nearly trading paint with it.

“Groot’s crafted a sword that can kill him.”

Then it would be the only one in existence that could. Omort the Deathless didn’t come by his name without reason. “What’s the job?”

“He wants us to find the Vessel and deliver her to him before the next full moon.”

The Vessel. Every Accession, a female from the Lore would come into sexual maturity. Her first child would be a warrior of either ultimate evil or of ultimate good—depending on which way the father leaned. A car weaved in front of Cade. “Son of a—”

“What are you doing?” Rydstrom demanded.

“Traffic.” Cade didn’t want his brother to know anything was off. He had told him that he would stop watching Holly. Though they both suspected she was his female, a future with her was impossible.

Humans were forbidden to demons. Because they never survived the initial claiming.

But Cade hadn’t been able to stop himself from watching her from afar, studying her, growing more and more fascinated with the young mortal. Becoming more convinced that she was his.

He knew it was ridiculous. He was an ancient immortal, a brutal mercenary, head of a crew of soldiers of fortune. And yet Cade looked forward to nothing—except seeing her.

Holly went through her life having no idea that she was the highlight of a millennium-old demon’s disappointing existence. . . .

This new job was supposed to be the last chance for him and Rydstrom to reclaim the crown. If Rydstrom found out Cade wasn’t “on,” the two of them would be heading for another of their infamous house-killing brawls. Cade used to enjoy working off his anger. Now the idea wearied him.

“How are we supposed to find the Vessel?” Cade asked.

“I was told it’s a Valkyrie this time around.”

“Handing over a Valkyrie for the use of an evil sorcerer—you’re not worried about our alliance with them?”

“I’m going to take a page from your book and say that what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“They will know. Nix will be able to see this.” Nix, the half-mad Valkyrie soothsayer, had helped Rydstrom and Cade in the past. In fact, she’d put together this deal, though she’d given them no indication who they’d be working for.

Cade had talked to her less than a week ago about Holly. Nix had revealed nothing about tonight.

“If Nix didn’t see that the Vessel would be one of her own before, she might not now. Besides, it can’t be helped,” Rydstrom said. “Nothing is more important than this job. It was Nix herself who vowed this was our last chance to defeat Omort.”

“Do you have a location on the target?”

“Groot’s oracles have been searching for her. As expected, she’s here in this city.”

The coming Accession was already pushing and pulling all the factions together in mystical hotspots like New Orleans.

“And we’re not the only ones who want her,” Rydstrom added. “Oracles, witches, and sorcerers are all scrying for her.”

Cade could imagine. “You got a name?”

“No name on her. But we have her last known whereabouts, a place called the Hall of the Son of Gib. I know it sounds like typical soothsayerese, but it’s a lead.”

A chill slithered up Cade’s spine. *No. No way.* The Hall of the Son of Gib. Or Gibson Hall—the mathematics building on the Tulane campus.

Holly wasn’t a Valkyrie; yet those demons might have seen her in the predicted location and mistaken her for one. She had the right delicate features and slight build. They could have assumed she was the Vessel.

Only one local demon faction would have had the resources to determine the Vessel’s location before Cade and Rydstrom—the Order of Demonaeus.

“We go for the Valkyrie tonight,” Rydstrom said. “I’ll be back at the house in two hours. Meet me then.”

Two hours. Even if Cade was tempted to ask his brother for help with the Demonaeus, there wouldn’t be time to wait for him. “Yeah, will do.” Click.

The wide wheels of his truck screeched as Cade cut across three lanes of traffic, careening over the median to speed back in the other direction.

He knew where the Order of Demonaeus was located, had been forced to convene with their kind on more than one occasion.

Cade had even seen their ritual altar. Was the sweet, impossibly innocent Holly stripped atop it even now?

The steering wheel bent under his grip.

– 2 –

She woke.

Her eyelids were too heavy to open, and she didn't know if she wanted to see anyway. A quick mental survey of her body revealed terrifying things.

She was lying on what felt like a stone slab, naked except for her jewelry, and with her long hair hanging down over the end, snagging on the rough edges. The stone seeped a deep chill into her body, so cold her teeth were chattering.

They'd taken her glasses from her face, ensuring that everything within ten feet would be a blur.

Deep-voiced chanting sounded all around her, in a bizarre language she'd never heard.

Holly finally cracked open her eyes. No man had ever seen her completely naked before—now a dozen indistinct figures leered down at her.

One pinned her arms, another her legs. With a cry, she struggled against their grip. "Let me go!" *This is a dream. A nightmare.* "Release me! Oh, God, what are you doing?"

The meds were messing with her brain. Surely she was hallucinating.

When they didn't answer, only continued their chanting, she pleaded, "Don't do this," but she didn't know exactly what "this" could be.

Though no electric lights were on in this dank chamber, black candles sat all around and moonlight shone through a skylight of some kind. She squinted around her and could see that the men were wearing robes and . . . *costume horns?*

In their chanting, one word seemed to be repeated: *Demonaeus*. This must be some kind of

sicko, demon-worshipping cult.

Yet they weren't wearing masks to conceal their identities. She was certain that meant one thing—they didn't plan to let her out of this place alive.

"My family will be looking for me," she lied. Her parents were dead. She had no siblings. "I'm not the one you want for this . . . this sacrifice." Tears pooled, then spilled down her temples. "I'm not special in any way."

A couple of them gave harsh laughs at that.

"This isn't happening," she whispered to herself, trying to stem her panic. *"This isn't happening."*

She gazed up at the glass dome above her. The moon had risen almost directly over an unusual etching in the center of the glass, depicting what looked like the face of a horned demon.

The shadow from the etching would slide directly over the altar, over her, when the moon hit it. It was a gnomon, a shadow maker, like that of a sundial.

The men seemed to await the shadow's advent, glancing up every so often. Await it for what?

As the moon continued to ascend, their chanting grew louder. She struggled harder, kicking her legs and thrashing her arms.

Lightning flashed across the sky. She vaguely noted that the more she strained to get free, the more frequently the bolts flickered overhead.

The largest of the men slid between her spread legs. When he removed his robe, comprehension hit her. She couldn't see below his waist but knew he was naked. *"No, no, no . . . don't do this!"*

The whites of his eyes were . . . flooded with black? He clamped her thighs, dragging her over rough stone to the edge of the altar.

She shrieked. All hell broke loose.

The men slapped their hands over their ears; the glass above them splintered into ominous forks through the etched demon's face—then the whole of it shattered, raining heavy shards all around the untouched altar.

A lightning bolt jagged down through the opening to spear her squarely in the chest, tossing the men away.

She screamed from the impact, arching with her fists clenched. The bolt was a physical force

continuing on and on.

Unimaginable heat sizzled through her veins. Her two rings melted off her fingers, her earrings from her ears. Her necklace and watch were seared to liquid, dripping from her body.

She was unharmed—because her skin was somehow hotter than the boiling metal.

The pressing weight of the electricity filled her with power, with . . . comfort. When it ended, Holly was changed. She didn't feel alone in this place.

Punish them, a voice seemed to whisper in her mind. *They dared to hurt you. . . .*

Her earlier terror was strangled by a fresh rage. Her fingers were suddenly tipped with razor-sharp claws. Her eyesight was keener than it had ever been even in the darkness. Fangs grew in her mouth.

Though she felt no ill effects from the lightning, the demons looked dazed, blinded. They were bleeding from the falling glass.

But they quickly regrouped. She rose, crouching on the altar, waiting as they stalked closer. One had a club—her eyes fixed on it.

A club. To beat her unconscious so they could continue their sick ritual.

Red covered her vision. When one lunged for her, she snatched him by the horns. They were . . . attached to his skull. Not a costume. Which meant *real* demons?

Which meant hallucination. This couldn't truly be happening. She laughed as she twisted the demon's head, assured this was some kind of nightmare.

And in her nightmare, the instinctive drive to kill with her new strength and fury overwhelmed her.

When the others attacked, Holly was unafraid.

She knew *how* to kill them as if she'd been hunting and slaughtering them for thousands of years. She knew to wrench their heads from their necks, to slash out with claws that would rend through skin and arteries as they would tissue paper.

Punish . . .

When the blood began to spray, lightning scored the sky above her as if in encouragement.

"I understand," she murmured as she aimed for one's jugular and severed it. "I see." *Yes, their*

last sight on earth should be my laughing face.

* * *

“Easy, female,” Cade soothed as he crept closer to where Holly huddled naked in a corner.

She was covered in blood. But had it come from her, or the twelve demons she’d apparently slain?

Her eyes were . . . *silver*, glowing in the shadows. Which meant Valkyrie. Somehow she was no longer a mere human.

A Valkyrie at Gibson Hall. Holly was indeed the Vessel.

She had her knees drawn up to her chest and was trying to cover her breasts while baring her little claws at him to ward him off. She was trembling with fear and shock, and tears coursed down her blood-splattered face.

It was killing him.

“Easy,” he murmured. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Her eyes darted from his horns to those on one of the heads lolling on the stone floor.

“Yeah, I’m a demon, too,” he said. “But not at all like them. My name’s Cadeon Woede.”

How far had they gotten with her before she’d turned and attacked? Though the carnage looked to have been done some time ago, Holly still had gashes on her arm from the claws of one of these demons.

She might have been turned to a Valkyrie, but she hadn’t yet been granted the accelerated healing and immortality of one. Which meant that she was still incredibly vulnerable to harm. Like a human.

Humans die so easily.

“Did they injure more than your arm?”

She finally shook her head.

“Hurt you anywhere? Do I need to get you to a hospital?” he asked, even as he knew that wouldn’t work.

Other factions were searching for her. He would be surprised if they hadn’t already scried the lightning he’d seen from a distance. Power still sizzled from her and throughout the chamber. New

power was easily traceable.

She whispered, “They d-didn’t hurt me.”

“Good. I want to help you, Holly.”

She frowned at his use of her name, studying his face.

“We’ve met before,” Cade said, but she was in no way calmed—lightning continued to strike in constant streams. Lightning gave Valkyrie strength, but it also mirrored their emotions.

When he began unbuttoning his shirt to cover her, she gave a cry, and bloody claws swiped out at him. Then she stared in horror at her fingertips.

Just hours ago, she’d been living as a normal human—or near normal with some eccentricities. Now she had become something he never could have predicted. A Valkyrie. Or half one. He hadn’t known she’d possessed this latent potential. The shock of the ritual must have triggered the transformation.

If not for this power, she would have been brutalized, her womb offered to the dark god this order of demons worshipped.

When he removed his shirt, she bared her small fangs and hissed, then looked aghast at her reaction.

“There, now, a good hiss never hurt anyone.” He crouched beside her, fighting the urge to clasp her to his chest. “I’m going to put this on you. *Easy* . . .”

She gazed up at him with eyes wavering between silver and the intense violet he recognized.

“Wh-what’s happening to me?”

“You know all those creatures you thought were myths?” When she shakily nodded, he said, “Well, they’re not. And you’re changing from a human to an immortal.”

Which meant it had become possible for Cade to claim her for his own.

And you’ve just become my target—the Vessel. The means to pay for a sword to kill our enemy.

She equaled the crown he’d worked for nine hundred years to reclaim—the unyielding pursuit that had given him a reason to go on living.

Never had it been so close. . . .

All he had to do was use and betray the woman he’d waited just as long to possess.

– 3 –

Holly turned and hunched to button the shirt, peering over her shoulder to keep this Cadeon in sight.

She remembered meeting him before. As if she could ever forget those stunning green eyes. She recalled his accent as well—it sounded like some type of British colonial, and he spoke with an unusual intonation.

Months ago, he'd approached her on campus. Initially he'd been cocky, then grew tongue-tied, stammering, even as he'd boldly studied her figure.

She'd found him weird. And that was before she'd known what had been hidden beneath the hat he'd worn.

Now she could see what had been covered by his shirt as well. His bared chest was rippling with muscles, and he wore a wide gold band just above his bulging bicep.

He was as massive as the others, admittedly one of *them*. She shuddered, trying to block out the sight of the corpses all around her.

But he looked different as well, his facial features appearing more human. His horns ran back along his head through his tawny hair, instead of jutting forward.

How can I see this well without my glasses? “Why should I t-trust you?”

“Because it’s my job to protect you. More will be coming—I’ll explain everything later.”

When she still hesitated, he said, “These twelve were just the first round intended for you.”

“First round?” she cried.

A creaking door sounded from somewhere on a floor above them. He shot to his feet. “Come with me if you want to get out of here alive.”

“Wh-where are we going?”

“We’re going to run for it. I’ll keep you safe, but you’ll have to trust me.” He held out his big hand to her.

Seeing no other choice, she took it, and he pulled her up. She was surprisingly steady on her feet, all things considered. Never relinquishing her hand, he led her out of the chamber, then down a murky stone corridor.

When the passageway intersected with an alcove, they spied a group of three males, robed like the ones before, speaking that same odd language. Cadeon pulled her back against the wall, then whispered directly at her ear, “Don’t make the smallest sound. You stay here until I return for you. Clear?”

She nodded, and he turned back. As he prepared to attack, the broad muscles in his back grew before her eyes. His horns straightened and blackened.

Her lips parted when he lunged for the others. His speed was mind-boggling, and his roar shook the room, painning her sensitive ears. He snatched the horns of one demon and twisted its head until an audible pop sounded.

As he faced off against the other two, his upper and lower fangs shot longer. He used them like an animal as he bit and clawed.

Had she looked that overcome with rage when she’d killed? Her earlier fearlessness disappeared. When his eyes flooded with black like the other one’s had, she shuddered, backing away.

Had she thought him different? *I just want to go home. Forget this ever happened.* Why should she trust him? *I can find my own way out.*

Clear of the fray, she hastened in the direction they’d been traveling, eventually stumbling into an open gallery.

More bizarre symbols were stamped into the wooden chairs and stone floor. Ancient-looking tapestries hung from the ceiling. On a display shelf were skulls that looked human, but they had horns and upper and lower fangs.

Then she saw what appeared to be double doors to the outside. If she could get outside, she could find a car or hide—

Rapid gunshots exploded the plaster just feet to the right of her. She sucked in a breath and dared a glance as she ran to her left. Men aimed machine guns at her with deadly intent.

A second man began shooting from the other direction. Bullets riddled the wall on either side of her, closing in. She darted right, then left once more, blocked each way. The sweep grew closer . . . closer.

A foot away on each side. She froze with terror.

A bellow sounded over the gunfire. Cadeon hurdled the line of bullets to get to her. Scooping her up in his arms, he tucked her against his chest. Just as the shots reached them, he pressed her against the wall until his body covered every inch of hers.

He gritted his teeth when the first bullet hit him, unable to turn to run without risking her. She burst into tears. Two bullets, three, four . . .

He stared down at her, those jet eyes seeming to consume her, and grated, “No more . . . running from me. Yeah?”

“Y-yeah,” she whispered brokenly, crying harder every time his big body jerked from the impact.

Over his shoulder, he roared at them, a furious warning growl, and she whimpered. His voice a harsh rasp, he said to her, “*No, no, female. Shh.*” He petted at her tears with huge fingers tipped with short black claws.

The shots abruptly stopped. Holly peered over Cadeon’s shoulder. The robed demons were attacking the gunmen.

As the others clashed, Cadeon sprinted toward those double doors with her in his arms. He turned in midstride, hitting the doors with his bullet-riddled back, bursting them from their hinges.

Charging out into the night, he made for an older truck parked off to the side of the manor. After opening the groaning cab door, he tossed her inside on the cracked vinyl seat and followed her in. He pinched the key and turned. Nothing.

“Is the battery dead?” she asked, shaking off some of the shock and fog. “Does this thing still

run?” Wrappers and crushed cans littered the floorboards.

“Hey, hey, no disrespecting The Truck. She’s gotten me out of a lot of scrapes.” He finessed the gearshift up and back. “I just need to make sure . . . she knows we’re in neutral.” Holly thought she heard a click. “There.”

The engine roared to life. He cast her a patronizing glance as soon as they were tearing up the shell drive.

She peered back at the manor. From the outside, the residence was stately, the grounds immaculate. She would never have guessed what beings lurked in the bowels of that place.

And now she was with another of their kind. She turned to him, studying this being—this . . . *demon*.

He had blond stubble on his tanned face, and his hair was thick and straight, reaching past his masculine jaw. Uneven strands looked lightened by a life in the sun.

The gold band he wore on his right arm appeared to be permanent, as if he’d have to cut it to get it past that bulging bicep. And those horns . . .

When they’d straightened earlier, they’d become much larger and darker. Now they were smooth, the color of a shell, lying close to his head. With his hair tousled over them, they probably wouldn’t be easy to discern.

“How am I measuring up?” he asked, his voice deep and rumbling.

She flushed. “I’ve just never seen . . . horns before tonight.”

“Figured you’d be in for a shock.”

“Where are we going now?”

“I’ve got to get you out of town,” he said. “This place is too hot for us to stay.”

She noticed blood on the back of his seat. “How are you still moving with all those bullets?”

“With a lot of fucking pain, Holly.”

She gasped, his foul language grating on her like nails on a chalkboard.

“Oh, come on, halfling! My language’s only going to deteriorate from here.”

“I . . . it’s just habit. Are you going to be okay?”

“I should be able to shed them.” When she frowned, he explained, “My skin should push them

out when I heal.”

Holly couldn’t scarcely wrap her mind around that. “What did those men want with me? Who were the ones shooting?”

“The gunmen were leeches. Vampires.”

“Vampires,” she said softly, but her mind was screaming, *This is insanity!*

“They must know you haven’t turned fully immortal yet. Our kinds never use guns, as evidenced by their shite aim.”

She winced at the vulgarity, but managed not to gasp this time. “Again, why?”

“Because you just became the most popular girl in town.”

“What does that mean?” In the stern tone she usually reserved for her students, she added, “This isn’t the time for cryptic answers, Cadeon.”

“This isn’t the time for questions whatsoever, Holly.”

Headlights met them on the drive. An SUV blocked the gated exit.

“Fuckall,” he snapped, wheeling around, spraying up shells. “More vampires.”

She clamped hold of the dashboard to brace herself. “Where are we going now?”

“Only one other way off this property. Into the swamp.”

“How would you know?”

“Been here before.” At her look, he said, “I’ve met with the demons here on occasion. As a representative of my breed.”

“You . . . you *fraternized* with those animals? Does your ‘breed’ kidnap women as well?”

“Kidnap women? I can hardly keep the chits off the jock as it is, pet.”

Eyes wide, she said, “*Chits? Pet?* Are you from the nineteenth century or just trying to be sexist?”

“I’m from medieval times, and I never have to *try* to be sexist.” He slammed on the brakes, and cranked the four-wheel-drive gear, peering at her hard. “It just comes to me natural, like a gift.” Stomping on the gas once more, he sent her flying back into the seat as they lurched forward, racing over pristine greens.

“Why did they want to hurt me? I’ve never done anything to deserve this!”

“It’s not what you’ve done—it’s what you are.”

“A math instructor?” she said in a strangled tone.

“You’re a Valkyrie now. And a special one at that. Your mum must’ve been one.”

“Valkyrie! My mom was a pie contest winner! And she was *human*. She died two years ago.”

“Then your biological mother must have been one.”

She was shocked into silence for a moment. How had this demon known she was adopted? “I didn’t even know her.” Holly had always imagined her as a scared teenager who’d had the incredible good sense to leave her baby on the most wonderful doorstep imaginable. Now this demon was saying that her mother was a Valkyrie? “What exactly *is* a Valkyrie? And how did you know I was adopted?”

“Questions later. Right now we’ve got to get through the swamp.”

The dark line of brush loomed. “I don’t see a road!”

“There’s a service trail,” he said, then added in a casual tone, “It might be a shade grown over.”

“A shade! Are you certain there’s no other way to get out?”

He nodded. “The property’s surrounded by bayou and swamp.”

“What are the odds that we’ll make it through?”

“I give us one in fifteen.”

Her eyes went wide. “I wouldn’t take those odds!”

“You would if there’s *zero* chance otherwise.”

“Oh, God,” she muttered, feeling around the seat. “Where’s the seatbelt?”

“Broke a few years back.”

“And you didn’t get it fixed?” she snapped.

“Don’t usually ferry around mortals, then!” he thundered back.

Struggling for calm, she said, “Cadeon, I do not see even a hint of a trail.”

“Demon senses. I can find it.” But he pressed his straightened arm over her chest as they closed in.

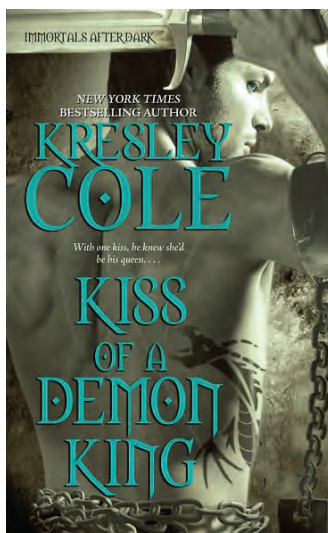
“Y-you’re not really going in there?”

“Trust me.”

This being had saved her life, had even taken bullets for her, and yet there was something so markedly *untrustworthy* about him. . . .

He flashed her a rakish grin with barely noticeable fangs. “Though if you’re the praying type, now might be a choice time.”

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Excerpt from

KISS OF A DEMON KING

“With me, nothing is as it seems. It’s usually much, much worse. And then— What do you mean I only get one epigraph? I get as many as I please. Only pre-eviscerated people have ever said things like that to me.”

—Sabine of the Sorceri, Queen of Illusions,
anointed princess of Rothkalina

“That sorceress might be an evil bitch, but she’s my evil bitch. And I’ll have no other.”

—Rydstrom Woede, fallen demon king of Rothkalina

Prologue

Gray Waters Lunatic Asylum, London
Fall 1872

“Whenever you have a sorcerer betwixt your thighs, your powers tend to disappear,” Sabine told her sister as she scanned the faces of the frenzied, caged humans. “It’s merely a fact of life.”

“Maybe in the past,” Lanthe said as she dropped the unconscious guard she’d been toting by his belt. “Things are going to be different with this one.” She busily tied the man’s hands behind his back—instead of breaking his arms, which had the same result and didn’t waste rope. “You still haven’t seen her?”

Her—the sorceress they’d come to release from this place—if she agreed to convey her powers to Lanthe in exchange for her freedom.

Sabine slinked down the darkened corridor. “I can’t tell when they huddle like this.” She plucked a cell door off its hinges and tossed it away, her heels clicking as she entered the cage. Up

close, she could tell the inhabitants all looked very . . . *mortal*.

Naturally, they cowered from her. Sabine knew the exotic picture she presented with her garments and face paint.

As though she'd donned a mask, her eyes were kohled black in a swath from the sides of her nose to her temples.

Her clothes were constructed more of strips of leather and chain metal than of cloth and thread. She wore a metal bustier and mesh gloves that ran the length of her arms, ending in forged fingertip claws. Situated among her hair's riotous braids was her elaborate headdress.

Typical garb of the Sorceri females. In fact, if one's apparel didn't weigh more than the wearer, then one was underdressed.

By the time Sabine was exiting the next cell down, Lanthe had finished with the knots. "Any luck?"

Sabine tore free yet another cage door, peered at pale faces, then shook her head.

"Do I have time to check the smaller cells in the basement?" Lanthe asked.

"If we're back at the portal in twenty minutes we should be all right." Their portal back to their home of Rothkalina was a good ten minutes away through dank London streets.

Lanthe blew a jet black plait from her forehead. "Watch the guard and keep the freed inmates inside this hall and quiet."

Sabine's gaze flitted over the unconscious male sprawled on the squalid floor, and her lip curled in disgust. She could read the minds of humans, even when they were blacked out, and the contents of this one's were giving even Sabine pause.

"Very well. But hurry with the transfer," Sabine said. "Else we'll attract our foe."

Lanthe's blue eyes gazed upward out of habit. "They could be here at any second." She hastened to the stairwell once more.

Their lives had become a droning cycle: steal a new power, flee enemies, have power stolen by a smooth-talking Sorceri male, steal a new power. . . . Sabine allowed it to continue.

Because she'd ruined Lanthe's innate ability.

When her sister was gone, Sabine muttered, "Look after the guard. Very well . . ."

Lifting the man by his collar and belt, she tossed him in front of the exit doors. Some of the denizens grew wild at the violence, howling, pulling their hair. The ones who'd been eyeing the main exit scuttled back.

Shush the humans, easy enough. She sauntered to the guard and stepped up onto his back, opening her arms wide. "Gather round, mad human persons. Gather! And I, a sorceress of dark and terrible powers, will reward you with a story."

Some quieted out of seeming curiosity, some in shock. "Hush now, mortals, and perhaps if you are good, obedient pets, I'll even *show* you a tale." The cries and yells she'd ignited were ebbing. "So sit, sit. Yes, come sit before me. Closer. But not you—you smell like urine and porridge. You, there, *sit*."

Once they'd all gathered before her, she crouched on the guard's back. She gave them a slow smile as she readied for her story, tugging up her skirt to fiddle with her garters, then adjusting her customary choker.

"Now, for this evening, you have two choices. You can hear the story of a mighty demon king with horns and eyes as black as obsidian. In ages past he was so honest and upstanding that he lost his crown to cunning evil. Or, we have the story of Sabine, an innocent young girl who was forever getting murdered." *Who would one day be that demon's bride. . . .*

"Th-the girl, please," one resident whispered. His face was indistinguishable through the curtain of his matted hair.

"A discerning choice, Hirsute Mortal." In a dramatic voice, she began, "Our tale features the intrepid heroine, Sabine, the Queen of Illusions—"

"Where's Illusions?" a young woman paused in gnawing her own forearm to ask.

Excellent—these were going to be narrative interrupters. "It's not *a place*. A 'queen' is someone who is better at a particular mystical skill than anyone else."

Sabine could cast chimeras that were indistinguishable from reality, manipulating anything that could be seen, heard, or imagined. She could reach inside a being's mind and deliver scenes from their wildest dreams—or worst nightmares. No one was her equal.

"Now the ridiculously beautiful and clever Sabine had just turned twelve, and she adored her

soon-to-grow light-skirted sister, Melanthe, aged nine. Sabine had loved little Lanthe with her whole heart since the first time the girl had cried for her ‘Ai-bee’ over their own mother. The two sisters were born of the *Sorceri*, a dwindling and forgotten race. Not very exciting story fodder, you might think. Compared to a vampire or even a Valkyrie,” she sniffed. “Ah, but listen on and *see* . . .”

She raised her hand to weave an illusion, drawing from within herself and from her surroundings—the mad energy of the inmates, the lightning-strewn night beyond the asylum.

When she blew against her opened palm, a scene was projected onto the wall beside her. Gasps sounded, a few stray whimpers.

“The first time young Sabine died was on an eve much like this, in a decrepit structure that trembled from thunder. Only instead of a rat-infested asylum, it was an abbey, built into the peak of a mountain, high in the Alps. The dead of winter was upon the land.”

The next scene she cast showed Sabine and Lanthe hastening down a murky stairway in their nightgowns and coats. Even as they rushed, they hunched their heads at each new batting of wings outside. Lanthe silently cried.

“Sabine was filled with anger at herself for not listening to her instinct and taking Melanthe away from their parents, from the danger they attracted with their forbidden sorcery. But Sabine had been reluctant because the two girls—though born of immortals and both gifted with powers—were still children, which meant they could be killed and wounded as easily as mortals, their injuries as lasting. Yet now Sabine had no choice but to leave. She sensed her parents were already dead, and suspected the killers were loose somewhere in the shadowy abbey. The Vrekeners had come for them—”

“What’s a Vrekener?”

Sabine inhaled deeply as she gazed at the ceiling. *Mustn’t murder audience, mustn’t murder* . . . “Winged avengers of old, demonic angels,” she finally answered. “A dwindling race as well. But since memory, in our little corner of the Lore, they had slaughtered evil Sorceri wherever they could find them, and had been hunting Sabine’s family for all of her life. For no other reason than because her parents were indeed quite evil.”

With a flick of her hand, Sabine changed the scene, showing the two girls stumbling into their

parents' room. By bolts of lightning flashing through soaring stained glass windows, they saw the bodies of their parents, curled together in sleep.

The *headless* bodies, freshly decapitated.

In the image, Sabine turned away and vomited. With a strangled scream, Lanthe collapsed.

Another illusion showed Vrekeners emerging from the shadows of the chamber, led by one who wielded a scythe with a blade forged not of metal but of black fire.

Flashes of their huge ghostly wings appeared, and the double rows of horns on their heads gleamed. They were so towering that she had to crane her neck up to meet eyes across the room. All but for one. He was a mere boy, younger even than Sabine. His gaze was transfixed on little Lanthe, curled unconscious on the floor—one of the adults had to hold him back from her.

Sabine and Lanthe's situation grew clearer to her. This band of Vrekeners hadn't stalked them only for punitive reasons.

"The leader tried to convince Sabine to come peaceably with them," she told her audience. "That he would put the sisters upon the path of goodness. But Sabine knew what the Vrekeners did to Sorceri girl children, and it was a fate worse than death. So she fought them."

Sabine began the last illusion, letting it play to the end . . .

Her entire body shook as she began to weave her spells around her enemies. She made the Vrekener soldiers believe they were trapped in a cavern, ensnared underground where they couldn't fly—their worst fear.

For the leader, she held up her palms, a gesture of supplication directed to his mind. Once linked, she greedily tugged free his nightmares, which she then offered up in a display before him, forcing him to relive whatever would hurt him most.

These scenes made him sink to his knees, and when he dropped his scythe to claw at his eyes, she snatched his weapon from him. Sabine didn't hesitate to swing it.

Hot blood sprayed across her face as his head tumbled to her feet. Once she swiped the sleeve of her gown over her eyes, she saw that her illusions were

fading, the Vrekeners able to see where they truly were once more. Lanthe had woken and screamed for Sabine to watch out.

Then time . . . stopped.

Or seemed to. Sounds dimmed, and everyone in the room slowed, all staring at Sabine, at the blood arcing from her jugular as she collapsed. One of these males had slashed her throat from behind, and all the world went red.

“*Abie?*” Lanthe shrieked, charging for her, dropping to her knees beside her. “*No, no, no, Abie, don’t die, don’t die, don’t die!*” The air around them heated and blurred.

Whereas Sabine had her illusions, Lanthe’s innate sorcery was called *persuasion*. She could order any being to do as she pleased, but she rarely gave commands—they often ended in tragedy.

Yet when the males rounded on her, Lanthe’s eyes began to glitter, sparkling like metal. The terrible power she’d feared to use she now wielded over them, without mercy. “*Do not move . . . Stab yourself. . . Fight each other to the death.*”

The room was heavy with sorcery, and the abbey began groaning all around them. One of the stained glass windows shattered. Lanthe told the boy to jump through it—and not to use his wings on the way down. Eyes wild with confusion, he obeyed, the thick glass slashing over his skin. He never yelled as he plummeted to the valley floor.

When all were killed, Lanthe knelt beside Sabine again.

“*Live, Abie! Heal!*” Gods, Lanthe was pushing, trying to command her. But it was too late. Sabine’s heart no longer beat. Her eyes were blank with death.

“Don’t leave me!” Lanthe screamed, pushing harder, harder . . . The furniture began to shake, their parents’ bed rattling . . . More shifting . . . a thud as a head rolled to the floor. Then a second one.

The power was unimaginable. And somehow, Sabine felt her body restoring itself. She blinked open her eyes, alive and even stronger than before.

“They ran from that place, out into the world, and never looked back,” she told her enthralled audience. “All that Sabine would have from that night was the scar around her neck, a tale to tell, and the blood vendetta of a Vrekener boy who’d somehow survived his fall. . . .”

Lost in thought, Sabine absently realized that the guard had awakened and was squirming under her boot heels. She reached down and snapped his neck before she got so caught up with the story that she forgot to do it.

One woman clapped her hands in glee. Another breathed, “*God bless ’n keep you, miss.*”

Sabine might as well be an agent of fate for these people on this eve. Not an agent for good, nor for bad. Just serving fate—which could be either.

After all, the next guard hired might be worse to them.

“What about the second time she died?” a brazen female asked. Her head was shaved bald.

“She was fighting to defend Melanthe and herself from yet another Vrekener attack. They captured Sabine, then flew her to a height, dropping her to a cobblestone street. Yet her sister was there once more to heal her broken body, to snatch her from the arms of death.”

As if it had happened yesterday, Sabine could still recall the sound of her skull cracking. *That one had been so close.* . . .

“The third time, they chased her into a raging river. The poor girl couldn’t swim, and she drowned—”

“*Then take it, you bitch!*” a woman shrieked from downstairs, interrupting the flow of the story once more. Ah, the Queen of Silent Tongues was yielding to Lanthe.

Sabine’s skin prickled as the air began to sizzle with power. The sorceress jailed downstairs was surrendering her root ability. Lanthe would be able to talk telepathically to whomever she addressed, within a certain distance.

“No, don’t fret,” Sabine told her antsy humans. “Have you read any of the halfpenny novels, the ones with bank robberies? That’s all my accomplice is doing now. Except she’s stealing something equivalent”—she made her voice dramatic—“to your *soul!*”

At that one woman began crying, which pleased Sabine because it reminded her why she so rarely took humans as pets.

“Who killed her the next time?” Brazen Mortal asked. “Vrekeners?”

“No. It was other Sorceri bent on stealing her goddesslike power. They poisoned her.” *The Sorceri so adore their poisons*, she thought bitterly. But then she frowned at the memories. “It did things to the young girl’s mind, this repeated dying. Like an arrowhead forged in fire, she was made sharp and deadly from constant pressure and blows. And she began to covet life as no other before her. Whenever she felt hers was in danger, a mindless fury swept through her, the need to lash out undeniable.”

When some of their eyes widened, Sabine realized her pensiveness had made the cell appear to be choked with mist. She often unwittingly displayed illusions that mirrored her thoughts and emotions, even when dreaming.

As she swiftly cleared the air, another patient said, “Good miss, wh-what happened after the poisoning?”

“The sisters just wanted to survive, to be left alone, to amass a fortune in gold through just a bit of sorcery. Was that too much to ask?” She gave them an “*honestly?*” look.

“But the Vrekeners were unrelenting, tracking them by the girls’ sorcery. Especially the boy. Because he hadn’t reached his immortality by the time he made that leap, he didn’t regenerate. He’d been broken, scarred and deformed from his injuries forever.”

They’d since learned his name was Thronos and that he was the son of the Vrekener Sabine had beheaded all those years ago. “Without the use of sorcery, the girls were starving. Sabine was now sixteen and old enough to begin doing what any girl like her would.”

Brazen Mortal crossed her arms over her chest and knowingly said, “Prostitution.”

“Wrong. Commercial fishing.”

“Really?”

“Noooo,” Sabine said. “Fortune-telling. Which promptly earned her a death sentence for being a witch.”

She fingered the white streak in her red hair, the one she hid from others with an illusion. “They didn’t always burn witches at stakes. That’s a fallacy. No, sometimes a village had burned its quota, so they killed secretly, burying a group alive.” Her tone grew soft. “Can you imagine what it was

like for the girl to breathe earth? To feel it compacting in her lungs?”

She gazed over her silent audience. Their eyes had gone wide—she could hear a pin drop.

“The other humans expired quickly, but not so for Sabine,” she continued. “The girl withstood the reaper’s call for as long as she could, but felt herself fading. Yet then she heard a ringing voice from above, commanding her to live and to rise from her grave. So Sabine mindlessly obeyed, digging against others’ dead flesh, blindly stretching, desperate for another inch closer to the surface.”

From behind them, Lanthe’s voice intoned, “At last, Sabine’s hand shot up from the muddy ground, pale and clenched. Finally, Melanthe could find her sister. As she hauled Sabine out of her grave, lightning struck all around and hail pelted them—like the earth was angry to lose her catch. Since that fateful night, Sabine doesn’t care about anything.”

Sabine sighed. “It’s not true that she doesn’t care about anything. She cares about nothing very much.”

Lanthe glared, her eyes shimmering a metallic blue from her recent infusion of power.

“*How amusing, Sabine,*” she said, laying the words directly into Sabine’s mind.

Sabine jumped. “*Telepathy. Outstanding. Try to retain it.*” Gods, she was relieved to see Lanthe acquire another power. Her sister’s persuasion had been exhausted keeping Sabine alive.

It seemed that all those deaths had made Sabine even more powerful while weakening Lanthe—in both ability and resilience.

“*That sorceress also had the power to talk to animals,*” Lanthe continued. “*Guess what you’re getting for your birthday!*”

“*Oh, bully.*” One of the least sought powers of all Sorceri. The problem with communicating with animals was that there were rarely enough within earshot to be helpful. “*I can only hope a plague of locusts is milling about when I need them.*” To her audience, Sabine said, “We’re finished here.”

The long-haired male asked, “Wait, what happened after that burial?”

“Things got much, much worse,” Sabine said dismissively.

The crying female cried harder. “H-how could it get worse than dying so much?”

Sabine dryly answered, “They met Omort the Deathless. He was a sorcerer who could never know death’s kiss, and so he was instantly smitten with the girl so well acquainted with it.”

Lanthe met her eyes. “He’ll be wondering where we are.”

“But he knows we’ll always return.” Omort had *controls* in place for the sisters. Sabine gave a bitter laugh. Had they actually once thought they’d be safe with him?

Just then, Sabine heard the sound of wings outside.

“They’ve come.” Lanthe’s eyes darted to the chamber’s high window. “We run, run for the tunnels beneath the city, and try to find our portal above.”

“I’m not in the mood to run.” The building began to rock—or it appeared to—with Sabine’s anger.

“When are you ever? But we have to.”

Though Sabine and Lanthe were nearly as fast as the fey and were notoriously dirty fighters, the Vrekeners’ sheer numbers were unstoppable. And the sisters possessed no battle sorcery.

Lanthe’s gaze swept over the room, searching for escape. “They’ll catch us even if you make us invisible.”

With a flick of her hand, Sabine wove an illusion. Suddenly she and Lanthe both looked like patients. “We’ll create a stampede of humans and run out into the night with them.”

Lanthe shook her head. “The Vrekeners will scent us.”

Sabine blinked at her. “Lanthe, have you not smelled my humans?”

– 1 –

Present day

The Tongue and Groove Strip Club, Southern Louisiana

“A lap dance for the sexy demon?”

With a firm shake of his head, Rydstrom Woede turned down the half-clad female.

“With a lap like yours, I’ll make myself at home,” another told him. “For free.” She cupped one of her breasts upward and dipped her tongue to her nipple.

That got him to raise an eyebrow, but still he said, “Not interested.”

This was one of the low points of his life, surrounded by strippers in a neon-lit Lore club. He was on edge in this ridiculous place, feeling like the worst hypocrite. If his ne’er-do-well brother found out where he’d been, he would never hear the end of it.

But Rydstrom’s contact had insisted on meeting here.

When a pretty nymph sidled up behind him to massage his shoulders, he picked up her hands and faced her. “I said *no*.”

The females here left him cold, which confounded him—since he needed a woman beneath him so badly. His eyes must have darkened, because the nymph quickly backed away. *About to lose my temper with a nymph?*

Lately, Rydstrom had been a constant hair trigger’s turn from succumbing to rage. The fallen king known for his coolheaded reason, for his patience with others, felt like a bomb about to explode.

He’d been experiencing an inexplicable anticipation—a sense of building, a sense that

something big was going to happen soon.

But because this urgency had no discernible source or alleviation, frustration welled in him. He didn't eat, couldn't sleep a night through.

For the last couple of weeks, he'd awakened to find himself thrusting against the pillow or the mattress or even into his own fist, desperate for a soft female below him to ease the strangling frustration he felt.

Gods, I need a woman.

He stared down into an untouched glass of demon brew. Yet he had no time to woo a decent one. Just another conflict battling within him.

The kingdom's needs always come before the king's.

So much was at stake in the fight to reclaim his crown—from Omort the Deathless, a foe who could never be killed.

Rydstrom had once faced him and knew from bitter experience that the sorcerer was undestroyable. Though he'd beheaded Omort, it was Rydstrom who'd barely escaped their confrontation nine hundred years before.

Now Rydstrom searched for a way to truly kill Omort forever. Backed by his brother Cadeon and Cadeon's gang of mercenaries, Rydstrom doggedly tracked down one lead after another.

The emissary he was to meet tonight—a pus demon named Pogerth—would be able to help them. He'd been sent by a sorcerer named Groot the Metallurgist, Omort's half brother, a man who wanted Omort dead almost as much as Rydstrom did. Groot was little better than Omort, but *an enemy of my enemy . . .*

Just then, a demoness dressed in black leather with cheap makeup on her horns gave Rydstrom a measuring look as she passed, but he turned away.

He was . . . curious about wicked females, always had been, but they weren't his type—no matter what Cadeon occasionally threw in his face when they fought.

No, Rydstrom wanted his queen, his own fated female, a virtuous demoness to stand by his side and grace his bed.

For a demon, sex with one's female was supposed to be mind-blowing compared to the random

tup. After fifteen centuries, he'd waited bloody long enough to experience the difference.

He exhaled. But now was not the time for her. *So much at stake*. Rydstrom knew that if he didn't defeat his enemy this time, his kingdom and his castle would be forever lost.

My home lost. His hands clenched, his short black claws digging into his palms. Strippers traipsing by his table gave him a wide berth.

Omort and his followers had desecrated Castle Tornin. The sorcerer had set himself up as king and welcomed Rydstrom's enemies, granting them asylum. His guards were *revenants*, walking corpses, the dead raised to life, who could only be destroyed once their master died.

Tales of orgies, sacrifices, and incest in Tornin's once-hallowed halls were legion.

Rydstrom would die before he lost his ancestral castle to beings so depraved, so warped he considered them the most revolting beings ever to walk the earth.

Gods help anyone who crosses me this eve. A ticking bomb—

At last, Pogerth arrived, teleporting inside the bar. The pus demon's skin looked like melted wax and smelled of decay. The gauze he wore under his clothes peeked out at the collar and cuffs of his shirt. He wore rubber boots that he would empty outside in regular intervals, as was polite.

When he sat at Rydstrom's table, it was to a squishing sound. "My lord and master seeks a prize so rare it's almost fabled," he began without preamble. "In return for it, he'll deliver something just as fantastical." Switching to the demon tongue, he asked, "What would you be willing to do for a weapon guaranteed to kill the Deathless One?"

* * *

Castle Tornin

The Kingdom of Rothkalina

When a severed head bounced wetly down the steps from Omort's throne dais onto the black runner, Sabine casually sidestepped, continuing past it.

The head belonged to Oracle Three Fifty-Six—as in the number of soothsayers that had been in office since Sabine had come to Tornin.

The scent of blood cloyed as revenants mindlessly cleaned up the matching body.

And Omort, her half brother and king of the plane of Rothkalina, was wiping off his bloody

hands—which meant he’d torn the oracle’s head from her neck in a fit of rage, piqued no doubt by whatever she’d foretold.

Standing tall and proud in front of his ornate gold throne, he wore a raised armor guard over his left shoulder and a dashing cape on the right. Atop his pale hair sat the intricate headwear that served as both a crown and an armor helmet.

He looked suave and sophisticated, and utterly incapable of yanking a woman’s head off her body.

Omort had stolen so many powers—pyrokinesis, levitation, teleporting—all seized from his other half siblings before he killed them. Yet he couldn’t see the future. The lack often enraged him. “Something to comment about this, Sabine? Growing soft?”

She was the only one who dared defy him in any way, and the creatures at court quieted. Lining the halls were members of many of the factions who allied with the *Pravus*, Omort’s new army.

Among them were the centaurs, the Invidia—female embodiments of discord—ogres, rogue phantoms, fallen vampires, fire demons with their palms aglow . . . more beings than could be named.

Almost all of them would love to see her dead.

“So hard to find good help these days,” she sighed. Sabine could scarcely be expected to feel sympathy for another. For far too many times she’d dragged herself up from a pool of her own blood. “Which is a shame, brother, because without her we are as good as blind.”

“Worry not, I will find another seer directly.”

“I wish you all the best with that.” Soothsayers didn’t grow on trees, and already they were wading deep into the recruiting pool. “Is this beheading why you summoned me?” Sabine’s tone was bored as she gazed around her. She studiously avoided the mysterious Well of Souls in the center of the court, taking in other details of the opulent throne room.

Her brother had drastically changed it since the rule of the mighty Rydstrom. He’d replaced the demon’s austere throne with one made of blazingly bright gold. Tonight, blood lay splattered over the gleaming metal—from the oracle’s squirting jugular.

Been there. . . .

On the walls, Omort had hung his colors and his banners emblazoned with his talisman animal: an ouroboros, a snake swallowing its own tail, to represent his deathlessness. Anything simple, he'd made lavish. And yet, this place still didn't suit the outwardly sophisticated Omort.

According to legend, the premedieval Castle Tornin had been created by a divine hand to protect the well, with six bold towers encircling it, and the central court. Though the stones that made up the fortress were rugged, they'd been placed flawlessly. Tornin was perfectly imperfect.

As rough-hewn as its former king was reputed to be.

Omort drew back his cape before sitting. "I summoned you *half an hour ago*."

"Ah, just so. I recall that now." She and Lanthe had been watching DVDs in Lanthe's solar-powered room. The sisters probably logged seven hours a day watching movies. *Alas, cable wasn't forthcoming.*

As she passed the Viceroy centaur, Sabine peeked down and asked him, "How's it hanging? Low and to the left, I see. Your left, my right." Though his fury was undisguised, he would never challenge her. She had far too much power here.

She gave him a wink to remind him of just that, then continued to Omort, "I was going to be here on time. But I had something very urgent to take care of."

"Did you really?"

"No." And that was all she'd say on the matter.

Omort stared at her in fascination, his yellow irises glowing. But when she removed her own cape, he seemed to shake himself, casting a disapproving look at her garments—a scanty bandeau top of gold weave, a leather micro-skirt, claw-tipped gauntlets on her hands, and thigh-high boots.

After raking his gaze over her body, Omort settled on her face. She'd drawn her bold scarlet eye paint in the shape of wings that spread out from her lashes up over her brows all the way to her hairline.

In ages past, Omort had wanted to make it law that females of value were to obscure their faces with a traditional silk Sorceri mask instead of mere paint mimicking one, and to cover their bodies entirely.

He'd swiftly learned how Sabine felt about that idea.

“Actually, Omort, I just came to drink my *medicine*.”

“You’ll get your dose later,” Omort replied, waving a negligent hand.

How easy it was for him to dismiss. He wasn’t the one who needed it to keep from dying a horrific death.

“For now, we have something more important to discuss—”

Hettiah, Omort’s half sister and Sabine’s arch-nemesis, arrived then, hastening up the dais steps to stand beside Omort’s throne—her rightful place, since she was his concubine as well as his relation. She must have run here as soon as she’d heard Sabine was at court, frantic to make sure Sabine didn’t steal Omort from her.

Hettiah was woefully confused on two points: Omort was Sabine’s for the taking, and she would never be taking.

Omort ignored Hettiah utterly, keeping his eyes on Sabine.

“Important to discuss. . . ?” she prompted.

“My spies have long been searching for Groot the Metallurgist and monitoring the activities of his most trusted followers.”

Groot lived in hiding from Omort, and was one of only two half siblings outside Tornin who still survived.

“I’ve just learned that he sent an emissary to meet with none other than *Rydstrom Woede*.”

At last, an intrigue! “Rydstrom and Groot, our two most dangerous enemies allying. This *is* bad news.”

“Something must be done. One of the spies heard the emissary promising a sword forged to kill me.”

Everyone at court stilled—including Sabine.

Omort exhaled wearily. “It won’t, though. It can’t.” He almost sounded regretful. “Do you know how many bombs, spells, spears, daggers, and poisons were supposed to have ended me?”

Indeed, Sabine had seen Omort stabbed through the heart, beheaded, and burned to cold ash. And always he rose from a dirty mist like a phoenix, stronger even than before. His very name meant *without death*.

“But Rydstrom must believe it will work,” he said. “The infamously coolheaded demon was seen storming from the meeting, and heard calling his brother Cadeon as he got into his car to speed away toward New Orleans.”

“Rydstrom must be on his way to meet him.” *Cadeon the Kingmaker, a ruthless mercenary.* He was rumored to be able to put any king on a throne—except his brother. For centuries, the two had worked together to reclaim Tornin.

Which was now *her* home. *Get over it, demons. Not moving.*

Hettiah cleared her throat. “My liege, if the sword can’t kill you, then why worry about it?”

“Because the belief is nearly as dangerous,” Sabine answered impatiently. “The sword could be seen as a rallying point, used as a propaganda tool.” Already little rebellions erupted over the countryside, the demons continuing to clamor for their deposed king.

Clamoring still—after *nine centuries*.

Sabine often wondered how he’d earned such fervent loyalty. “So it’s clear I can’t let the brothers meet,” she said. “I’ll intercept Rydstrom before he can reach the city.”

“And then?” Omort said quietly. “What will you do with him?”

“And then I’ll kill two birds with one stone,” she answered. “This is the prophecy beginning.” Just in time for the Accession.

Every five hundred years, that great immortal war took place, and they were on the cusp of it right now.

Her gaze flickered over the mysterious well in the center of the court, strewn with sacrifices—bloody and unidentifiable body parts. Her future depended on unlocking its power. And the demon was the key. Or, rather, his heir was.

When she faced Omort, his brows drew together, as if he’d thought she would balk at bedding a demon. In fact, she was eager to get this over with—and then to seize the power that was there for the taking.

At last, something to want, to *need*.

Hettiah asked, “What if the demon resists you?”

Sabine’s lips parted. “Have you *looked* at me lately, Hettiah?” She turned in a circle, a move that

left Omort leaning forward on the edge of his throne, and Hettiah sending her murderous glances.

Hettiah wasn't without power. In fact, her ability was neutralizing others' powers. She could erase illusions as easily as Sabine could cast them. Lanthe had nicknamed her Hettiah the Buzz Kill and Aunt-Matter.

"Don't underestimate the demon," Omort finally said. "He's one of the most iron-willed beings I've ever encountered. Don't forget that *I* faced him—and yet he lives."

Sabine exhaled, trying to keep a rein on her notorious temper. "Yes, but I have unique *attributes* that make this demon's seduction *in the bag*."

"You also have a detriment," Hettiah sneered. "You're a freak among the Lore."

It was true she was unique—a virgin seductress. Sabine chuckled at Hettiah's statement, then her expression instantly turned cold when she faced her brother. "Omort, put a muzzle on your pet, or I'll make her one from her intestines." She rapped her silver-tipped claws together, and the sound rang out in the chamber.

Hettiah lifted her chin, but she'd paled. Sabine had in fact plucked an organ from her. On several occasions. She kept them in jars on her bedside table.

But Sabine refrained from this as much as possible, because whenever she fought Hettiah, it seemed to overly excite Omort.

"Besides, *if* the demon somehow resists this"—Sabine waved her hands over her figure—"I'll have a backup plan." She always had a plan B.

"You'll need it." Hettiah smirked.

Sabine blew her a kiss, the ultimate insult among the Sorceri, who stored poisons in their rings to be mixed into drinks—or blown into the eyes of an enemy.

"Capture him tonight, and then . . . begin." Omort sounded sickened. Not only was Rydstrom a demon, which most Sorceri viewed as little better than an animal, the fallen king was Omort's blood enemy.

And the time had finally come for Sabine to surrender her virginal—hymenally speaking—body and her womb to the creature. No wonder Omort had gone into a fury with the oracle.

Part of him lusted for the power Sabine could garner. And part of him lusted for her—or for

women who resembled her, like the red-haired Hettiah.

He rose then, descending the steps to stand before her. Ignoring Hettiah's huff of dismay—and the warning in Sabine's eyes—he slowly raised his hand to her face.

His bloodstained nails were long and cloudy. When he pinched her chin, she said in a seething tone, "Now brother, you know I dislike it when men touch my face."

When angered—like now—Sabine's surroundings appeared to rock and explode as though from an earthquake, while winds seemed to gust in tempests. Omort hesitantly released her as the court attendees nervously stamped about.

"I have the coordinates for the road Rydstrom will be traveling," Omort said. "Lanthe can open a portal from the dungeon directly to that location, and you can stop him there. It will be a perfect trap. Unless she's already lost her thresholds power."

Lanthe could still create portals. But her ability was temporarily weakened each time, so she could only manage it once every six days or so. Sabine only hoped she hadn't burned one recently.

"Why don't you call Lanthe in here and ask her yourself?" Sabine said, making him scowl. For some reason, Omort had always loathed being near Lanthe and had decreed that the two sisters would never be together in his presence.

"Exactly how long do I have to set this snare?" she asked.

"You must intercept him within the next two hours."

"I go at once." She had little time to hatch a plot, which irritated her. She adored plotting—devising plans and subplans and contingencies—and half the fun was the *anticipation* of a trap about to be sprung. She would dream up scenarios for months, and yet now she had only mere hours.

Before she could leave, Omort leaned down and murmured at her ear, "If there were any way around your sleeping with this beast, I would have found it for you."

"I know, brother."

She did believe him in this. Omort would never willingly give her up, because he wanted Sabine all for himself and had since the first time he'd seen her. He'd said there was something in her eyes he'd never seen before—the dark knowledge of what it was like to die. Something he could *never* know.

He covered her bare shoulder with a clammy hand, sounding as if he'd just stifled a groan at the contact.

"Do—not—touch, Omort." She gritted out the words, making her plaits appear to be striking vipers until he removed his hand. Sometimes she had to remind him that she was as treacherous as the serpents he worshipped.

She turned immediately, giving him her back instead of taking three steps away before turning to exit the chamber. When she passed the well, she darted her gaze to it.

Soon . . .

"You won't fail me?" he called after her. "Rydstrom must not reach his brother."

"Consider it done," she called back with utter surety. How hard could it be to capture a demon?

– 2 –

A prize so rare it was fabled . . .

Rydstrom sped his McLaren down a deserted levee road, his headlights cleaving through the swamp fog. That crazed energy within him, the inexplicable tension, had spiked to a fever pitch.

Omort could be *killed*.

One hundred miles per hour. One hundred and ten . . .

With a sword forged by Groot the Metallurgist.

Rydstrom had waited so long for this, he had a hard time believing it was happening now. Although he didn't trust the demon Pogorth, Rydstrom trusted his ally, Nix the Valkyrie soothsayer who'd arranged their meeting.

Nix had said that this campaign was a chance to kill Omort—Rydstrom's last chance. Either he would succeed in destroying the sorcerer or he would fail forever.

By all the gods, it was possible. But for payment, Groot had asked for the *impossible*. Or so it would seem.

One hundred and forty miles per hour. Though Rydstrom had hung up the phone with his brother minutes ago, he was still slack jawed. Cadeon—the most untrustworthy and least dependable being Rydstrom had ever known—had informed him that he was already in possession of the prize Groot demanded in exchange for the sword.

Cadeon had reluctantly agreed to meet Rydstrom at their customary place north of New Orleans with the payment in tow, but Rydstrom still had half an hour to reach him. There was plenty of time

for Cadeon to back out—if he hadn’t already.

At that thought, Rydstrom floored the gas, surging to one hundred and sixty miles per hour. *Not fast enough.* He would give his right hand to be able to trace once more. Yet Omort had bound that teleportation power in him and in Cadeon. Rydstrom had never felt as frustrated by that curse as right now. *So much at stake.*

Yes, Cadeon had already found the prize. But he would not be keen to give it up.

He’ll run. Rydstrom had to get to him before he could.

Long moments passed with him deep in thought over his brother. Knowing Cadeon would let him down, he accelerated even more. *One seventy . . .*

Rydstrom would die for his people. Why wouldn’t Cadeon—

Eyes stared back at him in the headlights. Not an animal, a *woman*.

He slammed on the brakes and swerved, the vehicle skidding out of control.

* * *

The screech of tires peeled out into the night as the demon’s sports car began to spin wildly. But somehow he was righting it.

“He’s pulling it back.” Lanthe sounded impressed.

Sabine raised her hands and muttered, “I don’t think so, demon.” Just when he appeared to gain control, she shifted the vision of the road, obscuring the bridge abutment to his sight.

He sped directly into it.

An explosion of sound erupted—the groaning of metal, the shattering of glass. Smoke tendrils snaked upward, and gaskets hissed. The previously shining black car was totaled.

“Did you have to make him crash that hard?” Lanthe asked, piping her lip to blow a black braid from her face. “He won’t likely be in the mood for love now.”

“You were the one in my ear, yelling that he was getting away.”

Earlier, when Sabine had heard the smooth purr of an engine in the distance, she’d made Lanthe invisible, then she’d cast an illusion of a vehicle on the side of the road, stalled with the hood up.

The damsel in distress. Unable to fix her own engine. A ridiculous cliché. But necessary.

When he hadn’t slowed, she’d waved her arms, and still he’d continued speeding along.

Refusing to let him slip past her, she'd cast forward an illusion of herself, directly in his car's path. He'd swerved to avoid her likeness.

"Besides, he's a demon," Sabine continued. "Demons are both tough—and lusty." When his door shot open, she said, "See?" But he hadn't yet exited.

"What's taking him so long?" Lanthe asked, switching to telepathy, biting her nails as she silently talked. *"What if we draw the Vrekeners?"* Even after all these years, those fiends continued to track the sisters' heavy sorcery.

"We've got time yet," Sabine said, though she was growing impatient to see the male she'd be giving herself to—and anxious to get a glimpse of one of the most well-respected leaders in the Lore.

Of course, Sabine had read all about Rydstrom and knew details of his history. He was fifteen hundred years old. He'd had five siblings, with two sisters and one brother still living. He'd been a warrior long before he'd unexpectedly inherited the crown of Rothkalina.

And she knew details of his appearance: a large male with a battle scar on his face and intense green eyes that would grow black with fury—or desire. As a rage demon, his horns would flow back instead of jutting forward. One of his had been damaged before he reached his immortality.

Horns. And she'd be taking this demon into her body in mere moments, if her plan worked.

If not, she had her poison ring. Under a ruby was a sleeping powder prepared by the Hag in the Basement, their resident poison and potion preparer. Demons were highly susceptible to both.

Drugging Rydstrom wasn't Sabine's preferred plan, but if it came down to it, she would use all means necessary to get him into the dungeon cell they'd prepared for him—one he couldn't break free from despite his demonic strength.

It was mere feet from them.

Directly within the cell, Lanthe had created the seamless portal that opened up to the road. To conceal it, Sabine had woven one of the largest, most intricate illusions of her life, making the dungeon look just like a part of the scenery along the road.

It seemed an eternity passed before Rydstrom finally lurched from the smoking wreck. She released a breath she hadn't known she held.

And there he was.

He certainly was big—approaching seven feet tall with broad shoulders. His hair was as black as night. His horns curved out from just past his temples to run along the sides of his head, their shell-like color stark against his thick hair. Indeed, one was damaged, the end broken off.

Though he reeled a couple of steps, he didn't look *too* injured. No visible blood.

Sabine arched a brow just as Lanthe silently said, "*Your demon's just . . . fearsome-looking.*"

She was about to correct Lanthe and say, "*Not my demon.*" But the male before them would indeed be hers. For a time. "*He is a fearsome male, isn't he?*"

From his appearance, Sabine would have guessed him to be an assassin or cutthroat criminal of some sort. How odd, since he was supposed to be a bastion of reason, a wise leader who liked to solve conflicts and discover solutions to complex puzzles.

Rumor in the Lore held that a lie had never left Rydstrom's tongue. Which must be a lie in itself.

"*Are you going to try to seduce him first or just spring the trap?*"

"*Seduce him first. He might go demonic over his capture.*" She smoothed her hands down her pale blue dress.

"*You look good,*" Lanthe said. "*Sweet. Nothing says 'do-me!' like pastel.*"

"*That's just unnecessary, Lanthe.*" Since Sabine hadn't wanted him to know she was a sorceress, she'd worn an elegant but conservatively boring gown. She'd thought it wouldn't hurt to appear virtuous, which she assumed a good demon king would prefer.

He had *better* like her shuddersome new look. Except for her ring, not a single ounce of gold adorned her body. No makeup, either. She'd left her hair unplaited, curling almost to her waist—without a headdress. And it felt *wrong*.

"*Are you sure you want to go through with this?*" Lanthe asked. "*No second thoughts about taking one on the chin for Team Evil?*"

Eyes locked on her prey, Sabine murmured, "*Not in the least.*"

A goal, a plot, a possibility . . . all lay before her.

Once he staggered back to survey the damage to his car, crunching over glass and debris, the demon whistled in a breath at the sight, but his attention quickly turned away from the wreck.

“Is someone here?” he called. With each second that he shook off the accident, his shoulders went farther back, his chin lifting, his demeanor unmistakably *kingly*. “Are you hurt?”

Sabine didn’t answer, instead letting his voice roll over her. It was pleasingly deep-toned, with the British-tinged accent common to noble rage demons.

When he loped in her direction, he snagged a cell phone from his pocket and peered at the screen. She heard him mutter, “Bugger me.” No reception out here.

He wore a dark jacket over a thin black sweater that molded over his broad chest. His clothes were simple in cut but expensive-looking. Tailored, of course. No off-the-rack garments would fit his towering build and wide shoulders.

The battle scar on his face carved across his forehead, then jagged down his cheek. He had to have received that injury before the age when he’d been “frozen” in his immortal body—she guessed when he was thirty-four or thirty-five years old—or else it would have healed seamlessly.

The scar gave him a dangerous air that clashed with his royal bearing and rich-looking clothing, as did his horns, his fangs, his black claws . . .

“I’d do him,” Lanthe said.

“Since you’d do anyone, your comment is meaningless in the definitive sense.”

“You’re just jealous.”

Yes, yes she was.

When he glanced back up, he met eyes with Sabine. His were the most startling green she’d ever seen.

“Go now,” she told Lanthe. *“Be ready to shut the portal directly behind us. Once I capture him, report my success to Omort. Loudly. In front of all the fools at court.”*

“Will do. Go get ’em, tigress. Rar!”

With Lanthe gone, Sabine devoted her full concentration to him. His gaze narrowed as she made the night appear dreamlike. The stars shone brighter for him, the moon seeming heavier in the sky. Brows drawn in confusion, he started toward her.

She could see him assessing her, his gaze flickering over her long hair, and over the modest gown that fortunately had grown damp in the humid night and clung to her breasts. When he peered

hard at the outline of her jutting nipples, he ran a hand over his mouth.

Time to get him through the portal. When she began sauntering along the road away from him, he said, “No, wait! Are you all right?”

She turned to him but continued to step backward toward the trap.

“I won’t hurt you.” The demon hastened after her. “Do you have a car out here?”

“I need your help,” she told him, continuing her damsel-in-distress act.

“Of course. Do you live near here?” Finally, they neared the portal’s edge.

“Need your help,” she said once more, ducking behind what appeared to be a willow by the water’s edge, but was actually an illusion within the dungeon.

He joined her there—and Sabine sensed the portal closing. The trap had worked, and he’d never felt a thing.

“I have to get to the city,” he said. “But then I can come back to help you.”

Before she caught herself, her gaze flitted over the deep scar on his face—the first time she’d seen it this close.

He noticed and seemed to be waiting for her to react.

The scar didn’t bother her as much as it clearly did him. She could use that against him.

All in all, he wasn’t anything like she imagined. He was . . . better. And if she looked at those intense eyes long enough, she could almost forget what he was. When she arched closer to him, he drew back, suspicion in his expression.

She hastily said, “Help me *now*.” Grasping one of his big hands in hers, she kissed it with smiling lips, then placed it over one of her breasts.

As if he didn’t realize what he was doing, he cupped her flesh with a growl.

“This is what I need,” she murmured, arching to his rough palm.

“And the gods know that I want to give it to you, right after I’ve settled—”

“I need it”—she took his other hand and placed it on her inner thigh—“*now*.”

He squeezed her breast and leg too hard, as if he were holding on for dear life. Yet still he seemed on the verge of leaving her. She delved to read his mind, but demons could deflect her probes. She only heard his stray thoughts, and only because they were so strong.

—“*Been so long without a woman . . . can’t have her . . . responsibilities.*”—

Exactly how long had he been celibate? And was this brute truly thinking to deny her? *For responsibilities?*

The rejection was intriguing.

She knew that demon males loved to have their horns touched, relished having their females steering them sexually. His had straightened and become duskier with his arousal, so she raised her hands and wrapped her fingers around them.

He shuddered as if in ecstasy.

“Kiss me, demon.” She gave a firm tug to lead him down to her, and he finally bowed his head. When their lips met, he groaned from deep in his chest.

—“*. . . connection with her, maybe the connection.*”—

Yes, already he sensed what she was to him. *Now he’ll come to heel.*

He began taking her mouth, twining his tongue against hers slowly. She got the impression that he was endeavoring to be gentle for her. He probably feared he’d scare her off. But when she met his tongue and gave it teasing laps with her own, his hands landed hard on her ass to rock her against his sizable erection.

So the rumors about demon males weren’t exaggerated.

When she felt him subtly thrusting that shaft against her, she thought, *This is better.* Once males got to this state, they ceased to think.

As she relaxed somewhat, she began to find his kiss enjoyable. He tasted good, his lips were firm, and he knew how to use them. More of his delving kisses, more squeezing and exploring her body.

But when heavily aroused, Sabine unwittingly cast illusions of fire. If he saw them, he could guess her identity. Just when she began to worry that her reaction to him might get that intense, he broke away from her.

“I . . . can’t do this now. I have to meet someone. Much rides on this.”

Was he serious? “Make love to me,” she whispered, now sidling closer to him. “Here. Under this tree, in the moonlight. I’m *aching* for you.” And that might actually be true.

“No. I have obligations.” His voice was rough, his thoughts in turmoil, blasting past his own blocks.

—“... *she’s so lush . . . cock’s throbbing for her . . . horns straightening . . . No! The kingdom’s needs always come before the king’s.*”—

Yes, Rydstrom was supposed to be patient and wise. Apparently, she could add selfless to that list.

When he backed away, her lips parted in wonderment. *He’s going to deny me.* She’d offered up her body, all but begged him to take it, and he’d declined.

How surprising. The only thing Sabine loved as much as a good juicy plot was a surprise. He’d resisted her—his own female. “Then you leave me no choice, Rydstrom.”

Just when he frowned, no doubt wondering how she knew his name, she began withdrawing her illusion. The road and the moonlit night gradually disappeared, revealing the sealed and locked cell. As he twisted around, his eyes narrowed with recognition.

“You’re Omort’s sister, Sabine, the Queen of Illusions.”

“Very good, Rydstrom.”

The brows-drawn look of desire from before vanished. Now he appeared disgusted with her. “Show me your real form.”

“This is.” She smoothed her palms over her breasts and lower. “I’m so pleased by how much it arouses you.” *But it hadn’t enough.* . . .

Clearly struggling to control his temper, he asked, “Why have you done this to me, Sabine?”

She motioned toward the bed now revealed in the center of the cell—the one with chains at the head and foot. “Isn’t it obvious?”

– 3 –

“No, it’s not obvious.” Rydstrom glanced from the bed back to the sorceress before him.

Thoughts ran riot in his mind—suspicions arose and were dismissed. *A bed and chains.* She’d failed to seduce him to willingly bed her. Was she now intent on *taking* what she’d wanted?

When he felt a confusing surge of lust at the idea, he realized she must already be entralling him. Of course she was. He’d seen the road disappear, had seen the bridge abutment move. She had unthinkable power, and for some reason she’d targeted him.

He surveyed the dimly lit space. She’d lured him directly into a large dungeon cell. And one he recognized, because he’d kept prisoners here when he was master and king of Castle Tornin.

She’s trapped me in my own goddamned dungeon.

When he faced her once more, she met his gaze. Her eyes were unusual—with light amber irises surrounded by a ring as dark as coffee. He couldn’t seem to look away from them. “You’ve brought me back to Tornin, so I assume you’re working with Omort.”

“That’s correct.” Her voice was a purr.

I’m in my own dungeon, a prisoner of my worst enemy. Between gritted teeth he said, “And when will I get to face him?”

“You will not. You need not. All you need is me.”

“Explain to me exactly what you plan,” he demanded, cursing his reaction to her. He’d never responded so strongly to any woman before her. He’d been kissing her, lost in pleasure, actually thinking, *She might be my queen.*

Rydstrom had worried what such a beauty would think about his scar, about how much larger he was than she. For her, he'd tried to gentle his touch and kiss. All the while she'd been luring him into a trap.

"I plan," she began matter-of-factly, "to become pregnant with your heir."

His lips parted. Her very words made his shaft shoot hard as steel as every primal demon instinct inside him seemed to stir to life. This female with her plump breasts and sweet lips desired his seed, wanted to mate *with him*.

She's spellbinding me. She must be.

He'd studied Omort's family, had read about hundreds of his half siblings. Omort had murdered most of them after stealing their powers. But a few he kept close.

What have I read about this sorceress? She was aptly called the Queen of Illusions. Rydstrom had just fallen prey to one of remarkable detail. Though she looked to be in her early twenties, she would have to be centuries old.

She was reputed to be even more diabolical than Omort.

Grappling for patience, he grated, "Sabine, let's discuss this like rational beings." Rational was the last thing he felt. "What do you hope to gain?"

"With me in control of your heir, the last of the rage demon rebellions will be quelled."

The idea that the rebels amounted to even a thorn in Omort's side was heartening. Rydstrom had thought that the sorcerer's sadistic regime had broken any true momentum. "There are two flaws to your plan."

"Enlighten me, demon."

"First, my body won't . . . give up seed." A rage demon could take release in sex, but could never spill his seed until he'd claimed his female, and the seal was finally broken. "Not for any but my fated one—"

"I am yours." Her eyes held his, and he realized that she, at least, believed what she'd said. Omort had oracles, basically his own Nix at his beck and call.

Sabine could know more than I do. . . .

Rydstrom shook his head hard, even as his mouth went dry. In fifteen hundred years, he'd never

felt so attracted to another female. What if she were his? To find his queen after waiting so long? To find her as Omort's sister? "No, fate isn't that cruel."

She quirked a brow at that. "Fate is indifferent."

"What are the odds that my woman is related to my worst enemy?"

"Omort's sire lived for millennia and begot hundreds of daughters." She sidled around him. "Five centuries ago, a soothsayer told Omort that his own half sister, the Queen of Illusions, would be your fated mate, and that she would bear your heir in a time of war. After the foretelling, Omort searched for me specifically because of what I am to you. And then I merely waited here at Tornin for the right time."

"Why now? Why do this now?"

She tilted her head. "I was going to seduce you slowly. But we learned of a plot between you and Groot. I had to prevent you from joining forces with your brother, Cadeon the Kingmaker."

Did Sabine know the specifics of their plans? Tonight, Rydstrom had told his brother that should Omort learn of his quest to get the sword, he would stop at nothing to thwart them. Rydstrom hadn't known his enemy had a sorceress like this aiding him.

"What do you know about a plot?"

"More than you think," she replied. "I *always* know more than men think."

Did she know that there was at last a weapon to kill Omort? That Rydstrom had been intent on speeding to meet Cadeon so they could go barter with the psychotic Groot for the weapon? She must.

Cadeon would be at their meeting place right now, wondering where in the hell his older brother was. The brother who was never late, who never missed a meeting.

"Even if you are fated to be mine, Sabine, I'll never have you."

"Oh, you'll have me." Her lips curled in a knowing, sexual grin that made his heart pound. "Again and again until this deed is done."

Again and again. Taking her soft body, learning that perfect pale flesh . . . *No! Resist her.*

"Tell me the second flaw." She lowered herself to the large bed, sitting gracefully on the side. Her mane of glossy red hair tumbled forward, and her scent swept him up. "You've raised my

curiosity.”

He inwardly shook himself. “For my heir to be legitimate, you have to be my queen by marriage.”

“I know.” She ran her fragile-looking hand over the sheet. “We will wed.”

She talked of marrying him as if it were an afterthought, while his mind was reeling.

Because he *was* drawn to her as no other woman before. And there was only one way to determine if she was truly his.

“You’ll give your vow to me, demon. And I’ll accept it.”

The vow—the recitation that would bind a rage demon king to his queen. No ceremony, no witnesses, just a pact between two to become one. He would vocalize his claim on her, and if she accepted his right to her, then she would forever be his queen. “My people will never recognize a marriage coerced by sorcery—or a conception fueled by your notorious potions.”

“Rydstrom, let’s just be frank here. Considering your reaction to me”—she delicately pointed to his erection—“do you really think I’ll need to use sorcery on you?”

He clenched his jaw, unable to deny what was so obvious. “Of course you’d kill me after our babe is born?”

Our babe. He’d never said the phrase in his life. Even she tilted her head at the words.

But then she slowly smiled—and it was beguiling and took his breath away. Had she noticed? “Well, I wouldn’t be a very good evil sorceress if I allowed you to live.”

“Then there’s one thing I can assure you. You will never get my vow from me.”

“Then, Rydstrom, I can’t let you have me without it.”

At that, everything became clear. She would tease him, sexually tormenting him until he gave up the words. Why did the thought make blood surge to his groin?

This creature taking him to the brink, over and over.

Imagining the power struggle between them, the *complication* of it . . . Fantasies arose in his mind, thoughts he usually buried at once. Secrets long kept—and forever denied. “Then all you’re doing is wasting my time,” he said, but his voice was roughened.

“What makes you so confident that I can’t make you say or do *anything* to be inside me?”

Because so much is at stake. Never had Rydstrom been this close to all he wanted.

He had to escape to get to his brother before he did something monumentally selfish. Cadeon was a cutthroat mercenary who had just come into possession of what he'd yearned for most in the world. "You couldn't tempt me from my duty before—and I didn't even know who you were then."

Bravado, Woede.

She stood, her shoulders back. "You haven't seen everything I have to tempt you with," she said, pulling a ribbon at her bodice. The gown slid over her pert nipples down her narrow waist and shapely legs to pool at her feet.

All that remained on her exquisite body was a sheer scrap of white silk covering her breasts and the tiniest panties he had ever seen.

His lips parted, and his cock felt like it could rip through his pants. With her eyes flashing, she raised her chin, well aware of her effect on him and prideful of it.

If this female weren't so evil, she'd be glorious.

In that instant, he decided, *I'll claim her as my war prize when I escape.*

And he would use her to get free.

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“They say I’m as fickle as winter, as shy as frost, and as indifferent as a blizzard. It’s rumored my body is pure as driven snow. Nobody imagines that I might be full of fire.”

—Daniela the Ice Maiden,
Valkyrie and rightful queen of the Icere, the fey of the frozen north

“Women are like bottles of liquor. They should be sampled, savored, then discarded. Matrimony is for men who can’t handle their liquor.”

—Murdoch Wroth, eighteenth-century warlord, modern vampire soldier

– 1 –

The French Quarter, New Orleans
Present day

“She’s . . . near.”

At his brother’s weak and broken words, Murdoch Wroth’s eyes narrowed in anger toward the one who’d brought the proud Nikolai so low.

Myst the Coveted, a female immortal with a vicious heart.

And Nikolai’s fated Bride.

“How can you tell?” Murdoch asked.

“Because I can *feel* her,” Nikolai said.

Murdoch adjusted Nikolai’s arm, which he’d slung across his shoulders to help his brother walk as they searched. The humans milling all around them merely assumed Nikolai was another drunk.

Proud Nikolai. He was exhausted from consuming too little blood, his body racked with never-

ending need for a mad Valkyrie who delighted in his pain. Nikolai had lost weight, his face turning gaunt, his muscles flagging.

“Murdoch, when I find her . . . I want you to trace from here.”

He shook his head. “I’ll stay until you’ve secured her—”

“No. Don’t want you to . . . see me.” Nikolai’s weary gaze darted away from Murdoch’s. “I will lose control.”

Which would shame his stalwart older brother as little else could.

Murdoch couldn’t imagine how Nikolai would react when he found Myst. Five years ago, she had *blooded* Nikolai, as only a Bride could, bringing to life his dead vampire’s body. She’d made him breathe, made his heart beat, and stoked his newly reawakened lust with no intention of slaking it.

That same night, another Valkyrie had shot him through with arrows and still another had mocked his desires. Myst had fled with the two, dooming Nikolai.

A blooded vampire could only take release for the first time while touching his Bride in some way. If she wasn’t available, then he would remain in a state of constant sexual readiness, aching indefinitely.

Which she well knew.

“Promise me you’ll leave,” Nikolai grated.

At length, Murdoch said, “I will.” If Myst was indeed here tonight, it would make sense that there’d be more Valkyrie out on these very streets. More of their deceiving, manipulative, violent kind. “But only to find another one,” he added.

He could capture one and interrogate her about the Lore, the world of not-so-mythical beings he and his brother were now a part of.

Murdoch’s knowledge of the Lore was as limited as that of any of the vampires in their warrior order of Forbearers. Their army consisted mostly of turned humans, and the Lore creatures kept their secrets well guarded from them.

“Don’t underestimate the Valkyrie as I did,” Nikolai rasped. “Else suffer as I have.”

He suffered because fate had forced this bleeding on Nikolai. *As if Nikolai needed another*

burden.

The bleeding process was what Murdoch detested most about being a vampire, even more than never seeing the sun again.

Though he'd once been a rake, bedding a new woman each night, Murdoch hoped it never happened to him. To be mystically tied to a single woman sounded hellish, especially to a woman he didn't choose, and one who could spurn him, as Myst had Nikolai.

The pain had rendered his brother nearly mindless in his pursuit of her. Nikolai wanted retribution, but Murdoch suspected he also simply wanted *her*. Even after all that she'd done to him.

"Where will you take her this night?" Murdoch asked. "The mill?" They'd secured an old renovated sugar mill outside the city, staying there instead of the Forbearer castle while they'd scoured these streets.

Nikolai shook his head.

"Then back to the castle?"

When Nikolai didn't answer, Murdoch said, "You wouldn't take her to *Blachmount*?" The ancient Wroth estate—where most of their family had died in a single night of sickness and murder. "Why?"

"Because that's where my Bride belongs."

Before Murdoch could question his meaning, Nikolai went still, his eyes briefly sliding shut. Then his head swung up toward a rooftop. "It's her."

Above them, a redhead stood frozen, her lips parting in shock.

Murdoch had only briefly seen her all those years before, and now he studied the details of her Valkyrie appearance. She had delicate fey features—pointed ears and high cheekbones—but he also spied the tell-tale claws and small fangs.

At the sight of her, Nikolai stood fully, no longer needing Murdoch's aid. "*My Myst.*"

Her face paled, no doubt at the sight of Nikolai, who now looked like the monster she'd sought to make him. His irises had turned completely black, his fangs descending in his mouth, dripping from thirst.

Her horrified expression almost made Murdoch pity her, but she deserved no mercy. Which was

good, because Nikolai would show her none this night.

Their pursuit of half a decade was . . . *over*. At last.

Just as Nikolai tensed to trace to her, Murdoch slapped him on the back, then teleported away as he'd promised, disappearing so quickly he went unnoticed in the morass of drunken tourists. Even if they had seen him vanish, the humans would think they'd imagined it.

Murdoch materialized in a back alley several blocks away, then walked to the Quarter's main thoroughfare, Bourbon Street. As he moved among the crowds, a warm breeze tripped down the street, dissipating the swampy haze and the fumes from food vendor stands.

Warm. In February. Good hunting weather.

Yes, Nikolai would be merciless tonight, as would Murdoch. Now all he needed was to find his prey.

The hunt is on.

* * *

I'm being followed.

Daniela the Ice Maiden furtively glanced over her shoulder once more. Again she spied nothing out of the ordinary—tourists milling, witches catcalling to human males—but Danii couldn't shake the feeling that she was being stalked.

Which begged the question: what creature would be stupid enough to court a Valkyrie's wrath?

Maybe she was just spooked by Nīx's cryptic remarks tonight. Nucking Futs Nīx, her half sister and the Valkyrie soothsayer, often made off-the-wall predictions. But this one continued to replay in Danii's mind.

"Sad, sad Daniela, the broken doll who wants to be fixed. Tonight she might."

Because of Danii's pale, freezing skin—she was part Icere—she was often likened to a porcelain doll. Well, because of her icy skin and because of what would happen to her if she grew overheated. . . .

But a *broken* doll? What did that mean? And fixed—for good, for bad? *What* precisely would be fixed?

She'd told Nīx, "I can't imagine what you're talking about. I'm not broken"—*my lonely*

existence makes me want to tear my hair out—“and I don’t know how I could be ‘fixed.’”

Perhaps by being able to finally touch another? To feel a man’s skin against her own without being burned, instead of constantly fantasizing about it?

I would give anything.

Yet the only males on earth who could touch her were the Icere. Regrettably, they also happened to want her dead.

Which meant the closest she’d ever get to having sex would be reading about it in the many tomes of erotica she kept hidden in her room or by indulging in her rich fantasy life.

Which also meant she was probably the world’s oldest virgin. Merely awaiting confirmation from Guinness.

And people wonder why I prefer fantasy to reality.

Her ears twitched with awareness. No, she wasn’t simply spooked; *something* was happening. Her senses were alert.

Hastening her pace, she carefully wound around the people on the street, negotiating the ninety-eight-point-six degree gauntlet. Even the briefest contact with another’s skin would burn her. A conundrum, because she kept cool by baring *lots* of hers.

When her frosty breath fogged in the warm night air, she just stifled the urge to scream, and peeked over her shoulder once more.

This time she spotted a towering male, far behind her. He was striking, looked to be mid-thirties. But there was something unusual about him.

Was he even human? New Orleans was chock-full of Lore beings. He could be an immortal, maybe even the one trailing her.

At that moment, he wasn’t looking in her direction, so she took the opportunity to duck into an alley beside a hotel. Leaping up four stories to the hotel’s flat roof, she crossed to a low ledge wall overlooking the street, then crouched between two flags—one had a fleur-de-lis covered in beads, and the other said *Pardi Gras!*

Tilting her head, she studied the male below. He had longish dark brown hair, cut negligently, with a lock falling over his forehead. His face was fantasy-worthy, with a strong, masculine jaw and

chin.

He wore tasteful clothes, a black button-down and jeans with a jacket that made her feel warm just looking at it. She herself was wearing the thinnest backless dress she could find.

He strode with an air of confidence. The male was gorgeous—and he knew it. How could he not, with the women gaping at him? Then she frowned. He seemed oblivious to the prancing coeds in low-cut tops angling for his attention.

His body was big, muscular in a way that hinted at immortal, but what he was exactly eluded her. Considering his size, he was probably a demon, or even a Lykæ—those animals had begun prowling the Valkyries' turf as bold as they pleased.

Or could he be . . . a vampire?

She trained her gaze on his chest, watching for the rise and fall of breaths. Seconds passed. Historically, the vampires had shunned Louisiana. Yet on this night her Valkyrie coven had heard that members of both warring vampire armies, the Horde and the Forbearers, could be out in the Quarter.

What they didn't know was why.

His chest is still. Bingo. Vamp.

Since his eyes were a normal gray and clear—not crazed and red with bloodlust—that meant he was a Forbearer, one of an army who didn't drink blood straight from the flesh.

Vampires who didn't kill. At least, that was their mission statement.

The Lore was still waiting to see how that worked out for them.

Though Danii knew she needed to report back on this sighting, she couldn't take her gaze off him. What was it about this vampire? She was aware of only two Valkyrie who'd ever been with his kind. One still lived. Danii knew the danger; so why this attraction?

Yes, he was breathtakingly cocky, with his leading-man face and broad shoulders, but she'd never been so absorbed by a male. Not a real one, anyway.

Broken-doll Daniela . . . *wanted*. Him. A vampire.

When he was almost directly below her, she noticed that he seemed burdened, preoccupied even. Hardly the expression of someone who'd been stalking her.

But if he hadn't been, then who—

The unmistakable twang of bow-strings sounded behind her.

She dove for cover, and a swarm of arrows sliced the air where she'd been standing. A second volley skittered against the brick where her head had just been, ricocheting off the low ledge wall.

She recognized the creosote-like scent of the arrowheads. Poison on the tips, *fire* poison. Which could only kill ice creatures like her. *Oh, gods.*

Without looking back, she vaulted over the side of the roof. When she landed in the alley below, she tore off at a sprint.

The bows, the poisoned arrowheads—this wasn't a Lykae threat. Not a vampire attacking.

Icere assassins were hunting her. *My mother's people.* How had they found her?

No choice but to flee, knew she couldn't remain to fight. These assassins traveled in bands, and the number of arrows indicated at least half a dozen men.

Even as she raced directly toward the mortal gauntlet, her mind rebelled. She hadn't seen another of her kind in centuries. *I thought I'd be safe from them here.*

Her only hope was to outrun them, yet she knew how fast they would be. Like her, they were born of the fey—

She dashed right in front of the vampire, nearly knocking him over.

– 2 –

Murdoch had just rubbed the back of his neck, then peered upward, convinced he was being watched.

He'd spied nothing, started on his way again . . . and almost ran over a small blonde in a skimpy backless dress.

With lightning speed, she darted in front of him, sparing him the briefest glance. He caught a glimpse of high cheekbones and alarmed silvery eyes before she sped across the main thoroughfare toward another alley. A pointed ear had peeked out through the wild spill of her long fair hair.

Pointed ears, silver irises, running too fast to be a human.

An immortal—possibly one of *them*.

That glimpse of her was all it took, and the chase was on. He hurriedly followed her into the alley, then traced, vanishing and materializing ever closer to her.

Though small, she was swift as she navigated through a maze of shadowy blocks, heading toward the river. He was barely gaining on her.

What kind of being could run as fast as a vampire could trace?

As he neared, he made out finer details of her appearance. Her legs were taut and shapely under her short dress. Her bared back and arms were slim. She wore silver bands above her elbows, and elaborate braids threaded her long hair.

She seemed foreign, unusual. Like women from faraway lands in olden times. *I can't wait to get a better look from the front.*

That thought threw him. Since the night he'd been turned into a vampire three hundred years ago, he'd had no interest in women, no need for them, just as he never reacted to the scent or sight of food.

Why would I give a damn about what her front looks like? He would wrest information from her. He could do little else.

His body was deadened. And he preferred it that way.

Just then, she glanced over her shoulder as she ran, and he caught sight of her elven face once again.

Those pointed ears . . . several factions in the Lore had them, at least that he knew of. Valkyrie were among them. He was becoming more and more convinced he'd found his quarry.

But she seemed to have lost sight of him altogether, focusing in another direction.

With each minute that passed, they traveled deeper into a decaying labyrinth of abandoned warehouses and stacks of railcars.

Finally she was slowing. She stumbled in a puddle, then tripped on the corner of a shipping pallet.

He stopped tracing and began running toward her. He was close enough to hear her heart drumming, her gasping breaths.

The Valkyrie his brother had encountered had known no fear of vampires. Maybe in the last five years they'd learned they had reason to flee from one. The thought made him pursue her with even more excitement. His vampire instincts rushed to the fore. The thrill of the chase overwhelmed him, and Murdoch played with her, letting her lope until she tired.

Just as he decided to end this, he turned a corner after her, running into a four-way crossing.

There was no sign of her.

Only silence.

* * *

Danii crouched on the second floor of a storm-ravaged warehouse, struggling to catch her breath and shuddering from heat.

She still couldn't believe the Icere were here. She'd thought she was safe living in such a warm

climate, believing they'd never look for her this close to the equator.

Like the Icere, Danii didn't sweat. Unlike them, she could go into thermal shock if she grew overheated. But she was more accustomed to the temperature here than they were. And she knew every twist and turn of these downtown streets. As long as she didn't catch a fire arrow, she could handle the Icere.

The vampire was another matter entirely. When she'd seen him tracing after her, she'd gaped in disbelief that yet another pursuer had joined the chase.

A clear-eyed vampire, a true Forbearer.

Though hidden, she could still see him from this vantage. With a narrowed gaze, he turned in circles below, determining her direction.

Any superficial and misguided attraction she'd felt for him was drowned out by annoyance. If this male would just move on, the Icere likely wouldn't find her here.

Otherwise, he was going to get her killed.

The assassins would separate to trap her, driving her with the threat of those poisoned arrows. They wouldn't lob their notorious ice grenades at her—they'd lose valuable cold and she'd simply take the impact with a smile on her face as she soaked the chill into herself.

But those arrows . . .

Tipped with a poison that ravaged through an ice being's veins like liquid fire.

I would know. This wasn't the first time a faraway Icere king had dispatched killers after Danii, the rightful Icere queen.

Instead of leaving, the vampire called out in a deep voice, "I know you're here." His words were thickly accented. Russian? Perhaps Estonian. "You're a Valkyrie, are you not?" He stilled, listening for her. "If so, you'll want to know that my brother just captured Myst the Coveted."

Myst. Danii loved all her half sisters equally, but she *owed* Myst.

Wait . . . a Forbearer's *brother* had taken her? There was one Forbearer—an Estonian—who wanted Myst above all others: Nikolai Wroth, the Overlord. He'd done Myst wrong, but then she had *definitely* retaliated.

And the Overlord had brothers.

Danii had to find out what had happened to her sister. If Nikolai alone had her, then Myst probably wouldn't be in danger, since she was his Bride. But if Nikolai had surrendered her to the Forbearer king . . .

I have to know. Danii could trap the male below in a cocoon of crushing ice, then question him, but how much more cold—and time—could she stand to lose?

"Why do you cower?" Anger blazed off him. "A true Valkyrie would face me."

True Valkyrie? His taunt struck home, like a jab at an exposed nerve. She wanted nothing more than to be like her half sisters. To enjoy all the things they took for granted. *Broken doll* . . . She rose unsteadily, crossed to a gap in the wall, then stepped out.

At once, his gaze locked on her, following her down. His lips parted, revealing barely visible fangs, but he made no move to close the thirty or so feet between them.

Had she truly thought the gray of his eyes was normal? Recognition seemed to flare in them. *Recognition?* But how? She'd never seen him before—she'd definitely have remembered.

His gaze was focused . . . *predatory*. Then his irises turned black. Black in a vampire meant intense emotion. Yet his earlier fury seemed to be fading.

As they stared at each other, all other sounds—the eerie thrum of barges churning the river, the distant screech of streetcars—were drowned out.

"My brother warned me that your kind are vicious." His voice went even lower as he frowned. "I cannot see you as so."

"Where is my sister, vampire?"

"I can take you to her, Valkyrie."

I'll bet. Yes, the male before her was a Forbearer, which meant that he was clueless among the Lore.

He'd have no idea how dangerous Danii in particular could be.

– 3 –

A living, breathing Valkyrie stood before him. And she was so stunningly beautiful. . . .

Murdoch's view of her front had proved far more rewarding than he'd imagined.

He shook himself. Was she one of those who'd shot Nikolai? Had she been there to laugh at the idea of his brother's agony?

For some reason, he couldn't imagine her like that. He knew she was an enemy—one among an army of females who sought the annihilation of all vampires—and Nikolai had just warned him not to underestimate them. But this one looked even more fragile than Myst.

Though her features and lithe body were perfection, her blond locks were tangled around her pointed ears, and dust smudged her cheeks. Her face was feverishly red, and she was subtly swaying on her feet. She looked sad and miserable.

And spooked.

Chasing a female who feared him sat ill. Nikolai had sworn they were taunting, sadistic warriors. Yet this creature had hidden from him—after fleeing as if her life depended on it.

"Listen, Valkyrie, I don't want to hurt you. I just have some questions for you to answer."

She raised her hand, but lifted no weapon. Instead, she flattened her palm just below her lips as if to blow a kiss good-bye. The breath that left her mouth looked like a cloud of frost, surging forward, surrounding him.

Ice flash-froze around his boots. He couldn't move his legs. Couldn't break free. "*What the hell is this?*" Her breath continued to surround him, ice growing up past his knees, climbing to his

thighs.

Then she coughed, bending over and rocking on her feet. The buildup stopped, leaving him fettered by this bizarre binding.

He strained against the ice, which seemed stronger than any he'd ever known, but he was unable to break free or trace from it. "Take—this—away."

She stalked closer. "Who has Myst now? Nikolai or the Forbearer king?"

"How do you know my brother's name?"

"Nikolai or the king?"

He spied the points of her ears twitching, and her gaze darted past him. Just as she *hissed* at something behind him, he heard movement and twisted his upper body around.

There stood half a dozen men, large Viking-looking warriors, with swords at their sides and arrows already nocked to the strings of their raised bows.

Their breaths smoked in the warm night air and their ears were pointed.

She hasn't been fleeing from me—

Arrows darkened the air around him, whizzing past his head. They'd aimed for her.

But somehow she was twisting to dodge the onslaught. Whirling around in the air, she turned to dart into another alley, her speed incomprehensible.

Then she was gone.

His hands shot down to claw his legs free, his fingers swiftly going numb. Just as the males behind him ran after her, Murdoch heard more fighting.

There are two groups. They're organized, flushing her out. Can't get this fucking ice off me.

Suddenly, her small body came flying out of the intersecting alley before him.

Thrown. She'd been *thrown*.

The force of her landing sent her skidding across the pavement. As she stabbed her claws against the bricks to right herself, a cloud of arrows followed her. The momentum took her out of his field of vision.

Then an unfamiliar scent swept him up. Though his instinct told him it was blood, his mind rebelled.

Never had it smelled so exquisite. So irresistible.

At last Murdoch broke free, tracing to intercept her. When he reappeared, his every muscle tensed in an instant.

The scent had been blood—*hers*. She was kneeling in a pool of it, her chest full of arrows. One of the males was holding her up by her hair, speaking in some foreign tongue. In his other hand, he held a glowing red blade.

She gazed up at Murdoch as crimson streams snaked from her wounds to the dirty street.

They'd done this to her?

What had you been about to do to her? His vampire nature warred with memories of the man he'd been. . . .

—I would never have hurt her.

—She was my prey. They stole her from me. My prize.

Just . . . *mine*.

At the thought of those men loosing their arrows at her, the idea of her pain and fear, rage erupted in him. The need to protect her, to destroy those who sought to harm her, burned within him.

Mine.

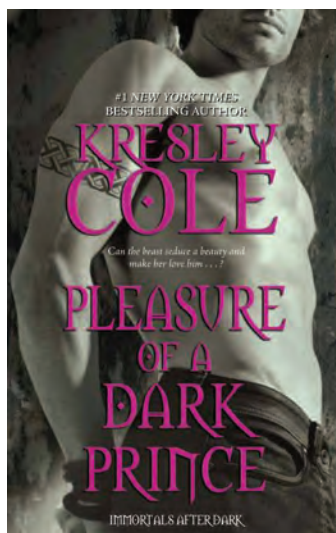
Two realizations struck him.

This strange female belonged to him alone. And these killers would die before they relinquished her.

Her gaze held Murdoch's, and she weakly extended her small hand. With tears running from her silvery eyes, she spoke, a whisper directed to him, loud above all sounds.

"Mercy."

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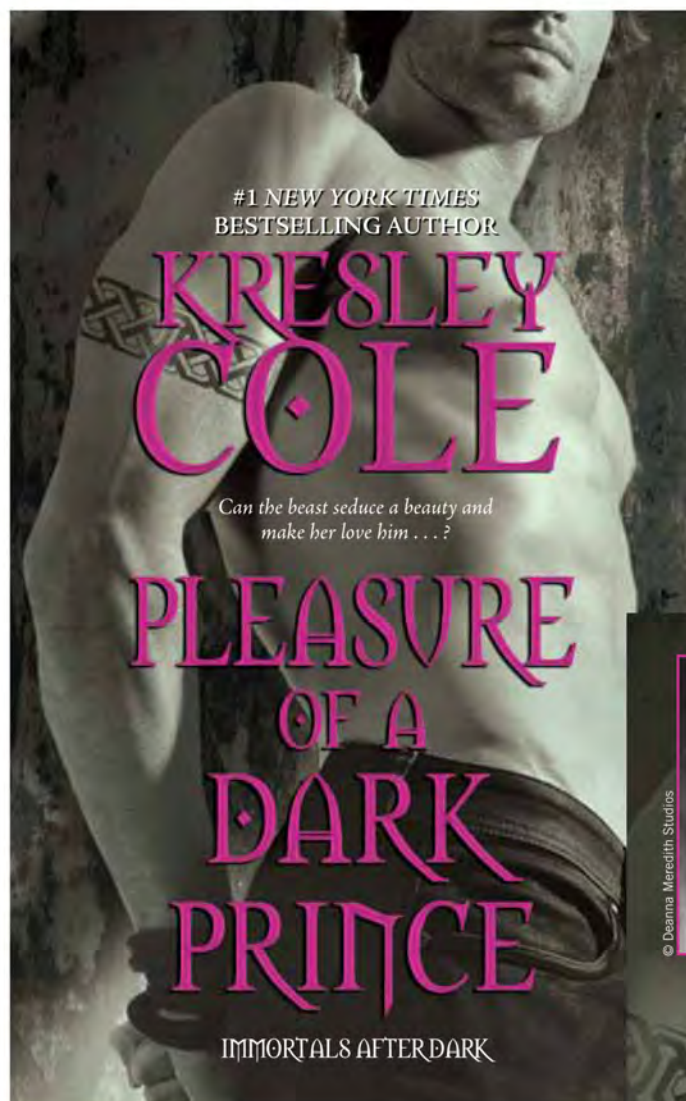
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GLOSSARY FROM THE BOOK OF LORE

The Lore

“... and those sentient creatures that are not human shall be united in one stratum, coexisting with, yet secret from, man’s.”

- ❖ Most are immortal and can regenerate from injuries. Many of the stronger breeds can only be killed by mystical fire or by beheading.
- ❖ Their eyes change to a breed-specific color with intense emotion.

The Valkyrie

“When a maiden warrior screams for courage as she dies in battle, Wóden and Freya heed her call. The two gods give up lightning to strike her, rescuing her to their hall, and preserving her courage forever in the form of the maiden’s immortal Valkyrie daughter.”

- ❖ Take sustenance from the electrical energy of the earth, sharing it in one collective power, and give it back with their emotions in the form of lightning.
- ❖ Possess preternatural strength and speed.
- ❖ Without training, they can be mesmerized by shining objects and jewels.
- ❖ Also called Swan Maidens, Shield Maidens.

The Vampires

“Two warring factions, the Vampire Horde and the Forbearer Army.”

- ❖ Each vampire seeks his *Bride*, his eternal wife, and walks as the living dead until he finds her.
- ❖ A Bride will render his body fully alive, giving him breath and making his heart beat, a process known as *bleeding*.
- ❖ *Tracing* is teleporting, the vampire’s means of travel. A vampire can only trace to destinations he’s previously been.
- ❖ The *Fallen* are vampires who have killed by drinking a victim to death. Distinguished by their red eyes.

The Horde

“In the first chaos of the Lore, a brotherhood of vampires dominated, by relying on their cold nature, worship of logic, and absence of mercy. They sprang from the harsh steppes of Dacia and migrated to Russia, though some say a secret enclave, the Daci, live in Dacia still.”

- ❖ The *Fallen* comprise their ranks.
- ❖ Enemies of most factions in the Lore.

The Forbearers

“ . . . his crown stolen, Kristoff, the rightful Horde king, stalked the battlefields of antiquity seeking the strongest, most valiant human warriors as they died, earning him the name of Gravewalker. He offered eternal life in exchange for eternal fealty to him and his growing army.”

- ❖ An army of vampires consisting of turned humans, who do not drink blood directly from the flesh.
- ❖ Kristoff was raised as a human and then lived among them. He and his army know little of the Lore.
- ❖ Enemies of the Horde.

The Sept of Sorceri

“The Sept forever seek and covet others’ powers, challenging and dueling to seize more—or more darkly, stealing another’s sorcery . . .”

- ❖ A breed-line broken from the enchantment caste of the House of Witches.
- ❖ Born with one innate power, their *root power*. If they lose it, they become slaves to their own kind called *Inferi*. They can trade and steal secondary powers.
- ❖ One of the physically weaker species in the Lore, they used elaborate armors to protect their bodies. Eventually they held metals—and especially gold—sacred.

The Lykae Clan

“A proud, strapping warrior of the Keltoi People (or Hidden People, later known as Celts) was taken in his prime by a maddened wolf. The warrior rose from the dead, now an immortal, with the spirit of the beast latent within him. He displayed the wolf’s traits: the need for touch, an intense loyalty to its kind, an animal craving for the delights of the flesh. Sometimes the beast rises . . .”

- ❖ Also called werewolves, war-wolds.
- ❖ Enemies of the Horde.

The Demonarchies

“The demons are as varied as the bands of man . . .”

- ❖ A collection of demon dynasties.
- ❖ Some kingdoms ally with the Horde.
- ❖ Most demon breeds can *trace* like vampires. Some breeds are bound to obey summonses.
- ❖ Those that can emit poison from their fangs, horns, or claws are more vulnerable to others' poison.
- ❖ A demon must have intercourse with a potential mate to ascertain if she's truly his—a process known as *attempting*.

The House of Witches

"... immortal possessors of magical talents, practitioners of good and evil."

- ❖ Mystical mercenaries who sell their spells.
- ❖ Strictly forbidden to create personal wealth or grant immortality.
- ❖ Separated into five castes: warrior, healer, enchantress, conjurer, and seeress.
- ❖ The only witch known to possess the powers of all five castes is Mariketa the Awaited.

The Furiae

"If you do evil, beg for punishment—before they come . . ."

- ❖ Ruthless she-warriors bent on delivering justice to evil men when they escape it elsewhere.
- ❖ Led by Alecta the Unyielding One.
- ❖ Also called Furies, Erinyes.

The Berserkers

"A berserker's lonely life is filled with naught but battle rage and bloodlust . . ."

- ❖ A cadre of warriors, consisting almost completely of mortals, who swore allegiance to Wóden. Known for their merciless brutality.
- ❖ One of the few human orders to be recognized and accepted by the Lore.
- ❖ Able to conjure the spirit of the bear, and channel its ferocity.

The Noble Fey of Draiskulia

"A warrior nobility who ruled over all the demon serfs in their realm."

- ❖ Were *Féodals*, an ancient term for feudal overlords, which became shortened to Fey.
- ❖ Masters in the art of poisons.
- ❖ Males prefer to be called Drais.
- ❖ Over time, divided into numerous subsets, including fire, ice, and forest fey.

The Sirenae

"Near the sea's edge, beware the siren's song . . ."

- ❖ A female species of immortals, they can permanently mesmerize and enslave males who hear their singing.
- ❖ Derive power from the sea and can't be away from it for more than one cycle of the moon.

Wendigo

"Corpse-eaters insatiable for flesh, ravenous for blood. They feed and feed, but can never be sated."

- ❖ Thought to be found only in the boreal forests of cold and northern lands.
- ❖ Distinguishable by their long, knifelike claws, and bodies that are forever emaciated.
- ❖ Will dig up graves for flesh.

The Wraiths

". . . their origin unknown, their presence chilling."

- ❖ Spectral, howling beings. Undefeatable and, for the most part, uncontrollable.
- ❖ Also called the Ancient Scourge

The Vessel

"To be chosen is to be doomed . . ."

- ❖ At the cusp of each Accession, a chosen female will beget a child who will become a warrior of either ultimate evil or of ultimate good—depending upon the father.
- ❖ Of the last seven Vessels, six have spawned evil.
- ❖ Some factions seek to assassinate the Vessel to prevent any birth. Others battle to possess her and control her offspring.

Revenants

"The dead robbed of eternal rest, forced to serve a dark master . . ."

- ❖ A corpse raised from the grave and reanimated, most often by a sorcerer or necromancer, who controls it.
- ❖ Can't be slain until the one who commands it is killed.

The Kobolds

"When eyes are on them, winsome they seem. Eyes away, and you can't imagine what they become."

- ❖ Gnomelike creatures that dwell in mines. The name of the capricious and dangerous mined element cobalt is derived from this species.

The Ghouls

“Even immortals beware its bite . . .”

- ❖ Humans turned savage monsters, with glowing green skin, yellow eyes, and contagious bites and scratches.
- ❖ Their imperative is to increase their number by contagion.
- ❖ They’re said to travel in troops.

The Turning

“Only through death can one become an ‘other.’”

- ❖ Some beings, like the Lykae, vampires, and ghouls, can turn a human or even other Lore creatures into their kind through differing means, but the catalyst for change is always death.

The Talisman’s Hie

“A treacherous and grueling scavenger’s hunt for magical talismans, amulets, and other mystical riches over the entire world.”

- ❖ Held every two hundred fifty years.
- ❖ Hosted by Riora, the goddess of impossibility.
- ❖ Won the last five times by the Valkyrie Kaderin the Cold Hearted.

The Accession

“And a time shall come to pass that all immortal beings in the Lore, from the strongest Valkyrie, vampire, and Lykae factions, to the phantoms, shifters, fairies, sirens . . . must fight and destroy each other.”

- ❖ A kind of mystical checks-and-balances system for an ever-growing population of immortals.
- ❖ Occurs every five hundred years. *Or right now . . .*

STAY TUNED FOR MORE TO COME . . .

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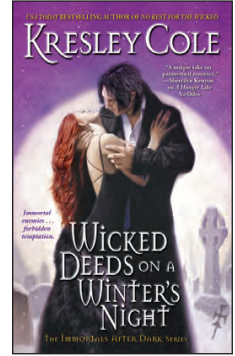
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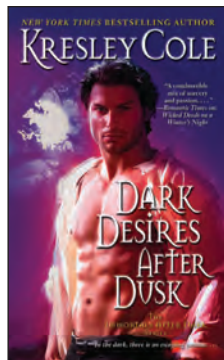
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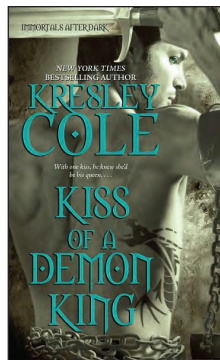
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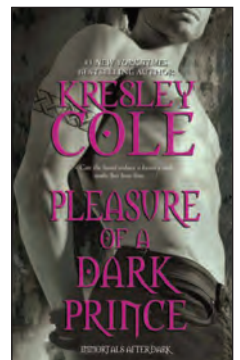
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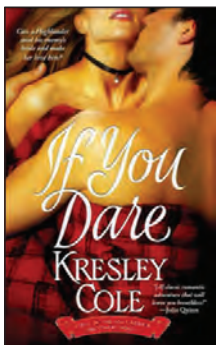
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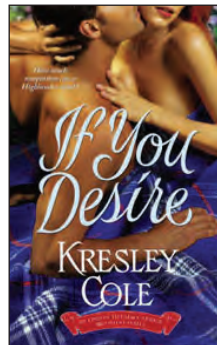
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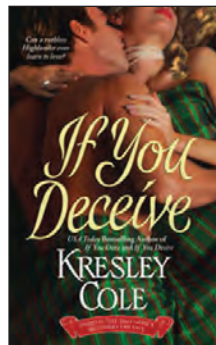
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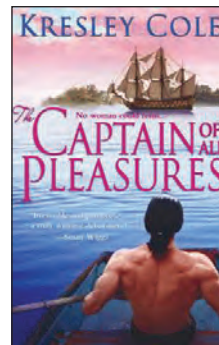
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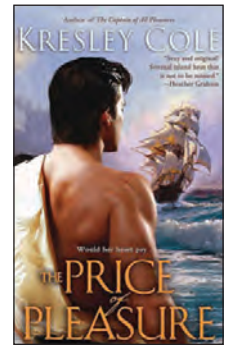
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BIOGRAPHY

Before becoming a *New York Times* bestselling author, Kresley Cole was a world-ranked athlete, coach, and graduate student. While earning her Master's degree, she spent much of her time in the research library, gathering background information for what would eventually become award-winning historical and paranormal romances.

Since her first novel was published in 2003, Kresley has sold a total of fifteen books and two novellas and has seen her releases translated into over a dozen foreign languages. She has traveled over much of the world and draws from those experiences to create her memorable characters and settings. Two of her favorite places to visit include the rain forests of Central America and the Far North Queensland area of Australia (where, by the way, she would not recommend swimming outside of the shark and stinger nets—at night).

Cole's trademark action, sensuality, and humor are best exemplified in her popular **Immortals After Dark Series**, which revolves around the Lore, a secret stratum of hundreds of immortal creatures—ranging from Vampires to Lykae, Furies to Shifters, and Fey to Valkyrie—that each have their strengths, weaknesses, and age old prejudices against the others. Though they secretly live among humans, they constantly war among themselves, which gives her a lot of material.

In 2007, Kresley won the prestigious Romance Writers of America RITA award for best paranormal for her novel *A Hunger Like No Other*, and in January 2009, she became a #1 *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller with her sixth IAD installment, *Kiss of a Demon King*.

She lives in Florida with her husband and far, far too many animals, and spends any free time traveling. You can learn more about Kresley and her work in her Readers' Forum at www.kresleycole.com/forum.

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