



Soft As Moonlight

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Dedication

For my friends and family. If it weren't for you, my stories would have remained long forgotten on the dusty office bookshelf.

Prologue

New Orleans, 1981

Push harder. Don't think. Run faster.

Cool sheets of peeling hail and heavy rain stung sharply, burrowing into the pale softness of deceptively fragile cheeks. Arden Moran barreled through the odd bucket or chair left decorating the barren rooftops, increasing the speed—heedless, hell-bent, and determined. Each painful and fragmented slice from jagged ice against her face healed in the moment it appeared; the thin wounds driving her onward and keeping her grounded both cruel and bittersweet. Ragged exhalations accompanied her breakneck pace, muted only by the quiet staccato of her restlessly bounding feet.

The warning from her sources had come too late. The skirmish between the Thymeria human faction and the vampyren would take just minutes. Crucial minutes it would take her to travel from Greyson's Pub to the water front.

Focus. Not much time.

The thin slate of shimmering sleet beneath her worn shit-kickers created a devilishly smooth sheen that would see a lesser creature felled and left for dead twenty stories below—but not her. Immortally good balance kept her from skittering when the faded rubber soles lost traction or a wet patch threatened to set her off course. She was constantly in motion, arms extended in harmony with lithe legs that carried her effortlessly from rooftop to rooftop.

She saw the space she sought directly ahead, recognized the older abandoned buildings framed by the flickering silver flashes of water. Then, the heavy scent of salt and ocean was overridden by the metallic bitterness of blood.

No, damn it!

Never breaking stride, she unsheathed the daggers holstered at her hips and propelled herself from the rooftop with a seamless kick and, twisting her torso midair, aimed for the center of the strewn bodies below. The ground rushed up to greet her, the grainy, rain-drenched asphalt absorbing the landing in welcome. She slid free of her trench coat in the same motion she lifted her arms and rose, standing above the leather pooled at her feet and gazing silently at the cause of the devastation.

Four newly turned vampyren were trapped in the throes of bloodlust, feasting on their bounty. The wet gurgles and disgusting slurps of bloodletting echoed in a disturbingly lyrical melody with the soft lapping of the water against the wooden landing.

Her stomach churned in revulsion as her own morbid and repulsive appetite surfaced.

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to remember why she had come, to suffocate the hunger and to replace it with something more substantial. The fire in her abdomen eased, and the coarse dryness in her throat abated.

When she opened her eyes, she chose her first target, winding through the bodies with ravaged throats and sightless eyes. Although her feet made no sound, it wouldn't have mattered. Depraved growls came from the throats and mouths of those experiencing the newfound hunger of the damned. They were blind to all but the blood-clogged buffet of corpses around them.

She snagged a handful of hair as she dragged her silver blade into the giving flesh of the nearest vampyren's throat, rendering it headless. Her ears went deaf, and her eyes went blind. It was no longer man, but demon—a being that lived to taint, pillage, and destroy. She held onto both pieces until the body went as limp and lifeless as the others around it. It crumbled to the ground in a slurpy scuff of bloody flesh meeting cool cement.

The three remaining Fallen didn't look away from the bodies they cradled and necks they crowded. Their faces were obscured by snarled hair that masked their gorging. Each one met the same fate at the end of her blade, sent to the ever after in the same efficient manner. Only when the last body was cradled by the harsh cushion of the blood-spattered ground did she allow resentment and outrage to surface.

The master vampyren in charge was long gone, leaving behind those he viewed as disposable. Just like the dead human soldiers dispatched by the Thymeria.

She trembled in fury.

The Thymeria.

For all they touted themselves to be, the vampire race was as ruthless as the vampyren, if not as bloodthirsty.

She worked through the bodies with her eyes, unwilling to use her nose. The lingering scent of blood was heavy in her nostrils, bringing on the goddamned hunger, and the frozen rain washing away the fragrance was waning. There had been no time to sate the need beforehand, and drinking of the recently departed would leave her no better than those she disposed of.

Only vampyren fed from the dead.

The vibrant red hair she dreaded discovering blanketed the darkened blacktop near the water, the body attached to the corkscrew curls hidden just out of view. She slowed her movement, delaying the inevitable by seconds. Her worst nightmare waited just around the side of a building, something she could foresee but never could have prevented.

Harsh words from the past returned to haunt her and echoed loudly in her mind with each weighted step.

The Thymeria will be the end of you, Portia. One night, you'll lay broken and shattered at my feet. They will gladly sacrifice your life for their self-righteous devices. You'll never join them in immortality, but you'll most certainly meet your death because of them.

“Arden.”

The voice registered as another agonizing memory. Only this time, her friend was speaking. Portia's voice was always soft, even in anger. It was her way, her nature. She was the gentle one, the nurturer.

"Arden."

The wet burble of blood escaping Portia's lips as she struggled to speak severed the grip of the past, sapped the strength in Arden's knees, and brought her quickly to the side of the girl she'd known since she was thirteen—the friend she'd sworn to protect. She quickly assessed the damage as she bowed over the large hole in Portia's chest. The ragged wound delved through the muscle, bone, and tissue directly over her heart. It was a killing blow intended to stem the flow of life at the source.

"Y-you c-came," Portia wheezed and opened her eyes. The hazel irises were dull, the light within fading.

Not long now.

She lifted one of Portia's ashen hands, brought it to her lips, and kissed the back softly before she whispered, "I told you I would."

"Yes." Portia closed her eyes and exhaled shallowly. "You did."

Even if it's too late.

Arden didn't have to speak the words aloud. It was a discussion left hanging like an impenetrable barrier between them, a division that had eventually torn the long-standing friendship apart. But remaining among those that exploited human life so easily wasn't something she could stomach, not when she'd learned the truth about who and what she was.

Orphaned at ten when her absentee mother passed, and recruited by the Thymeria at twelve, she wasn't like the other children coveted and molded to kill vampyren the world over. She was something different—something unique. And when she turned eighteen, the vampires at war with the Fallen of their kind discovered they had far more than a capable pupil at their disposal.

They had a weapon far more deadly.

For the first time, she regretted the decision to detach from the Thymeria. Staying would have spared the life of the humans she sought to protect. Mortals like the carefree and loving young woman clinging to the last threads of her life with numbed fingers.

"It's all right." Portia's eyes slitted and her weak fingers squeezed. "What's done is done."

"No, it's not." She shook her head and sighed, meeting her friend's exhausted eyes and communicating her intent. "Not yet."

She released the hand in her grip and moved easy fingers across Portia's bloodied face. It was easier to access the pain and anguish of memory by touching the flesh over the source, and she needed each and every one to ensure she got everything she needed from Portia in the exchange.

“D-don’t.” Portia’s voice was weak, vowels slurred. “Too d-dangerous.”

“Shh, it’s all right,” she whispered tenderly and brushed a stray chunk of red hair away from her friend’s clammy forehead while forcing her face to remain unreadable as she felt death approaching fast and relentless. “I need to know.”

The memories snaked into her skull, flashing images of the past along with searing bursts of emotion. Happier times were remembered first, then heartbreaks and loss. Finally, the visions she sought arrived, a merging of chaos and terror. Each image was stored along with the sentiment that stained it, winding along the memory and dousing it in grief or joy.

Including the face of the master vampyren that dealt the vicious blow that would end Portia’s all-too-short life.

The memories faded along with the soul of the body she held, and Arden gazed down at her Portia’s peaceful face, closing her dulled eyes with a light roll of her fingers. There was nothing left to do but to see to the bodies of the dead and bestow the vow Portia didn’t live long enough to hear.

“A life for a life,” she promised softly and traced the tips of her fingers along the wet strands of hair at her chilled temple. “I so avow myself.”

After removing Portia’s remains to a safe distance for a proper burial, Arden returned to the ally to remove the traces of battle, destruction, and the senseless loss of life.

The less the human police found, the better.

Piling the bodies into a morbid kindling tepee was easy, as was dousing them in gasoline. But striking the match against the orange-hued flint along the cardboard box twisted like a knife in the gut.

It was a stark reminder of what life among the Thymeria entailed.

The flame licked at her fingers, the heated wisps of fire deceptively beautiful. She tossed the small flare into the uneven mass and watched in a hazy detachment as the macabre pile of limbs and torsos roared to life.

This was what awaited mortals that flirted with the promise of eternal life.

Immortality—an oxymoron if ever there was. An extension on life didn’t ensure longevity. In the end, when the entire world crumbled, there was only one absolute certainty.

Mortal or immortal—bodies burn just the same.

Chapter One

New Orleans, Present Day

Wolfe Trevlian scanned over the preternatural patrons standing at the bar or seated at tables, eyes and senses vigilant, alert, and aware.

Greyson's Pub was a great place to conduct business as an immortal. The location in the grittier part of the city ensured humans remained well away. But the "Slaughter House" moniker wasn't bestowed because Greyson carved prime T-bone in the basement, and he wasn't in the mood to partake in a pissing contest.

His bad mood continued to sour as the minutes ticked by, each slower than the last. The only door into the bar remained firmly closed—the bright red leather with black stitching shining like bloody vinyl from the overhanging lamps—meaning his liaison continued to dally.

Goddamn you, Adam, he thought enviously, downing the last remnants of Hennessy. *I hope you're enjoying the mated life, you lucky fucking bastard.*

Coming back to this place wasn't easy. He'd left New Orleans two decades prior with the full intention of remaining as far away as possible. Bad memories lingered in the Big Easy. Memories best left alone.

Like those of Deidre Varmour.

The scheming fucking bitch.

Someone with a deep, questioning voice silenced his inner dialogue. "Wolfe, is that you? What in the hell are you doing here?"

Wolfe sank back in the booth and gazed up, smirking despite himself. He motioned to the empty space on either side of his large body and grinned when Greyson took a seat. Wolfe bowed his head slightly in a display of respect and answered, "I'm just taking care of some pack business since that Alpha of yours decided to settle down and retire."

Greyson returned his smile and flagged down a waitress. He ordered another round of Hennessy and a shot of Jack before relaxing into the old, cushioned leather. The elder Lycae didn't look a day over thirty, even at a century old. The grey at his temples, peppering short, dark hair seemed out of place, his tanned face with silver eyes all but wrinkle free.

"Everyone has extra business since Adam stepped down," Greyson said, steely eyes flashing metallic when he added, "Not that I can blame him for making the decision."

"You've met Kassia?"

"Aye." He nodded and smiled.

Wolfe wasn't surprised by the reaction to Adam's female. He'd been much the same when Adam had introduced her to the Quenell pack in New York following their mating. Kassia Lambert was the embodiment of what Lycae longed for in a mate—smart, devoted, and impossibly beautiful. And she obviously loved and worshiped her other half, in both body and soul.

If only all males were so worthy.

“What brings you to our neck of the woods?” Greyson kept the tone light, his voice casual.

Wolfe accepted the Hennessy from the waitress when she returned to the table and took a generous swallow before answering. “I’m smoothing things over with the vampyren king.”

“That’s the way of it, then?” Greyson’s voice changed, becoming angry. “Still harboring a grudge?”

Wolfe nodded, but didn’t speak. When Adam Trevlian, his cousin and the former Alpha of the Bacchus pack of Louisiana, killed Lucius Mercoix’s second in command for attacking Kassia, he hadn’t bothered masking what he’d done. The message had been clear—come for my mate and meet your maker. Unfortunately, the aftermath meant a certain amount of discretion and ass kissing was necessary. Lycae avoided vampires of all kinds like the plague, and going to war with them wasn’t feasible or worth the time invested.

They had more important things to worry about.

Luke Trevlian, Adam’s younger brother and the succeeding Alpha, had to gain the respect of the neighboring packs and the wolves beneath him. Dealing with petty issues was intended for Lycae who respectfully declined the duty of leadership passed down through the bloodlines.

Lycae like him.

Wolfe anticipated the next question and answered before Greyson spoke. “I’m here because I knew Taylor Martinson centuries ago. Before he started drinking blood and avoiding the sun. Luke thought a familiar face would be best and asked me to fly down to meet with him.”

Greyson’s disgust was apparent. “The human contact?”

That gained a chuckle from Wolfe. “I wouldn’t classify him as *human*. He’s lived too long for that.”

Movement from the front door caught Wolfe’s eye, the scarlet leather going dark as the obsidian night brushed the material and masked it in shadow. A dark shape covered in black leather stepped into the establishment, going still just inside the entranceway.

Wolfe flared his nostrils and scented the air. The fragrance of vampire, Lycae, and Chimera mingled with the stink of amber from a recent summoning by a witch or wizard. He separated each individual smell, having stored them the moment he took a seat some minutes before, and found what he sought—something new and unique.

Fresh milk soap, honeysuckle, linen and . . .

He breathed in once more, deeper and longer, unable to distinguish if the sweetness of leech was coming from the bar or the newest patron to Greyson's.

"You just stay clear of that one," Greyson grumbled, and Wolfe glanced away from the door to meet his disapproving glare. "She's not for you or anyone else in this place. You leave her be. Hear?"

Wolfe returned the glare with one of his own. "You sound like an overprotective father."

"I'm not asking, Wolfe." Greyson snagged his shot of Jack and tossed it back. Then, he cleared his throat and said, "Stay away from her."

A deep-seated frown formed when Wolfe returned his focus to the door and the shape was gone. He surveyed the crowd, following the enticing aroma of milk and honeysuckle, until he found what he was looking for nestled in the opposite corner at a table near the door. It was impossible to see any part of her. The black leather hat on her head masked her face and matched the long leather coat and gloves covering her body and obscuring her hands.

He reached out with his mind, listening for any thoughts she might inadvertently share. After a terse minute, he stopped, confused and agitated. It was as if there was an impenetrable barrier between them shielding her mind from his.

"What is she?" he asked, curious and intrigued.

Greyson's throaty growl demanded his attention once more. "Off-limits."

Further argument was silenced when the door opened and Taylor Martinson walked in with four vampyren in tow. They seemed completely out of place in their business suits, expensive cuff links, and ties.

"That's my cue." Greyson slid out of the booth, stopped at the edge of the table, and peered down. "I meant what I said. Steer clear of that female. Things won't end in the way you're hoping for." He reached into his pocket, removed a set of keys, worked one free and then tossed it over. "I'm not sure where you're staying, but the apartment is yours if you want it."

Wolfe accepted the key and slid it into his pocket. "Appreciate it."

"No problem."

Greyson's departing back brushed past Taylor's shoulder as he weaved through the accompanying entourage. Wolfe didn't bother rising to greet them. He remained quiet and observant while Taylor took a seat and the vampyren took places behind the booth, standing at the ready.

"Wolfe." Taylor's voice was different, bordering on lyrical. It was a common occurrence when one ingested vampire blood on a regular basis and began taking on their traits.

"Taylor." He acknowledged the greeting by notching his head.

“You look well.” Taylor got settled as he spoke, undoing the buttons on his expensive navy blue jacket and then smoothing the matching tie. His straw blond hair was neatly combed, his skin clear of stubble and baby-bottom smooth.

Wolfe didn’t bother echoing the sentiment. Vampires had an angelic and beautiful appearance, but it didn’t erase their lifestyle or morbid eating habits. Something Lycae abhorred.

Instead, he polished off his drink and said, “That’s always good to hear.”

“Better than the alternative?”

“I don’t know,” Wolfe quipped sardonically. “You tell me.”

The thin smile on Taylor’s face evaporated. “Let’s just get to it, shall we? Lucius is willing to accept your olive branch, but he has a stipulation.”

“I wasn’t aware we were negotiating.”

“If you want to keep the peace, a display of solidarity is necessary to prove it.” Taylor’s once-brown eyes went black. “Your Alpha killed a powerful master, someone that cannot be easily replaced.”

Feigning disinterest, he shrugged and asked, “What exactly would you like me to do?”

Taylor smiled broadly and leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table and interlocking his long, pale fingers. “That’s simple. Someone followed us here. Someone we want taken care of. You do this, and all is forgiven.”

Wolfe snickered and lowered his head, smiling just the same. It figured. Vampires were never good at ridding themselves of unwanted problems. They were fast and powerful, but relied on brains, not brawn.

“You want me to kill someone?”

“That would be preferable.” Taylor nodded, smile intact. “But a maiming would work just as nicely. We want to send the message that acting against the king isn’t in anyone’s best interest—especially hers.”

Wolfe’s smile vanished, and he narrowed his eyes at the all-but-human blood drinker across the table. “Her?”

The response was purely condescending. “Surely the prospect of cowing a female doesn’t intimidate you.”

“I don’t attack women, Taylor.” He couldn’t contain the throaty snarl that accompanied his words.

The former friendliness was gone, replaced with an uncompromising finality when Taylor said, “That is the price of peace between the vampyren and the Lycae. Take it or leave it.”

“I won’t kill a female for your king—any female.”

“Then don’t.” Taylor’s lyrical snarl was laughable at best. “Leave her breathing, if you must. But ensure that she understands the position she places herself in by killing off our kind. We’ll appreciate a hard lesson learned equally as much as a loss of life or limb.”

Wolfe’s grin was as his named implied—wolflike. A female killing off leeches couldn’t be *all* bad. Not to a Lycae.

“She’s killing off vampyren?”

“Yes,” Taylor quipped furiously. “And she’s targeting masters specifically.”

Even better.

“Seems to me”—Wolfe sat back and placed his large arms along the back of the booth—“that a Master should be able to take on one measly little female. If he can’t, he’s not worthy of leading his own army.”

“She kills them while they rest,” Taylor spat, fingers winding into tight fists that landed with a heavy thud on the table. “No vampire—vampyren, Thymeria, or otherwise—can defend themselves when the sun is at its zenith.”

His curiosity was officially tweaked.

He arched a thick, dark eyebrow and asked, “She’s a slayer?”

“No.” Taylor inhaled sharply and shook his head. “She’s something far more deadly.”

“And what might that be?”

Taylor slid from the booth, and the vampyren were instantly behind him, taking up the space at his back and sides. “If you want to know, you can find out right now. Will you accept the terms? Or do I need to tell Lucius you’ve decided the vampyren and Lycae must war?”

Chapter Two

Arden left her chair and exited Greyson's Pub the instant the vampyren slave rose from his seat across from the Lycae. She took refuge in the shadows provided by the building across the way, moving to stand alongside a large black limo with tinted windows while she waited for her target to exit the building.

Her body hummed in excitement, adrenaline pouring through her central nervous system and coursing through her veins. The electricity created by anticipation spiked in a dizzying high crafted by the ever-smart glory of nature, allowing her to observe in a triple focus—eyes, ears, and nose sharp.

Taylor was the only known individual with access to Lucius Mercoix. He was the liaison for all vampyren matters, speaking on behalf of the king in all things. And tracking him had been absolute hell.

Vampyren were reckless because of bloodlust, but they weren't stupid.

She closed her eyes and forced calm to replace eagerness. Now was not the time to bask in the promise of retribution. Years of diligence were about to meet fruition, but only if she got her head on straight and focused. The information from a dying master vampyren that had led her to Taylor may or may not have been tainted.

This opportunity was good—too fucking good.

Remembering her purpose, she removed her gloves and stuffed them into the pockets of her coat before allowing the long layers of leather to slide down the tight black turtleneck to rest in an indistinct lump at her feet.

Taylor was accompanied by his trusted four, assassins who would rend an immortal in two. And he was meeting with a Lycae, of all things. She shivered when she recalled how massive the hound of hell was, envisioning him as he sat relaxed and imposing at the table. His chiseled body, chin-length black hair, and darkly shadowed face were impressive as hell. But there was a very real danger waiting beneath the cool façade.

A danger called death.

Regardless of his reason for meeting with vampyren, Lycae detested vampires. It was a well known and indisputable fact.

There was no better time than the present to prepare.

Drifting over daggers attached to harnesses on each leg and Berettas slung beneath each arm, she went through the weapons attached to her with a familiar, lingering caress. Clips were arranged along the back of her belt, ensuring ammunition wouldn't be a problem.

With a deft motion, she freed the gun to the right, emptied the clip into her opposite hand, and scanned the rounds before snapping it back in place with a firm thrust of her palm. She returned the Beretta to the holster and felt for her back pocket. The poor man's dental pliers were ready and waiting.

She drew a deep breath and released it just as slowly, savoring the moment and what it meant. The time was at hand. A vow would soon be settled, and a life would be avenged. All that was left was an additional period of waiting. She'd been patient this long, a little longer wasn't asking for much.

Soon, Portia.

Soon.

Wistful, she perched her shoulder against the brisk brick wall and started whistling.

Chapter Three

Mindful of his much longer legs as he slid free, Wolfe squeezed out of the booth to follow Taylor and his men. It was a blessing and a curse, being so large. On one hand, it ensured a heated glance got the job done with minimal physical effort. On the other, it meant low ceilings and too small furniture were a common occurrence.

He glanced at the corner. The girl Greyson warned him away from was no longer occupying the seat. It had been decades since he'd been interested in any female, and even longer since he'd had a decent fuck.

It hadn't bothered him before, but it did now.

He recalled Deidre Varmour, and his hackles rose in disgust. The bitch used magic to bewitch him as a pawn in her own personal fucking vendetta, and had all but ruined him in the aftermath. He hadn't had much use for females after that, swearing them off them permanently.

Perhaps it was best the mystery woman was gone, he thought grimly. He'd likely take his contempt for one female out on another.

"I'll take the front," one of the vampyren announced, moved before Taylor, and then strode to the front door. He exited the building, the remaining vampyren directly on his heels.

The crisp autumn air crashed into the building, the delectable scent of jambalaya and red beans in the distance causing his stomach to rumble. Dinner was next on the agenda. Nothing sated hunger like fresh biscuits, refried beans and rice, and a side of gumbo. His plane had landed before he'd enjoyed a proper meal, and alcohol on an empty stomach was just asking for trouble.

The motion of the line came to an abrupt halt, and he stopped thinking with his suddenly ravenous appetite and peered up and over the heads of the guards. A small black shape appeared, standing in front.

A soft feminine voice warned, "I suggest you move."

Her request was met with the threatening baritone of the vampyren in front. "Move me."

A wet gurgle sounded, bubbly and out of place, and Wolfe watched in disbelief as the vampyren's head wobbled and then detached from his shoulders. Taylor pressed back against him as the remaining guards flew from the building and went on the offensive.

Growling thickly and shoving him away, Wolfe demanded, "What the fuck?"

"It's her." Taylor's fear was apparent in both his face and his voice. "I told you the bitch would be here."

Wolfe watched the small figure spin and duck, dodging blows and kicks, and he froze in astonishment when he placed her as the female inside the bar. Her skill at physical combat was

impeccable, her speed uncanny and decisively inhuman. The daggers in her grasp were like an extension of her hands, delivering deep slices that spewed blood into the air in a vivid red spray.

“If you want peace with Lucius, you’ll stop her.” Taylor’s voice was wheezy and weak, accompanied by a stark fear that burned Wolfe’s nostrils.

“How will he know I didn’t?” Wolfe derided, his eyes following the girl as she moved with a grace that belied her nature.

She is too damned fast to be mortal.

He turned to Taylor and returned his stare, adding sarcastically, “You’ll be too dead to tattle.”

“Fool.” Taylor pressed into the door as if he could vanish into the leather. “My death is how he’ll know. If I don’t return, he’ll take it as a declaration of war.”

“War means two sides engage in combat. Your king doesn’t want to fuck with the Lycae. He knows better.”

“You’re right, he doesn’t.” Taylor smiled arrogantly. “No more than your cousin wants another burden on his back to derail his ascension as Alpha. We didn’t come here because you fear our kind. We came here because we are another obstacle you cannot risk.”

Wolfe smiled back, this time in anger. His vision shifted, allowing him to see in wolf clarity. Taylor stopped sneering and backed away, but not before Wolfe delivered a hearty blow to his nose and broke the bone with a satisfying crunch. A pitiful cry of pain was muffled by the hand that rushed to stem the gushing fountain of blood.

“You’re right. It’s an obstacle Luke doesn’t need at the moment. But for future reference, don’t threaten me or mine. You might get what you want, but you won’t leave happy.”

Wolfe turned and watched the battle unfold. One of the vampyren moved close and the female seized the opportunity, lurching into him and then whipping behind his back. Her hand latched onto his jaw, and she forced his head up and back. The dagger severed the tissue and muscle easily. She released the body, dropped the head, and crouching down and breathing shallow, went back to work.

The two remaining vampyren went for guns in their jackets, but she interrupted them with gunfire of her own, sliding the daggers into the sheaths on her legs and retrieving the guns tucked against her ribs in the same smooth motion. She stood tall to unleash hell’s fury into thick heads and spongy torso’s. Bullets whizzed past her and she ducked behind an alley for cover, reappearing in seconds with fresh clips and more gunfire.

“What the hell is she?” he whispered, awestruck and fascinated.

Taylor removed a handkerchief from his pocket, padded his nose, and spoke scathingly through the thin material. “She’s an outcast, unwanted by either race that bore her.”

Wolfe's jaw clenched and he stared at the vampyren slave through narrowed eyes. "She moves like a vampire and fights like the Thymeria."

"That's probably because she was a member of the human faction. But that was years ago. As for being vampire—"

Wolfe stopped listening as he was forced to intercept the oncoming female in question. The remaining vampyren were down and squirming weakly atop the blocked concrete, and she was homed in on one person he didn't particularly care for himself—Taylor.

Damn it.

Subduing an unwilling female wasn't how he envisioned his first night back in New Orleans. He had wanted to relax with decent food and even better music. Not engage in a scuffle with a tiny girl that just put the beat down on four vampyren.

Should be thanking her for the community fucking service.

"Get the hell out of here," he snarled at Taylor and stepped forward.

If she was intimidated by his much larger size, it didn't show. She never slowed in her trek, releasing the clip in her sidearm with a flick of her thumb and sending it dancing along the asphalt. Her free hand wound behind her back in the same motion and returned with a new, fully loaded clip. She swiftly slammed the cartridge into the gun and locked it in place with her palm.

She was forced to peer up as she moved, and he finally got a glimpse of her eyes. The irises were a deep hued blue, as dark and vast as the clearest midnight sky. And the threat glimmering inside those devastating, beautiful orbs was exacting.

"Out of my way, Lycae."

Her soft voice was like brandished velvet against his spine, causing his skin to ripple and the hair on his arms to rise in recognition. The bones in his body seemed to thrum, along with something else that had lain dormant his entire life. He shook his head hard and faced the furious female with the voice of a siren, the face of an angel, and the body of a goddess.

"I can't do that."

"Of course you can," she purred, lifted the gun, and cocked the hammer for added effect.

Christ, but she's ballsy.

Mindful of the shiny obsidian sidearm, he reminded her softly, "Bullets don't work on us, cher."

"Sure they do." Her voice was husky and slightly accented, as lulling sweet as the honeysuckle radiating from her skin. "If they're made of silver."

He stepped forward and was rewarded with a bitch of a sting in his chest, followed immediately by another. The excruciating burn that accompanied the sharp bite scoring the skin inside his chest and rending tissue was devastating. He withheld the grimace that would reveal the pain she wrought, meeting her level stare and grinding his teeth together.

“I missed the heart intentionally, Lycae.” She peered around him for a moment and returned those glorious blue eyes to his face, gun level and at the ready. “I won’t a second time.”

“Do you want him that badly?” he wheezed despite himself, pockets of air seeping blood into his thin button down shirt and staining the white material crimson.

She didn’t hesitate. “I wouldn’t be facing off against something like you if I weren’t.”

Wolfe recognized the look because it was one he’d seen displayed many times by his brethren. She wanted blood—Taylor’s blood—and she’d die to get it. Even if it meant tangling with a Lycae three times her size.

He felt a pang of shame at what he was about to do, but there was only one way to ensure she didn’t skin Taylor’s worthless hide along with his.

He lowered his eyes, shifted to the side, and murmured, “Then, by all means.”

Blue irises flickered brightly before going dark. Her full, rosy-hued lips parted slightly, and her mahogany brows furrowed suspiciously. As if to clarify, she said, “I hold no grudge against your kind.”

He considered smiling at her newly projected nervousness and thought better of it, shuffling his feet and giving her room. “Glad to hear it.”

Slowly, she edged around him until she was closer to Taylor. When the vampyren slave was within her reach, she snagged his shirt in her hand, forcing him from the door and into the building. For a moment, her indigo eyes flashed in Wolfe’s direction, sizing him up. Wolfe remained where he was, as insubstantial and nonthreatening as a fly on the wall, waiting patiently for her to accept his false truce and lower her guard.

“All right, you sorry piece of shit,” she snarled at Taylor and turned away from Wolfe while holstering her sidearm and then pilfering in her back pocket. She produced a small pair of pliers and shoved the metal into Taylor’s face, pressing against him. “You’re going to tell me everything I want to know, or so help me—”

Wolfe rushed her, and she attempted to go for the gun, hindered by the pliers that snagged in her leather holster and the distance he crossed so quickly.

“You’re going to have to forgive me for this,” he murmured hoarsely and clocked her in the chin.

His knuckles collided with the delicate line of her jaw, and he pulled back just enough to rend her unconscious without risking serious damage. The hat came off her head, and long, thick strands of silvery white fell free, hanging in loose waves along her shoulders and down her back. Her blue eyes

mirrored her betrayal just before they slid closed and her body went slack. He caught her before she collapsed, wrapped an arm beneath her legs and back, and brought her against his bloodied chest.

The connection upon contact was asphyxiating, a wrenching in his body that had fuck all to do with bullets made of silver or years of self imposed abstinence. The wolf under his skin recognized the tiny creature cradled in his arms just as he did. A sense of belonging he'd never experienced surfaced along with the intense instinct to nurture, cherish, and defend.

Sweet fucking Jesus.

"Kill her," Taylor demanded, stumbling away from the wall, unkempt and livid. He lifted a hand stained by blood and pointed at the girl. "Kill the fucking bitch before she opens her eyes."

Wolfe growled, embracing the protective nature that arose when a Lycae male discovered his mate. His wolf answered readily, bones aching as the beast surged beneath his flesh and stopped at the barrier of his skin.

"Listen to me." Taylor lowered his voice but didn't back down. "She will kill you, Wolfe. Anyone that has come between her and her vow have been sent directly to the ever after. She doesn't harbor a grudge, but by associating yourself with the vampyren she detests, you have just instigated one."

"What is she?"

He didn't pose it as a question, and Taylor knew it.

"She's a Daywalker. A *Dhampir*."

The emphasis on the last word was intentional, and the devastation upon learning the truth was nearly unbearable. Wolfe glanced down at the most beautiful female this side of heaven, unable to believe what he knew to be true.

She was a goddamned vampire, or in the least partly one. She would require the life of others to survive, sustaining herself on blood . . .

Christ.

The pack would shit a goddamned brick when he brought her to New York.

"Don't torment yourself." Taylor attempted to sound understanding, wheezing slightly as his broken nose forced him to breathe through his mouth. "She's nothing to you, a half-vampire and half-human child with no past and no future. No one will miss her when she's gone. Do the world a favor. Destroy that which was never intended to exist in the first place."

"You don't have a hell of a lot of room to talk, *blood slave*," he growled, infuriated and teetering on the brink. "She was born this way. You can't destroy things simply because they are an anomaly of your kind. If you did, vampyren would have vanished long ago."

"The Thymeria want her gone as badly as we do."

Wolfe lifted his head and glowered at the man who had sold his soul to the vampyren so many years before. “Why do the leeches fear her?”

Taylor started to speak and stopped, shaking his head. “The why of it doesn’t matter. What does is that she never draws another breath. See to this now, and you’ll never have to worry about the king or the Thymeria. You’ll be in the good graces of each for eternity, I assure you.”

Fury arose, a maelstrom of outrage so pure and intense that he wanted to rip Taylor limb from limb and scatter the pieces about as a warning.

No wonder Adam went ballistic.

“You need to leave.” He shifted the fragile body in his arms, turned, and walked toward the back alley that led to the long-forgotten apartment Lycae used while visiting the area for business.

“Listen—”

“No.” Wolfe spun around and flashed fang, knowing his eyes answered the call and shone brightly. “You listen. Don’t come back here, don’t threaten me or any other Lycae with your propaganda, and sure as fuck don’t come near this female if you know what’s good for you. Having a Dhampir for an enemy is bad. Adding a pack that detests your kind into the mix won’t be beneficial.”

Taylor’s face went lax in understanding, his eyes wide and mouth gaping. “Oh, shit.”

“That’s right. You’ve just unwittingly introduced me to my mate. Now, do your race a favor. Warn your king what he’s just pitted himself against.”

Desperate now, Taylor tried to argue. “She won’t let this go—”

“Piss off.” He turned, shifting the female in his arms and drowning in the most erotic fragrance of honeysuckle and linen. Molten blood surged through his veins, going directly to his suddenly straining cock, and dots speckled his vision. Everything male in him screamed to mark and claim, to bring himself into the tiny body in his arms until they were barbed together and bound as a mated couple.

Fucking hell. Nothing had ever affected him like this.

Nothing.

The sound of the limo driving away allowed him to relax as he climbed the stairs. Then he cursed softly. Of all the questions he asked, he hadn’t bothered to ask the most basic and fundamental one—her name.

He dug the key from his pocket despite the protests of his wounds, opening the door with a quick flick of his hand and closing it with the heel of his foot. The tiny apartment wasn’t suited for any sort of long-term occupancy, but it sufficed for a short business trip. Even still, as he lay his mate on

the large mattress without a head board, he felt incredibly lacking as a male. She deserved to rest among the fresh linens she smelled of, on a bed large enough to allow them to play properly.

She didn't rouse when he situated her on the pillow, breathing deep and steady, the darkened bruise along her jaw fading. Gently, he brushed the back of his hand against the softness of her cheek, repeating the motion against her temple. His tanned skin was stark against her fair complexion and pale hair, his hand larger than her head.

He exhaled softly and allowed his fingers to drift to his side.

Leaving her wasn't an option. She'd flee the instant she woke. He had to explain the situation, allow her to understand just how important she was to him and why he'd interfered in her private dealings with Taylor. Hopefully, when the facts were laid out and the truth was on the table, she'd understand.

He tugged at the shirt thick with blood and walked to the phone by the bed, lifting the receiver from the cradle and pushing the pound key. The line clicked and then rang. After several chimes, the other end came to life, and Greyson's deep timbre echoed through the line.

"Calling already?"

Wolfe chuckled when he realized the bastard knew what his strange interest in the female meant before he did.

"We need to talk."

"Is she all right? I heard the gunfire outside but figured it was best to lay low until it went quiet."

"She's fine," Wolfe answered and stared down at the ragged holes in his chest. "But you need to bring the kit. She shot my ass full of silver."

Voices in the background nearly drowned Greyson out. "I'll be up shortly."

"Wait," Wolfe thundered before the other end of the line went dead. "Tell me her name before you go. In case she wakes disoriented and confused."

"She's asleep?"

He studied her peaceful heart-shaped face. The bruise marring her chin was stark against her porcelain skin, deepening it to a mottled purple along her jaw.

Clearing his throat, he answered evasively, "You could say that."

"Did you remove her weapons?"

"No." Wolfe glanced at the guns beneath each arm. "Why?"

“Because when she wakes up, it won’t be disoriented or confused. That girl will empty a chamber in your hide for coming between her and those vampyren, and after she’s decorated your blood with the floor, she’ll kick you while you’re down to remind you not to fuck with her in the future.”

He peered down at the face so angelic in sleep and said, “You’re joking.”

“The hell I am. She’ll own your ass, sure as shit.”

“Goddamn it.”

Trapping the phone between his shoulder and ear, he bent at the waist and began stripping her of the daggers and guns, snapping the buttons over the top to keep them in place before unwinding the leather holsters.

“Arden Moran.”

“What?” he mumbled, lifting her torso to pull the thick leather away from her delicate shoulders.

“Her name is Arden Moran,” Greyson repeated and added tersely, “I’ll be up when I can. The Friday night crowd just arrived, and we’re short a server.”

The line went dead, and Wolfe plopped the phone back onto the cradle, lowering her to the bed before carrying the daggers and guns to the small kitchen and placing them in the top cabinet. Then, he went to the sink, tossed the ruined shirt onto the counter, and removed a clean dish rag from the drawer beneath.

He swiped at the blistering wounds on his chest, dreading the removal of the shells placed in his flesh by the very female that fate intended for him and him alone. Nothing ever went as planned. Things always seemed to occur when he least expected it, catching him totally unaware.

Including this.

He turned around, braced his arms on the counter, and gazed at the small form resting peacefully across the way. The moonlight shone from the window, casing her in a soft white glow.

A debilitating longing enraptured him.

He wanted to go to her, hold her closely, and lose himself inside the moist and inviting heat of her body. He wanted what every mated Lycae did—a future with his female, a lifetime shared together.

A family, home, children . . .

She’s a Dhampir.

He forced aside what he wasn’t ready to deal with and wrestled instead with the uncertainty that awaited the two of them. When a Lycae found his mate, the claim wasn’t long in the coming. It was natural and necessary to ensure a lifelong bond. But this female would probably sever his dick off at the hilt with one of those silvered daggers before she willingly submitted to him.

“Arden.” He tested her name on his lips, found that it suited her perfectly, and knew his life just got a hell of a lot more complicated.

Chapter Four

Something incredibly soft brushed against the tip of Arden's nose. She shifted on the warm, lumpy padding beneath her head in an attempt to avoid the caress, lifting her hand and swatting the offending object with her fingers. When she felt the contact once more, she slid off the hard pillow, shifting away from the disturbance keeping her from sleep.

A delectable woodsy scent lined her nostrils, the fragrance so heady and alluring it burned the back of her throat. Her hunger emerged, enflaming the miserable fire churning in the pit of her belly and extending the cotton dryness in her mouth.

How long had it been since she'd fed?

She struggled to remember, logic and time evading her, unable to think coherently. Nothing mattered but the delicious ambrosia that sang to her—taunting the canines that extended and throbbed, yearning for appeasement. A decent feeding would keep her sated for days. And the blood calling to her was unlike any she'd tasted before.

Potent, masculine . . .

Powerful.

Her tongue darted out, lapping sultry bare skin. The hot and incredibly smooth flesh quivered at the first salty taste, pressing closer to her eager lips, and she detected the strong, steady drumming of a heartbeat just beneath.

Eyes closed, she moved upward, following the promise of the richest blood imaginable. The silky skin beneath her lips changed, growing softer as she found the vulnerable hollow of the throat. A rhythmic throbbing met her mouth, the pulse increasing as she bathed the area with her tongue. She pressed her palms against the sinewy chest beneath her hands, sliding her body up and over.

A throaty groan of encouragement rumbled against her ear, husky and deep. Large hands grasped her waist firmly, guiding her closer, and she straddled the hips that flattened beneath her. The pounding of the heartbeat against her lips thrummed in her ears, growing louder, until the pain in her fangs became unbearable.

Sharp incisors scored the flesh cleanly, delving past the giving softness of skin and the thin veil of muscle, piercing the large vein beneath. The blood that coated her tongue was everything it promised to be—delicious, rich, and unbelievably addictive—and riding behind the intense fulfillment of that first encompassing swallow was something most unexpected.

She ground against the pelvis beneath her, craving more than the blood offered. The lust was tangible, existing in the hands that groped the hard muscle beneath her fingers. Her body burned with the need for release, her breasts heavy, and her nipples sensitive. Her suddenly damp sex clenched spastically, the very center of her being empty and aching.

“Christ,” a hoarse voice croaked, and the fingers along her hips squeezed roughly, raking across the fleshy portion of her ass.

Arden swallowed once, then twice, a third time. Each swallow provided the strength she didn't realize she lacked. The rush was consuming, overwhelming reason.

Have to stop.

Her greedy tongue and lips refused to obey and followed the lead of the practiced hands that now trailed along her torso. Her breasts were cupped and palmed, nipples brushed so softly she wanted to scream. She pressed her aching core against the hot skin beneath her, undulating as she drank deeply.

Erotic images of being taken from behind on hands and knees until she screamed from pleasure flashed in her mind. Her skin flushed in excitement and anticipation, lips crowding the wound that continued to gush and pour. The liquid was so hot and thick, so entirely male. It incensed her, causing a sultry purr of arousal to echo inside her skull.

I will give myself over to the lust completely, drink until the hunger is no more and the need in my body is sated. For once, I will experience the forbidden.

Dear God, no.

Stories of bloodlust vanquished those of pleasure, and she tore her teeth away from the throat flush to her lips, lurching away from the body beneath her as she opened her eyes and came to awareness. The light that greeted her was blinding and her retinas burned painfully. Wincing, she rushed to a shaded corner and crouched, covering her eyes with her hand and focusing with her ears and nose. She couldn't see danger. She could only hear and smell it.

The fresh blood inside her stomach assisted her senses, each sound crisp and distinct, but the scent baffled her.

The entire space smelled of Greyson, that fresh scent of tree, wood, grass, and earth. But the person she'd fed from, while most definitely Lycae, was not the one she trusted. His smell was headier, positively provocative.

The shifting of a mattress and the rustle of sheets arrived first. Then, she heard the slow approach of footsteps. She felt for her daggers, and her heart sank when she learned she was defenseless. Her muscles rippled as she tensed and braced herself, prepared to fight blind.

"Easy," a male voice, laden with desire, murmured. "Take it easy."

"Where am I?" she demanded tersely.

He moved closer, voice soothing. "Somewhere safe."

"Who are you?"

"Wolfe Trevlian."

“Trevlian.” She yelped in panic and tried to pry her eyes open, hissing in agony when the light prickled and burned the surface, and she slammed them closed. Composing herself somewhat, she asked anxiously, “Any relation to Adam Trevlian?”

He chuckled and answered, “He’s my cousin.”

She pressed her hand into her face, grateful for the small shield it provided.

Could things possibly get worse? She was in a strange place—with a Lycae related to the former Alpha who presided over the renowned Bacchus pack—without her weapons.

Her nose flared and she felt a growl of animosity rising from her throat. “Where the hell is he?”

The laughter in his voice was gone. “Where is who?”

She rose and shook herself, unable to see but unwilling to stay in a position of submission. “The goddamned Lycae that came between me and the vampyren chew toy.”

He hesitated before he asked, “What do you want with him?”

“What *don’t* I want with him is a better question,” she railed. Feeling around, she stumbled past a chair to the right and became entangled in plastic mini blinds.

“Calm down.” He moved as he spoke, crossing the distance. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

Both angry and embarrassed, she allowed him to guide her to a chair, but not before she snapped, “If you’re so worried about my state of being, close the fucking blinds!”

His nearness brought on that unbridled surge of hunger, the lure of his blood as intoxicating as the finest Bordeaux. She breathed through her mouth and swallowed loudly. Drinking from an immortal meant the thirst should be completely appeased, not increased.

The hand at her arm vanished, and she sagged into the dusty chair, listening as blinds were turned and the light against her lids dimmed. Her eyes were brimming with unshed tears, residuals from the sun blurring objects and creating shapes when she forced them open. The Lycae strode from across the way, stopped, and crouched down beside her. She tried to bring his large bloblike frame into focus, but her eyes refused to clear.

“What can I do?” His voice was husky, creating unexplainable prickles along the surface of her skin.

“Nothing,” she sighed and closed her lids, rubbing the skin with the pads of her fingers. The only thing that could counter the burn of the sun was the coolness of the earth, and there was no way in hell she was asking the Lycae to go dig up a chunk of dirt for a mud mask.

She heard Wolfe stand and cross the room, followed by the click of a door opening and closing. After several silent seconds, loud footsteps pounding up a flight of stairs boomed just outside. The door opened and then slammed closed.

She smelled him approaching, was calmed by his balmy scent. Then, she smelled the fresh earth in his hand, held inches from her face.

“Tell me what to do,” he said as he settled beside her.

“How did you—”

He pried her fingers from her eyes before she finished the question and massaged the cool soil against the stinging skin of her lids. “Like this?”

The relief was incredible, and she moaned in bliss, relaxing beneath the large hands with careful fingers that pressed the earth against her agonized flesh. It had been decades since anyone had touched her so delicately.

“That ends now,” Wolfe murmured.

Unwilling to move, she sighed, “What does?”

He didn’t answer, repeating the ministrations. Before long, the miserable sting disappeared. She probably looked an absolute mess, but oddly enough, she didn’t care. Now that she remembered the most marvelous intimacy brought about by a healing touch, she didn’t want it to end.

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Wolfe pressed closer, and she felt the heat of his breath caress her face. “I never want to stop touching you, Arden.”

“How do you know my name?”

Just as the question came to mind, she had her answer—telepathy. All Lycae had the ability to read and share thoughts, and in taking his blood, she’d inadvertently bound herself to him. That was why she didn’t indulge in the blood of immortals she didn’t know and trust implicitly.

Being blood bound was as dangerous as being enslaved. And she’d all but forgotten that in the instant she’d gotten a taste of the unknown Lycae inches from her.

He most assuredly sensed her intention to move free of him. He slid between her open knees, forced her smaller body into the chair, and pinned her in place. The hand with the earth vanished and came back empty, insistent fingers twining in the hair at her nape.

“Don’t run,” he growled and nuzzled her nose, his enormous frame forcing her back. “It won’t do you any good.”

“W-what do you want from me?” she stammered, detesting the fear that lined her words and echoed in her mind, knowing he heard both.

“Don’t be afraid.” He sounded shamed. The husky timbre was replaced with the most sinful and luring cadence. “I won’t hurt you.”

Lying wouldn’t be beneficial, so she chose honesty. “You’re crowding me, Lycae.”

“Wolfe,” he corrected. “My name is Wolfe.”

“Wolfe,” she breathed and cleared her throat, thinking that naming a Lycae Wolfe was as imaginative as calling a cat Pussy.

“Not very inventive, is it?” Wolfe chuckled.

“Not particularly,” she agreed and groaned, unable to silence the sound of want when his pelvis and pronounced erection pressed against her thigh.

“You smell so good, Arden.” His throaty growl was back. “I want to devour you.”

She shook her head and attempted to move away from the hand at her neck, struggling against the web he weaved. She’d never imagined a Lycae would want her in his bed. They loathed those that ingested blood too much for that.

Hell must have frozen over when I wasn’t looking.

Always a first time for everything. Must have been the bite that aroused him.

“We can’t, Wolfe.” She struggled to speak, swamped by his presence. “I’m sorry if you got the wrong idea. I was hungry for blood, not a quick tumble between the sheets.”

“Who said anything about a quick tumble?” His lips brushed against hers, the motion featherlight.

Feigning annoyance, she countered, “I’m not stupid. All Lycae want casual and unattached sex. You don’t settle, not until you’ve found your mate.”

He continued tracing her lips and face with the softness of his mouth. “You’re right.”

When he didn’t move away, she grumbled, “If I’m right, back off. Give me some space.”

“I couldn’t give you space even if I wanted to. You can’t conceive of how difficult this is for me. Being this close to you”—his tongue flicked against her lower lip—“smelling and tasting you.”

“Come on.” Her words were muffled by another, longer, touch of his tongue. “It can’t be that difficult to find a willing female.”

“No.” He shook his head and bumped her nose in the process. “It’s not difficult.”

Those plush lips of his continued teasing her mouth, waiting until she opened her lips to speak, and then his warm tongue slid inside.

Sweet Jesus.

His mouth tasted as good as his blood, completely masculine, and each lap of his tongue told her that he knew exactly how to use it. He mastered her lips and mouth gently, encouraging her to relax by giving versus taking.

Why not? A primal part of her urged.

Sex was something she could never risk. Something she was doomed to remain detached from. Recently, she'd learned the dangers of getting horizontal with a male—she'd nearly killed him. She was too strong for mortal men, too damned tempted to drink as the need arose.

But Lycæ . . . Lycæ were superior by design. All immortals feared them. They were the most fierce—the strongest of all the races.

She went soft, enjoying the clean taste and incredible feel of him.

“You concern for my safety makes me ache, cher.” Wolfe lowered his head, nipped at her throat, and licked the skin in a smooth, decisive stroke.

Cher.

The endearment triggered a memory from the night before, and Arden placed the southern tenor of the Lycæ pressed so intimately against her. The very one who had allowed Taylor Martinson to slip away and, by default, Lucius Mercoix.

Goddamn him!

He didn't have the opportunity to brace himself, forced away when he lifted his face and she flung her head back and then slammed it forward, bestowing a full on Glasgow kiss. The crack of her forehead meeting his nose was mildly gratifying, the scent of blood sprouting from his nose easy to distinguish. She leaped over the side of the chair and stood, swiping at her muddled eyes.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed, struggling to see despite the reprieve of the cool appeasement of earth. “You slimy fucking bastard!”

“Calm down.” He spoke from lips coated in vivid red; that much she could see. The rest of his face was still blurry and out of focus.

“Where are my Berettas and daggers, *mongrel*,” she snarled, shaking her head forcefully.

“You're not going anywhere, Arden.” Wolfe was angry—the blow she delivered was impossible to be happy about—but she instinctively realized he was grappling for calm. “Not until there is an understanding between us.”

“Us.” She laughed caustically and started for the door. “There will never be an *us*, Lycæ.”

Facing the blinding sun was preferable to the future she'd face after she killed off the cousin of Adam Trevlian. She'd just have to bide her time and go after Taylor when the opportunity presented

itself again. In the long scheme of things, two decades weren't shit. She had an eternity to see to her vow.

What good was immortality without something rewarding to look forward to?

"Me." Wolfe's large body blocked her path to freedom. "You have me to look forward to."

"I wouldn't touch you if you were the last available male on the planet and the survival of immortal race rested on it," she snapped hotly.

He lurched for her and she crouched, avoiding his arms and spinning in a kick that connected with his lower back and sent him to his knees. The door waited, and she lunged, leaping over his all-but-prone body and grasping the handle.

A pair of strong arms captured and snared her from behind, dislodging her fingers and bringing her back into the room. Two long strides found her face up on the bed, her hands clasped above her head by one of Wolfe's, her legs trapped by the weight of his pelvis.

Thrashing wildly, she thundered, "Let go!"

"All right, hellcat, listen up." Wolfe's face slowly came into focus, fuzzy around the edges. His green eyes were bright, browning flakes of blood drying at his nostrils. His thick, dark hair spilled forward, masking his temples. "Rage at me for coming between you and Taylor. I deserve it. I did what was necessary at the time to save both our asses. But don't *ever* try to run from me. You won't get far, and it causes the beast under my skin to clamor for control. I don't want that for you, Arden. Not the first time."

"Have you lost your mind?" she shrieked, aware that struggling would do her no good but doing it just the same. "There won't be a first time, you crazy son of a bitch!"

"Oh, there will be a first time." He intentionally pressed his impressive erection against the softness of her core and rotated his hips. "And second, and third . . ."

The throaty moan that slid past her lips betrayed her and, in the process, fueled her outrage. She would easily give it up to this bastard, even after the trouble, and the opportunity, he cost her. She cursed her weak body, damning herself for feeling so drawn to a male her pride wouldn't allow her to have.

She met his eyes and ordered icily, "Get off of me."

"I won't let you go, Arden. I can't." His voice and eyes never wavered. "Do you understand me? Not now, not ever."

He stared at her as if she were no longer just a woman, but a possession. A little warning chimed in her skull. The dawning comprehension made her belly cramp and her heart falter. It couldn't be. There was no possible way. She couldn't be his mate. Werewolves mated humans they could change or others like them, not vampires.

“I didn’t believe it either, not at first.” He relaxed against her but didn’t release her wrists. “But it’s true. I knew the moment I touched you.”

“It can’t be,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Is the concept of being mated to me so horrific?” He lowered his face but stopped short of contact. “You’ll never have to be alone again. You’ll have someone to rely on for the rest of your life, Arden.”

The world reeled, thoughts coming in too quickly to be processed properly. So many insecurities arose at the prospect of lifelong companionship, the fears of having been an abandoned child resurfacing—harsh, painful, and unwanted.

Those that knew and cared for her always went away, either by force or by choice.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He kissed her then, lips soft and tender, the deadly hands on her wrists going slack. The overwhelming temptation to relent was too much, overriding common sense.

She couldn’t think like this.

“Bathroom,” she mumbled, pushing against the unyielding wall of his chest and struggling.

“Come again, *t’keera*?”

Her eyes slid closed, and she went still. “I need to use the bathroom.”

She knew he sensed her need for space, having invaded the privacy of her mind yet again. He shifted his enormous frame up and over and motioned to a door to the left. She slid off the mattress without a word, rushed to the door, and slammed it closed behind her. She pushed in the lock on the handle and sagged against the thin wood. Her breathing was jagged, her heartbeat erratic.

Her fingers were trembling when she reached for the faucets and turned them numbly. Fresh water flowed into the sink, a clear, steady stream cascading against porcelain. She cupped her hands and splashed the cold liquid onto her face, removing the traces of mud before she stared at herself in the mirror. Her long blonde hair was ratty, her eyes puffy from the strain of the sun. She looked like hell and felt even worse.

There was no way in God’s creation she was returning to that room.

To his bed.

The ramifications of allowing Wolfe to take her were irreversible. Mating a Lycae meant an eternity shared together. When they discovered their mate, nothing else mattered.

She turned to stare at the window over the shower and made peace with the fact that the intentional infliction of pain is oftentimes necessary to ensure survival.

A soft knock sounded, followed by Wolfe’s concerned voice. “Arden?”

“I’ll be out in a minute.” She spoke over the loud sounds of running water, grateful that the noise distorted the slight quaver in her voice.

“We need to talk, cher.”

Inhaling deeply and striving for calm, she said, “Give me five minutes.”

He stood on the other side of the door, and she welcomed the chaotic thoughts as they returned. She was trembling all over, and her frazzled mind was mush. After a minute, she heard heavy footsteps departing and sprang into action.

She left the water running, hurried for the window, and climbed through the small space without delay. The bright and painful beams of light blinded her completely, and she slammed her lids down to protect retinas that were weak to the sun. When she landed two stories below, she turned to her nose and ears for guidance and ran as quickly as her unsteady feet were willing to carry her.

A destination was uncertain, but at the present moment, all she needed was a direction.

And in this circumstance, that direction was whichever took her as far away from the unforgettable Lycae, Wolfe Trevlian, as possible.

Chapter Five

Arden pounded on the door she couldn't see, listening intently as the tiny metal numbers overhead rattled with each violent burst. Heavy stomping from within indicated she'd lucked out and Trevor was home.

Thank God.

"I'm coming, I'm coming! Hold on tae your water." The chain latch came undone, and the whoosh of air escaping accompanied what she guessed was a half-assed perusal. "What the hell have you gotten yourself into this time?"

She deliberately ignored the question, brushed past the body in her path, and stomped into the apartment she couldn't see. The trip through the business district had been hell to navigate, but she knew the layout of Trevor's apartment well enough to get along.

And the first place she intended to go was his garden on the back patio.

"Answer me, damn it," Trevor grumbled and she heard him close the door before following her. "Do I need tae prepare for company?"

"Yes, actually." She followed her nose and carefully felt around the herbs in the potted garden just past the open French doors, removing a small amount of the soil. "Can you mask my scent?"

"What have you pissed off this time?" His voice relayed his worry and anger. He started mumbling, one of his numerous bad habits. "Like I doona have enough trouble of my own tae deal with, I have tae take care of your shit, as well."

"Mask the scent first. Then I'll explain."

"Doona tell me it's another ghoul. The last one refused tae stay dead."

"Would you just mask my scent already?" She lifted the cold dirt and pressed it against each eye, sighing in relief. "I don't have time to argue with you."

Trevor grasped the top of her head, and she felt something wet coating the top of her scalp. He spoke several clipped words in Latin, evoking a spell of some kind. When he finished, he snagged her by the arm and guided her into the living area none too gently.

When she was seated on the couch, he ordered, "Start explaining."

"We've got a problem," she muttered.

"No, *you* have a problem, singular," Trevor growled. "I told you after our little run in at the city of the dead I was done. No more, Arden. No more going in half-cocked. Unlike you, I value my life."

"I'm afraid you don't have much choice." She cleared her throat before continuing, "The Lycae that's on my ass will sniff me out once he passes the Quarter."

“Damn it!” Trevor brayed, stomping around the room and allowing his temperate Scottish personality to shine. “It’s no’ enough that you have vampires, vampyren, and demon kind wanting to rip out your throat. You had tae go and tangle with a fucking werewolf?”

“He got between me and Taylor. I didn’t have a hell of a lot of choice,” she responded wearily.

“Are you, crazy?” His deep and infuriated voice boomed inside her ears. “A Lycae will tear you apart, Arden. You canna atone for the life of your friend if you’re dead. Did you ever think of that?”

“At the time, no.” She shook her head and her shoulders slumped. “I wasn’t thinking about anything but finding Lucius.”

Trevor’s breathy exhale resounded off the hard wood floor and ceiling, impossibly loud in the silence that followed. She didn’t blame him for being upset. Lycae were something they each swore to avoid, and with the exception of Greyson, she’d kept her word. But, thankfully, Trevor understood why she felt compelled to risk everything for vengeance, having been there once himself.

“We canna stay here,” Trevor announced in another inner rambling expressed vocally, his voice shifting close, then far, as he walked back and forth. “We’ll pack some things and drive over tae my parents’ place in Violet. No one knows about it, and if I mask our scent, nothing will be able tae detect us.” He stopped moving and asked, “How much time do we have?”

“Minutes, maybe?” she answered truthfully. She was fast, but she had been forced to make her way blind. Wolfe would find them. It was only a matter of time.

“Damn, damn, damn!” he bellowed. “You owe me, big time.”

His footsteps faded and she palmed her forehead. Things had taken a turn from bad to worse, and her valued friendship with Trevor McAvoy was something she couldn’t afford to lose. His magic allowed her to space apart her feedings, staving off the bloodlust. Without him, she would have to drink every single day. And since their relationship wasn’t formed in the most common sense, it meant she had to tread with extreme caution.

She’d met her quasi business associate when he needed help exorcising the demon that destroyed his parents and murdered his dearly departed girlfriend. Making money on the side was rather quaint and boring, until they took a job that pitted them against a Lich—the purest and most disgusting kind of vampire born.

Both of them walked away battered and alive, but just barely.

Trevor jumped ship shortly after . . . not that she blamed him.

The shuffle of feet came before something was jabbed into her chest. “Here, take them. They’re no’ what you prefer, but Ray Bans never go out of style.”

Arden accepted the glasses graciously, slid the thick plastic over her scorched eyes, and willed them open. The world was hazy, but her eyes no longer burned with the light. Trevor's unnaturally beautiful face came into focus, his long mahogany hair mussed as if he'd just woken, his dark goatee lined with shadow at his jaw.

"Thank you," she murmured and met his livid indigo-hued eyes through the thin, darkened barrier of the glasses.

"The spell isn't strong, but it's enough tae protect your eyes until I get my hands on some shade leaf."

"Anything is better than direct sunlight."

Quickly, he gathered the duffel at his feet, snatched the stocky wooden casting wand resting across the coffee table, and clutched it in his left hand. Then, he rushed to the vintage coat rack, retrieved his trench coat, and slipped it across his arm. When he returned to her, he paused for a moment, studying her intently. His face smoothed and a moderately perturbed smile formed.

"What am I going tae do with you, Cricket?" he asked softly, bending down to smooth a strand of hair away from her forehead. "You're more trouble than your worth. Do you know that?"

She nodded numbly and lowered her face. "I'm sorry, Trev. I didn't know where else to go. Greyson knows where I live. I couldn't return there."

His free hand wrapped around her wrist. "Come on, we need tae get the hell out of here. We'll talk in the car."

She stood on shaky legs, and Trevor twined a hand around her waist to keep her balanced and pulled her close. Thankful for the support, she went soft and allowed him to bear her weight. He wasn't built like the average magic castor—as tall as he was large. It came from his father's side.

The McAvoy men were stout Scots—to hear him tell it.

The floor trembled and shook, as if the world beneath them was protesting their burden. Trevor's hand tightened on her hip, and he swiveled their bodies around in time to see the apartment door burst free from the hinges. Wood from the frame split and splintered as the door crashed to the side and sent amber thistles skittering across the floor.

Then, one thoroughly enraged Lycae appeared in the entranceway.

Chapter Six

“Get away from my mate.” Wolfe snarled each word distinctly as he stepped over the remnants of the door and stomped into the room.

The beast was nearly unhinged now, crazed by the sight of Arden in the arms of another male. He felt the corresponding tremors in his muscles and bones, the desire to shift and destroy paramount. When he’d demolished the bathroom door and found her missing, he’d nearly lost control. It had taken all of his willpower to track her without going into a maddened state, driven by the possibility she could be lost to him.

The instinct within was primordial. Something he couldn’t deny.

The male released Arden but didn’t step away, his eyes wide and shocked. “*Your mate?*” he yelled loudly and peered down at her accusingly.

“Don’t look at me like that! It’s not my fault he’s delusional!” Attempting to detach herself, Arden tried to take a step back. “I tried to tell him he was wrong, but he won’t listen to reason.”

The male sized him up and muttered, “Lycae are no’ known tae reason when they mate.”

“To hell with this.” Arden glanced at him and then away. “I’m leaving.”

Reckless vampire!

Wolfe started to eclipse the distance when the male beside her lifted his arm and revealed a casting wand. The rounded end contained a clear orb that glowed white.

“*Subnecto*,” he barked, and the orb pulsed bright.

Wolfe stopped immediately, leaden feet glued to the floor. He drew back his lips, revealed fang, and scented the air. The stench of amber, wick, and salt permeated the space. He narrowed his eyes at the man, aware of whom he faced. Only one Warlock Judge had survived the curse of the crux demon that wiped out a majority of the magically inclined population of the Quarter a quarter century before.

“Sheriff Trevor McAvoy.” Wolfe’s voice was no longer wholly man—throaty, garbled, and territorial.

“I doona go by that title anymore,” the Warlock corrected.

Arden skirted behind Trevor, and the beast in him went mad, allowing Wolfe to move despite the binding of the spell. His feet shifted, sliding slowly across the floor, and the infamous Trevor McAvoy lost a bit of his cool composure.

The Warlock thrust the wand forward and ordered, “Doona come any closer!”

“Damn it, Arden! Stop running from me,” Wolfe raged, his body pulsating, skin burning.

So close now.

Vocal cords rippling and contorting, he warned, “I’m going to shift. When that happens, only a silver bullet to the heart will stop me from taking you.”

He scented her fear, heard the turmoil echoing inside her frenzied mind. The need to reassure and comfort her came second only to a steely determination not to lose control. If she ran again, he would lose his shoddy hold over the beast inside him. Then she’d learn just how eager his wolf was to claim her. He’d take her with or without the Warlock’s dead eyes watching, in such a way she’d never dare think of another.

“Stop moving.” Trevor addressed Arden quietly, his voice eerily calm. He kept his staff upright, eyes solely on Wolfe. “He’s no’ lying. He’ll shift, rip out my throat, and take you on the floor where we’re standing.”

Wolfe studied her, absorbing the emotions that tumbled so chaotically from her thoughts. She was afraid of what he was, what he represented, and of what he offered. He was the future she didn’t want to conceive. Happiness was something she believed she would never know.

His heart actually ached at the confessions brought forth from the deepest recesses of her mind.

Everything she ever loved, she lost.

“Lycæ don’t hurt their mates,” she mumbled weakly, refusing to look at him. “I’ll go while he’s bound. Now that I can see, travel won’t be an issue—”

Trevor cut her short. “If you run, he will find you. And there will no’ be any talking ’til after the deed is done.”

“Damn it,” she snapped, and a spark of temper all but eradicated her fear. “This isn’t logical! I’m a vampire, not a Lycæ!”

“A *Dhampir*,” Trevor corrected. “No’ vampire. There is a distinction.”

“Release me before I break free of the goddamned spell and demolish this entire fucking room,” Wolfe ordered, his eyes locked onto the female who captivated him beyond reason.

“I will no’ allow you tae harm her.” Trevor’s accent was full on now, no longer hindered by years lived in the States. “If you give your word no’ tae, I’ll set you free.”

Arden’s eyes flittered between him and the Warlock. Then she choked bitterly, “Don’t discuss me as if I’m not here!”

“I’m sorry, Cricket,” Trevor said gently. “You doona understand what this means, but I do. Denying him willna only prolong his suffering, but yours, as well.” He turned from her and clarified. “No harm to her, Lycæ.”

Wolfe didn't take his eyes from Arden when he promised, "You have my word."

With a heavy sigh, Trevor said, "Veera well." Cautious and wary, he lowered the wand and the orb dimmed.

The heaviness in Wolfe's feet evaporated, and he didn't hesitate, crossing the short distance in three long strides and wrapping his arms around Arden's waist. He lifted her from the ground and buried his nose her nape, covering as much of her in his scent as he was able. She didn't struggle, utterly passive in his arms, but he knew the temptation to flee remained.

"Don't run from me, *t'keira*." His muffled voice conveyed his torment and complete devastation at the possibility of failing her. "Don't force me to become the monstrosity you believe our kind to be."

"Damn," Trevor muttered as he moved past. "I have tae replace the door again."

"Would you put me down." Arden's voice sent bristles of want down his spine. "PDA's are not my thing."

The scent of her arousal clung to the air, testing his equanimity. She could pretend that she was disinterested—that she didn't long for him as he longed for her—but her body told a vastly different story.

"I'm not letting go of you again, *little mate*," he droned, emphasizing exactly what she was to him. "You may have fooled me once, but no more."

Smug-ass bastard.

He chuckled in the instant he heard the words in her mind, arms squeezing gently. With her near, the beast was appeased. But it wouldn't last. Not until he knew the bond between them was forged. And that was something that would only happen after he undressed her delicate body and lost himself inside her.

"Where's home?" he said next to her ear, nuzzling the soft lobe with his nose. "We have unfinished business, you and I."

"Don't even think about it, Lycae," she argued weakly.

"The old abandoned Smith plant off St. Peter," Trevor yelled from the door. "She lives on the top floor of the building."

"Trevor!" she screamed in betrayal.

Wolfe watched as the Warlock approached, turning slightly so Arden could see. Her anger and hurt was brutal to absorb—a miserable twisting of his heart and gut.

“You don’t know it yet, but mating the Lycae is for the best. You canna continue like this. Hell, neither can I. Worrying you will no’ make it home night after night is taking years from my life. Years I’d prefer to keep.” Trevor met Wolfe’s level stare and said, “Your name, Lycae.”

“Wolfe Trevlian.”

The Warlock didn’t react as Arden had. He was entirely unfazed and unimpressed by his stature in the pack hierarchy. He studied Wolfe closely, as if putting him to memory. After a pause, he nodded and said, “I know your face, Wolfe Trevlian. And I’ll be holding you tae that vow. I doona care if you’re related tae the goddamned creator. You harm her, and I’ll hunt you down.”

“I won’t harm her.”

He didn’t have to say it, but he did anyway. The Warlock obviously knew and understood his kind. Otherwise, he’d be missing a large portion of his throat, and Arden would be reaping the punishment of enraging his beast.

Trevor nodded, turned away, and called out just before he vanished around the corner, “Now you have tae convince her.”

Chapter Seven

“I’m going to need my hands.”

Wolfe relinquished his grip on Arden’s fingers and circled his arms around her waist, oblivious to the sigh that betrayed her brisk detachment.

He refused to give her space, even as they had made the trip across the Quarter in Trevor’s Jeep. Wolfe had forced her to sit in his lap, his “Roman hands and Russian fingers” caressing her in the most infuriatingly intimate of ways. Each time Trevor had glanced over at them nestled in passenger seat, Wolfe’s large hands smoothed over the surface of her thighs, back, and stomach possessively. The Warlock couldn’t wait to drop them off and peeled rubber the moment they exited the vehicle and the door slammed shut.

The damned traitor.

“You like my touch, Cricket.” Wolfe nipped at her neck. “You know it, and I know it. It’s a good thing, too, because I love touching you.”

She cringed at nickname bestowed by Trevor a decade before—something he adored as much as she detested—even as Wolfe’s lips and teeth threatened to guide her mind and body in an entirely different direction.

Wolfe’s tongue flicked against her nape and he murmured, “I think it suits you perfectly.”

“Don’t you have pack things to see to?” she blurted desperately, crouching and bending at the waist as best she could, eager to get inside and take a shower. Recalling his presence in the alley, she grumbled, “Or should I say, vampyren things to see to.”

“I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

Rolling her eyes, she leaned forward and retrieved the key inside one of the flowerpots. The cool soil along the carved edges was clumpy, and she shook the small key clean before stepping closer to the door. The deadbolt turned with a loud click, and she grasped the knob, pushing as she twisted.

Never had returning home been so unwelcome. This was her sanctuary, a private place to relax and unwind. Now, it would be nothing more than a cage. One she would be forced to share with the Lycæ bound and determined to possess her—in all sorts of wonderfully wicked ways.

Damn it, she cursed silently, aware that she wasn’t immune to him as she should be.

There was no fathomable way to describe what she was experiencing, inexplicable desire overtaking sound judgment. Wolfe’s throaty chuckle informed her he picked up on the thought, and she wanted to throttle him. He seemed to derive intense pleasure from being as close to her—emotionally and physically—as possible.

Walking into the apartment was difficult. Wolfe was a good foot taller than her five-feet-six inches, his long muscular legs bumping each of hers as they shuffled. She considered asking him to let go, but got her answer when unrelenting arms brought her closer.

“You’re going to have to release me at some point,” she huffed, guiding him across the long living space and over to the winding kitchen counter.

“Never, *t’keeira*.”

Afraid to know but too curious not to, she asked, “What does that word mean, anyway? Is it Lycae for mate?”

He lowered his head and she felt his face in the back of her hair, his deep inhale audible. He answered on the exhale. “Close. It means, most beloved one.”

The urge to melt against him was stronger, a deep, inner longing and want becoming impossible to suppress. It wasn’t enough that he had the looks of a god. He was also blessed with a voice so sleek and sultry it accentuated the declarations he appeared to have no shame professing.

“This is insane,” she muttered quietly and shook her head, straining to reach the flashing answering machine. They didn’t even know one another. Feelings that led to a binding—and in this case absolute—commitment came from developing a strong connection with someone. Not an all-consuming lust.

The vintage machine clicked and rewound in a wretchedly high-pitched squeal. When it came to a stop, the messages started. The first two were prospective clients, each wishing to procure services to locate missing family members. The third was a click and disconnect.

When the fourth message started and she heard Michael’s deep baritone, she tried to press Erase.

Wolfe’s warm fingers wound around her wrist and encased her hand, restricting contact with the projected target. She listened, mortified, as Michael apologized profusely for their failed date weeks before and implored her to reconsider her decision to stop seeing him. It had taken three years for him to wear down her defenses, an eternity for a mortal man, and as a deserter of the Thymeria human faction, he knew what she was. That was what had fascinated him in the first place, and what ultimately had encouraged him to risk everything to experience a night in her bed.

She’d only relented because, as an immortal approaching the dreaded half-century mark, she wondered what she’d been missing out on.

How she regretted that decision now.

The message was too intimate, too damned personal. When he mentioned his behavior, alluding to the bite that had nearly killed him, she wanted to fold in on herself and die. If she could have shriveled and vanished into the floor to escape Michael’s voice, Wolfe’s adept ears, and her own humiliation, she would have.

The message ended and the tape stopped, leaving them standing in a very odd and uncomfortable silence. The Lycae male that believed her to be his other half just listened as another man presented a very vivid picture of an envisioned future together. One she never would have shared otherwise.

“You’re involved with someone?”

The question was falsely impersonal—posed as if Wolfe were asking about the weather—and they both knew it. So many answers came to mind, but her tongue felt heavy, as did her embarrassment. She chose to shake her head in the negative, giving her voice a brief reprieve.

“Do you love him?”

“No.”

“Did you love him?”

“No.”

Still calm, he asked, “Is it over?”

She didn’t understand why he didn’t just read her mind for the answers he sought. Then, it struck her that he probably didn’t want to in case he didn’t like what he found. Michael’s profession of love and adoration was more than adequate.

“It’s over,” she whispered.

The words had no sooner escaped her lips before she was turned, her back pressed into the counter and breasts crushed against Wolfe’s chest. In a deft motion, her glasses were gone and his magnificent face was revealed. His green eyes were no longer dark and leafy, but the shade of bright, vivid emerald. The hands that cradled her jaw were feather light, the touch utterly gentle.

“Kiss me.”

Resisting the pull of those eyes and the allure of his voice was next to impossible. But she knew that the moment she submitted, it was over. One kiss was all he needed to claim her. The rest would follow naturally. The attraction between them was undeniable.

His face was so close that, when she talked, his heated breath marked her lips. “We need to talk first. We hardly know one another.”

Turning his head from side to side, he brushed her nose with his. “We know each other better than you’re willing to admit. You know it, too. This isn’t a minor dalliance that ends by exchanging phone numbers and meeting for casual sexual encounters. Nothing else matters, only you and me. The rest is irrelevant.”

“I don’t even know why you were meeting with the vampyren,” she groaned. Her eyes slid shut when his hands released her face and trailed down her arms, conscious of each nerve ending his fingers skimmed. “If Taylor Martinson is a friend of yours, it’s going to be one hell of a problem.”

“Look at me, Arden.”

She lifted her lids and met his shifting, multihued irises. The green was darker along the edge, his pupil large.

“I am not a friend to any of the vampyren, nor to any of the Thymeria. I met with Taylor as a favor to Luke, nothing more. When Adam stepped down, it created a weak spot in the pack. Dealing with the vampyren was a necessary precaution to help out a member of the family, as well as one hell of a friend.”

Wounding betrayal resurfaced. She was so close to her goal. Her vow nearly fulfilled. She murmured bitterly, “Then why did you stop me? Why didn’t you just back off and let me finish what I started?”

Twin pools of forest green flickered back and forth, as if trying to soothe her soul. The hands at her wrists traveled up, until he held her face captive once more.

“I didn’t know—about you, about us. I reacted impulsively before someone got hurt.”

“I won’t stop hunting them,” she informed him quietly, lifting her hands and bringing them across his forearm. His skin felt incredible, so warm and solid, the dark silken hair along the surface tickling the heel of her palms. She felt him quiver, and his hips pressed snugly against her. His mouth curved and her knees went watery when she got a full on smile.

“What are you grinning at?” she asked breathlessly.

“I didn’t know crickets were so ballsy.”

Then, those heavenly lips covered hers in a kiss as soft as moonlight, and the world disappeared.

He lifted her by the waist and placed her on the counter, lips never breaking contact. The leather of her pants snagged and caught against the plastic counter, causing her panties to rub her sensitized flesh mercilessly. Wolfe pressed his hips between her outspread legs, grasped her waist with abrasive fingers, and rotated his pelvis. His tongue slid past her lips, taunting and teasing. The masculine scent of him was wondrous, his taste delicious. Every portion of her body came to life under the persuasion of his hands, lips, and fingers.

Nudging her chin aside with his nose, his lips traveled along her cheek and jaw, following the line of her throat. She whimpered and grasped his arms, allowing her head to hang limply. His tongue lapped against her skin, increasing the fire roaring in her veins, stoking an agonizingly empty ache in the pit of her belly.

“So responsive,” he growled hoarsely, thrusting his hand against her core and palming her sex possessively. “I can’t wait to see if you taste as good as you smell.”

The contact forced a moan of want from her throat. She remembered how good he tasted—his blood thick, rich, and addictive. Her canines extended at the thought, pulsating painfully. She would

sink her teeth into his throat, drinking him down while he claimed her body. They would give and take, providing for and nourishing one another.

“Where’s the bedroom?”

She shook her head and pressed her face into his neck, inhaling deeply. She was filthy, covered in grime and earth. If he was going to take her, she would make sure she was clean.

“The bathroom is down the hall, on the left. I need to clean my face. I feel like a mud infested sewer rat.”

He laughed; the spine-tingling sound throaty and deep. “The shower is even better.”

He slid his hands beneath her, bringing her close as he lifted her to his chest and she slipped her legs around his waist. Their mouths met, tongues touching, lingering, and stroking. She felt the steady movements as he carried her to the bathroom, and reveled in his sheer size and strength. The thrill of submitting to a creature much stronger and more deadly appealed to her, not for the damage he was capable of inflicting, but for the gentleness he continued to display.

When they entered the stark white bathroom, Wolfe let her go for the first time since he’d broken in Trevor’s door, grasping her turtleneck at the fitted hem and pulling it over her head. He didn’t waste time, stripping her in deft motions, kneeling and grasping the back of her knees to remove the worn combat boots after he’d worked the laces loose. He tossed the leather and cotton aside, gazing up.

Wolfe’s eyes raked over her, lingering on her breasts, belly, and the see-through material shrouding her sex. She stood quietly, covered in nothing more than the black lace panties and bra she’d purchased a month before when she’d made the decision to engage in heavy petting with Michael. Only this time, her lover took her in prior to the proceedings, looking his fill and appreciating how the bra lifted her breasts and accentuated the slimness of her waist.

It was as if he was putting her to memory, learning her body before he touched her. The approval in his warm perusal was evident, his green eyes shifting from light to dark. His warm hand touched her knee, sliding around and drifting up. He palmed her ass through the thin material, fingers combing into the skin.

His lips moved, but the words didn’t register, muffled by the blood rushing through her body and pounding in her ears.

“What did you say?” she found herself saying, unnerved and aroused by this intimidating male kneeling at her feet.

“Your skin’s so damned soft,” he repeated, bringing his slightly callused fingers down to slide them beneath the lace and cup her bare bottom. Up and down he moved those hands, tickling the skin as he caressed her thighs and returned to palm her ass.

Portions of his ink black hair fell forward as he bowed his head, pressing his mouth against her thigh. Her flesh shivered, undercurrents beneath the skin prickling and traveling to the erogenous

zones of her body. The bristles along his chin and jaw scraped roughly, and she trembled in anticipation.

At that moment, there were no vampyren, Thymeria, or battles to be stifled or waged. Tomorrow would have consequences, ones that would make or break them. They lived separate lives, had different goals. But until the sun sank and the moon crested, it was just him and her, alone and eager, with nothing to stop them.

When he reached for the sides of her underwear, she stilled his hands with the lightest touch of her own. He peered up at her, a fierce desire and need evident by his strained features.

She didn't know much about Lycae, aside from the tales of old or the things she learned from Greyson. They were a fierce and proud race, secretive and loyal to a fault. But every immortal knew one singular truth. Werewolves only mated once, and it was forever. They lived and breathed for those they were intended for.

Somewhere deep inside her soul she felt an inexplicable bond taking hold, a dangerous shifting in her heart that revealed the many insecurities and fears she fought so hard to conceal—but not from him, not from this beast among men resting so reverently on his knees before her.

His hands remained on her hips, but they didn't squeeze or move. He watched her closely, frowning when he asked, "What's wrong, *t'keeira*?"

His concern touched her in ways his physicality never could. Hunger rose in her stomach, but it wasn't for blood. The promise of tasting another portion of him overrode any craving for the liquid rapture pulsing through his veins.

For once, she *would* experience the forbidden.

She urged him to his feet and peered up when he stood tall above her, a curious expression on his face. Then, she rose on tiptoe and pressed her mouth against his parted lips as she slid her fingers to the top button at his throat.

His breath caught, and his massive body went tight when she slid the button free to reveal a tanned thatch of skin. She whispered softly against his lips, "My turn."

Chapter Eight

Each pass of her fingers against the expensive cotton and his skin was torture, too little, yet just enough. Up until now, Wolfe hadn't known if Arden would accept him. Even with the attraction that existed between them, even as his body produced the pheromones that enticed her to react and respond to him without hesitation.

My female. My mate.

A peace was derived from the knowledge, a comfort he didn't know he needed. She would care for him and he would protect her. It was as it should be.

Good, right—fated.

"You're skin's as warm as the sun," she whispered softly, each delicate syllable pounding in his ears.

It must be the Lycae in him.

Wolfe tried to stop exploring inside her head, knowing she resented the invasion of privacy, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Random portions still slipped past, revealing her intense yearnings and secret desires. She was as excited as she was anxious, fearful of harming him in some way.

"For you, *t'keeira*," he grated between clenched teeth, forcing his body to remain immobile as the last button came free and she slid the material away from his chest. She didn't touch his bare torso, instead lifting one hand at a time and undoing the buttons at the wrist.

Her breasts strained against the bra containing them when she pressed against him and removed the shirt, allowing it to drift to the floor. Then, she moved away, allowing plenty of room for those delicate hands and gentle fingers to stroke and pet.

"You're solid muscle," she murmured, pressing her palms flat against his chest, her fingers trembling slightly. "I've never seen anything like you before."

He inhaled her unique scent into his lungs and savored the taste that lingered. The scent of her arousal was potent, without any traces of fear.

"You live in the city with the largest population of Lycae in the southern United States," he teased, lifting a hand to remove a smudge of dirt beneath her eye. "I'm sure you've seen others exactly like me."

She shook her head and tendrils of hair slipped past her shoulders, drifting along his forearm. Her mouth came to his chest and, tilting her head from side to side, she nuzzled the skin above his heart. After several passes, her tongue flicked out and bathed his flesh in sultry laps. He felt the sharp edge of her incisors when she trailed them against his skin, never breaking the surface.

The caress of her fingers became bolder, the pads of her fingers drifting lower. Her touch stilled at the dark hair just below his belly button, fingers swirling in lazy circles.

“I’ve seen sex demons, master Chimera, and Alpha Lycae. But I’ve never seen your equal.” Her admission was barely audible, but he heard her loud and clear, his body going rigid and cock rising to full mast.

He started to repay the compliment in kind when she grasped his belt at the buckle and made quick work of the leather and metal. She placed her hands behind the rim of his slacks, twisting ever so slightly until the button came free and the zipper slid down with ease.

She went to her knees, bowing before him, and easing the boxers and slacks down his thighs until cool air hit the portion of him that wanted her attention most. His throbbing cock sprang out, fully engorged and erect, and Arden’s eyes went wide at the sight, breathtaking orbs of blue twilight flickering in disbelief across the width and length.

She licked her bottom lip, which created an unbridled surge of lust and need that crackled throughout his entire body. He wanted to bend her over the counter and lick her honeyed sex until she came, screaming his name. Then, he wanted to bend her over that same counter and bury himself so deeply inside her body that she would never be able to remove him completely.

“Large everywhere.” Her hushed voice trembled, but he didn’t detect fear, only a slight hesitance. Her eyes drifted past his stomach until she gazed up at him. Her blonde hair was mussed, her sapphire eyes large and radiant. She was beautiful, a paragon intended to ease centuries of loneliness.

He wanted to kneel down to reassure her, but remained still, unable to deny himself the pleasure she offered.

“You’ll like it, *t’keeira*. I promise you.”

Those sparkling eyes lowered, and she shifted forward, lifting her hands. He held his breath, biting back a moan when she wrapped a hand around the base of his cock. Her soft palm was like silk against his flesh, the slick skin of his shaft slipping smoothly against the haven she provided.

She brought her hand to the head and paused, swirling her thumb along the outer rim and then massaging the thin slit in the tip. “So soft,” she said, repeating the impossibly erotic motion until he couldn’t help but thrust his hips forward as a plea for more. Her fingers worked in harmony with the motions of his pelvis, her hands stroking his length from head to tip.

“That’s so good,” he groaned, arching his neck and closing his eyes.

Had any other brought this level of pleasure with a mere touch? He couldn’t recall anything that had felt so good until she darted out her tongue, flicked the thin slit in the head, collected the bead that glistened on the tip, and took him into her mouth.

“Jesus,” he gasped, knees going weak. If the sensation wasn’t enough to bring him to climax, the act itself and the expression on her face would certainly see to it.

“I was right, Wolfe.” She ran her tongue along the edge of the crown, paused, and pulled away to gaze up at him.

“Right?” He exhaled, chest heaving.

Her lips curved, the most sinful smile he’d ever witnessed bestowed just for him, and she purred, “You taste incredible.”

Her mouth returned to lavish attention on his cock, but this time, she took the entire tip into those moist warm depths. Her tongue ran along the bottom, cradling and massaging, and her hand came up to knead at the sensitive sac hanging beneath.

The vow not to touch her evaporated into the abyss. Wolfe wound his hands into her hair, palming the back of her head. The wet heat of her mouth robbed him of air, and brought him so close to orgasm he rode the fine line between pleasure and pain. She suckled hungrily, taking as much of him into her mouth and throat as possible. The former hesitation and nervousness was gone, her motions following an intentional pattern.

To his relief, he perceived the instinct overwhelming her. The need to tempt him, a feral reaction intended to entice him to mate. He’d feared it wouldn’t, as she was half vampire and not wholly human or Lycae. But he heard the jumbled thoughts that guided her actions, coming at random.

Keening moans vibrated along his shaft, ecstasy so intense he had to struggle for control. With each pass, her mouth went deeper, each caress of her hand deliberate. Her delicate fingers surrounded the base, moving in rhythm of her lips and tongue. She was desperate for relief, aching for it. He could hear, smell, and sense her readiness.

She fought him when he tried to break free, wrapping her hands around his ass and bringing him forward. He felt the barb extend, the thick portion just under the head of his cock intended to latch into the womb and keep him embedded deeply within.

“No more, *t’keeira*.” He kept his tone firm but soft and groaned with the effort it took to pry away from her wicked little mouth. “You’ll have me spend my seed before I’m ready.”

The eyes that lifted and met his were cloudy, full lips shiny and slightly swollen. Her forehead creased, eyebrows going taut. The confusion over her actions and newfound want consumed her.

Turning from her, Wolfe peered around the small space. There was no bathtub, no fluffy towels, or candles. A basket was nestled in the farthest crook of the walk in shower. Soap, shampoo, and clean hand rags were dry and at the ready. He walked to the glass door, slid it open, and turned the stainless steel nozzles. The spray was heavy and the water heated quickly, warming the cool tile.

Arden was in the same place and position he left her, on her knees, watching him. Wolfe brought her to her feet, bending at the waist and claiming her trembling lips. He didn’t bother undoing her bra, extending a claw and rending the lace in the center in two. Her panties soon followed, leaving her as bare and ready as he was.

Her breasts were like the rest of her, perfectly formed. The rounded swells were crowned with pert, pink nipples, each one pebbled and hard. He caressed them, cupping and pressing his thumb in slow, lazy circles. She lifted her face and he met her halfway, darting his tongue out and brushing past lips that parted in welcome. The tentative contact of her tongue combined with a muffled moan

spoke volumes. His hands descended to her waist. He lifted her, brought them chest to chest, and then pulled his head away.

“The shower waits, cher.”

The door slid open and steam escaped, invading the cooler part of the room. Wolfe stood in front of the foggy streams of water, situating her before him. Winding his fingers into her hair, he urged her head back to soak the thick locks. She sighed, lifting her hands to remove uncooperative strands from her face.

Wolfe bathed her while she stood quietly, a soft moan or sigh escaping as he lathered her body with milk soap, washed her hair with honeysuckle lather, and cleaned her face. Each contour received the same treatment, his hands learning her lean curves and placing them to memory. He knelt before her again and soaped up her ass, belly, and hips. Random scars scattered here and there marred the perfection of her alabaster skin.

“How did you come by these?” he asked, tracing the edges of a ragged line on the opposite leg.

“I wasn’t always immortal. The change didn’t come until I was eighteen.” Her breath caught when his hand drifted to her sex, his fingers teasing the outer folds lightly. “I wasn’t as quick or as balanced before the transition. That meant I caught the sharp end of the blade on more than one occasion.”

A red haze distorted his vision.

“These are marks from the Thymeria?”

“Yes.”

Thinking of her engaged in combat while unaware of the power she would be granted upon maturity infuriated him. His mate could have been killed for nothing more than petty games in the vampire war for supremacy.

“Wolfe.” Her concerned voice dimmed the rising fury. “Are you all right?”

He wasn’t all right. He wanted to hunt down each and every Thymeria and sever their heads from their bodies.

“I’m fine,” he answered quietly, focusing on her body and not her worried face. Things were different now. If the Thymeria came, he would kill them. Lycae or not, she was his mate.

That made her pack.

When she was clean, he considered asking a return of the favor, eager to feel her fingers clutching his body. But he quickly decided against it. If she touched him as she’d done earlier, he would lose all self-restraint. His cock was still rock hard, the ache in his sac growing heavier.

He cupped her hips and rose slowly, placing his tongue at the vulnerable hollow of her belly and working his way up. He snagged a taut bud between his lips, bit down gently, and then bathed the flesh with his tongue. The skin beneath his hands shivered, and a soft cry erupted from her chest. He felt her hands twine in his hair, bringing him closer.

“Your mouth feels so good,” she whimpered, and sagged.

“Just wait, *t’keira*,” he promised, nuzzling his head between her breasts.

Her fingers wrapped in his hair, and she forced his head back until he met her eyes. “I don’t want to wait.”

Wolfe vaguely remembered carrying her from the stall, toweling her supple body in rough motions. The beast inside him raged for what it needed, clamoring to be heard.

Claim her. Take her.

His mind projected the fantasy from earlier, her legs over his shoulders and her ass against the counter while he buried himself between her thighs. He thrust her upon the counter, pressing her back against the wall length mirror and placing her bent knees over his shoulders.

“W-wolfe,” she stammered. “What are you doing?”

“I’m doing what I’ve wanted to do since I first scented you,” he growled, snagging her hips and sliding his hands around until he cupped her ass.

Her sex was hairless, and he marveled at the sleek smoothness. Her swollen lips were pink from his petting in the shower, the center just inside glistening. He parted her and lifted his eyes as he created a path with his tongue, tasting her in a long, deep stroke. She shuddered, legs going limp and her long, pale fingers clutching at the edge of the counter.

Her taste was better than the honeysuckle, absolutely cock-rocking, and he realized he would never get enough of this woman.

Not now, not tomorrow—not ever.

Chapter Nine

She was experiencing heaven.

Wolfe's tongue tormented and teased as he sucked and licked at her sex with abandon, and Arden encouraged him by releasing the counter and clutching his head. She never wanted him to stop, desperate to know what it meant to be consumed and brought to climax.

He growled in approval, settling in and bathing her core with warm laps of his tongue. Each stroke was longer, delving deeper, and soon she felt a large finger glide along the wet heat created by her arousal. He entered her carefully, pressing forward until his knuckle brushed her most sensitive flesh. After several thrusts, he added a second, and worked her slow and steady.

"Are you ready for me?" His voice had changed, hoarse and throaty. "Your body says you are. You're sex is as hot as fire and as sleek as satin, so tight and warm around my fingers."

She moaned in response, unable to formulate words. It felt too good, too incredible. A humming vibration began overtaking her body, starting at his lips and fingers and extending outward. Things seemed to rattle, her vision shaky, and after a moment, she realized she was trembling violently.

"You want to come so badly, *t'keevira*. Relax and let go."

Unpleasant memories kept the promise of pleasure at bay, reminding her of the last time she'd allowed herself to take the risk. A climax brought out baser needs, namely bloodlust, and she hadn't been able to stop herself. Wolfe was strong, but a vampire locked in the lust would be formidable—even if only a halfling.

Again, the pinnacle neared, approaching rapidly. She groaned and writhed, leveling her hips and pressing against his hand. When her conscience braced to steer her body away from orgasm, Wolfe thrust his fingers into her roughly, latched onto her swollen and pulsating clitoris, and she went over the edge.

The light overhead mingled with red speckles that clouded her vision when her body detonated, an ecstasy so intense that she allowed her limbs to thrash freely. The back of her throat went dry, and she released Wolfe's head. She tried to reach for him, unable to think clearly and starved for the taste of his blood as she reveled in climax. His free hand came up and pressed flat against her belly, forcing her to remain as she was, and she fisted the counter, disintegrating ceramic plaster and molding with her fingers.

Wolfe released the swollen nub between his lips. Moving away, he stretched her with his fingers and watched as she shattered. The sensations passed too quickly, leaving her a mass of quivering muscle and syrupy bones. Then, the hunger lessened, the throbbing ache in her canines fading. Arden sagged against the mirror and the counter, releasing the latter which crumbled to the floor and out of her fingers.

"I was right, *t'keevira*." He rose and shifted her legs to his waist, his body like a blanket.

“Right?” she panted, cleared her throat, and repeated the word he had spoken to her just minutes before.

“You’re positively breathtaking when you come.”

Her sex clenched at the admission, and she started to whisper something back when a loud blaring screech sounded from the living room. Common sense returned with a good dose of self-preservation. The alarm only sounded when the property was breeched by something malevolent. The banshee enchantment Trevor had crafted for her home ensured it.

They had been followed.

“Son of a bitch!” she shrieked.

“What’s that noise?” Wolfe frowned, trapping her between him and the cool ceramic.

“Get dressed,” she barked, shoving him hard enough to ensure he knew she meant business. When he backed away, she leaped from the counter, retrieved his clothes, and tossed them into his chest.

His eyes narrowed and the irises flashed, the green nearly neon.

“Don’t waste your temper on me,” she snapped and presented Wolfe with a seething glare of her own. “Save it for whatever is coming up the stairs.”

Before he could question her further, she pivoted, rushed across the hall, and walked into the bedroom. She chose another black lace bra and panties and slid them on before diving for the closet and snagging a fresh pair of leathers and a black turtleneck. She chose another worn pair of boots and felt around for the socks buried inside. She slid them on, pulled the boots over her feet, and tightened the laces.

As she stood and stomped her feet lightly to acclimate herself, Wolfe’s large body engulfed the doorway. He was dressed, but his clothing was wrinkled, and the huge hard-on displayed clearly through his slacks indicated why he was scowling at her.

“What the fuck is going on?”

She sighed and turned away from him, walking to the back of the closet to open the enormous safe pressed flush against it.

“I have a lot of enemies, Wolfe. Ones that would prefer to see me dead. I imagine they couldn’t resist the opportunity to follow us here, even if it means wrangling with a Lycae.”

A sigh of air escaped when the lock released and the safe opened. Arden quickly chose a holster and latched it across her chest, securing it in place before she returned for Berettas. She checked each chamber with deft motions before popping the safety and placing them into the holsters beneath her arms.

She jumped as Wolfe murmured next to her ear, “Who are your enemies, Arden?”

“I can’t be certain,” she answered truthfully, shrugging and taking several magically enhanced clips from the safe. “I’ve pissed off vampyren, vampires, Lycae, demons, witches, Warlocks, ghouls, zombies, and a random Chimera or three. Anyone or anything could be coming up to say hello.”

Large hands surrounded her shoulders and turned her around. She hesitated before peering into Wolfe’s face. His fangs were different from hers, both upper and lower incisors growing long and lethal.

“I won’t let anything touch you,” he vowed softly in a voice so unlike his face.

She couldn’t disguise the smile that formed. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” she whispered and lifted a hand to his cheek. Her heart faltered as she gazed into his eyes, and her stomach knotted in fear.

If something happened to him because of her . . .

The screech from the living room changed, the high-pitched shrill causing the walls to vibrate and her ears to ring. Arden lowered her hand and slid the clips into the back of her leathers before grabbing a dark pair of shades that she quickly placed over her eyes.

Whoever was approaching wasn’t far now.

“Come on.” She gripped Wolfe’s fingers and led him back to the bedroom, toward a window situated on the side wall.

She released his hand, snatched the black drapes, and ripped them free from the long metal bar above. A loud crash echoed from the other end of the apartment and Arden didn’t bother with the bolted latch on the window. She stepped back and spun around, taking out the glass with a kick that shattered the pane.

Dark shapes flittered in her peripheral vision and she heard a horrible bray of warning so menacing she found herself wide-eyed and pressed against the empty pane.

At first, she assumed the noise came from the three-headed Cerberus that waited several feet away, with muzzles strong enough to detach limbs from bodies. She was shocked that someone wanted to dispose of her badly enough to take the risk of summoning a hound from the gates of Hades.

Then, she glanced at Wolfe.

His clothing was in tatters, lying scattered around a furry body the size of a large pony with paws the size of dinner plates. His glossy black fur rippled with each movement of his muscles, and a warning growl was accentuated with a terrifying hum that carried through the floor and ceiling. He never turned to look at her, his eyes homed straight ahead.

The Cerberus moved and Wolfe met the creature midway. His massive jaws went for the throat of one of the heads, and when he found his target, she heard the horrific crunch of bone as the neck was crushed. The second head snapped at the flesh beneath Wolfe’s shoulder along with the third, sharp teeth nipping and vicious throats snarling.

Arden went for her Beretta and a whistle sounded just as a dull pain in her back set her off course, throwing her weight to the right and sending the glasses protecting her eyes to the floor. Blood splattered slightly as the bullet ripped through her, exited cleanly, and took refuge in the opposite wall.

She spun toward the window, lifting the gun and aiming for whomever was firing into the room. Another round caught her in the chest, and she staggered, going onto a knee.

The rotten bitterness of bespelled blood told her what she already knew. The hand she pressed against the wound in her chest came away streaked with black, her reddened fingers sticky and wet. The horrible stench of burning flesh and scorched sulfur made her gag, the pungent odor so strong it made her queasy.

She didn't waste time worrying about things like agony and shoved her fingers inside the wound, ripping through the tissue. The gold bullet embedded above her left breast wouldn't kill her, but the demon magic attached to it would. She could feel the taint spreading from the wound, corroding her system.

The tips of her fingers butted against the white hot metal, the contact blistering the skin. She bit her lip to keep from crying out and watched Wolfe through a thin veil of tears as he worked on the third head of the beast. Each pass at the golden casing proved futile. The bullet continued to splinter, making it impossible to feel properly, and her blood made the surface of the gold slick.

She wanted to scream out the window and call the bastard shooting at a safe distance a coward, but playing dead was smart, and she'd filled her quota of idiocy in the last few days. She'd let the spineless asshole think he'd gotten her.

It wouldn't be the first time.

The noises in the room were quiet, but she didn't notice that until Wolfe's hands gently tore hers away from the wound she continued to worry with. He didn't look at her, lowering his head and inhaling sharply. His jaw ticked, and she felt the rage pouring off him.

"It has to come out," he told her hoarsely, his voice cracking with the strain.

She nodded. "I can't get a grip on it."

He took a steadying breath and instructed gently, "Close your eyes."

She felt the tips of his claws pierce her skin, but she managed to remain silent, showing her pain only in the tautness of her fists, face, and body. Wolfe didn't extend her suffering by going for gentle, choosing to be fast instead.

She felt his claws bump the metal and whimpered when he spread his fingers to get a hold of the cursed object. When he had a grip, he removed it slowly to ensure it didn't slip free on the trip out. She wanted to scream when the bullet dislodged from her, but she didn't, collapsing into Wolfe's chest instead.

“It’s splintered.” His voice was panicked, fingers trembling. “The poison is already in your system.”

“Trevor,” she mumbled with a suddenly thick tongue. She was dizzy and uncoordinated. “He’ll know what to do.”

She wanted to tell Wolfe not to worry, that she’d survived worse, but the blackness that rose to claim her was too strong. Even still, she resisted, using the last of her willpower to place a weak kiss to the area above his heart before everything went dark.

Chapter Ten

Wolfe studied Arden's sleeping face, relieved to see her free of the pain that ravaged her body. Even still, a selfish portion of him wished she'd open her eyes and reassure him verbally.

The last few hours had been the longest of his existence.

"She's out for the count," Trevor said as he crept into the bedroom. "Using beak of nightingale tae reverse the effects means she willna wake for days yet. You may as well get comfortable."

"You're certain the poison is gone?"

"Absolutely," the Warlock nodded. "The toxins have left the building."

His gaze flickered back to his mate. The Warlock indicated that the bullet came from the vampyren gold vault, meaning they were resorting to hiring petty assassins. She could have died today, and if he hadn't been there, she would have.

His heart constricted with grief and fear.

Fucking cowards.

"You're right." Trevor interrupted his thoughts. "She would have died today."

Intrigued, Wolfe arched a brow. "You're telepathic."

"No' exactly. I'm an empath. That's how I met Arden. Her own innate perception drew me tae her."

"How so?" he asked, frowning. "She's born of vampire and human, not vampire and witch."

Trevor walked to the other side of the bed and peered down. Smiling wanly, he watched Arden for a long time. Then, he said, "I haven't shared this knowledge with anyone, Lycae. The only reason I do so now is because of the connection the two of you share. Arden is no' your run of the mill Dhampir. She is also cursed with clairsentience through touch. Do you know what that is?"

Wolfe hesitated before nodding. The ability to perceive events and emotions through physical contact was rare but not unheard of. He'd seen witches with the ability decades before, when a Lycae mated a mortal Seer.

Trevor seemed pleased. "Good. Then you're aware that a select few are also cursed with the third eye."

Wolfe tried to mask the fear that increased his heart rate, nodding once more. The third eye led to madness, especially if the person with the ungodly trait kept enough chaos and turmoil locked away in the mind.

"I can sense your unrest, wolf. Doona forget that."

Wolfe's glittering eyes met Trevor's. "What are you trying to tell me? That my mate absorbs the anguish of others and will eventually go mad?"

Trevor shook his head. "She can take the misery of another, but she doesn't have tae keep it. She can pass it forward. That's how she vanquished the demon I sought tae destroy."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"I should say no'. People with the gift are verra rare, and only exist in magically inclined families. I doona know Cricket's mother. That's a subject she rarely speaks of. But I believe she was either witch or Wiccan. It's the only explanation."

Wolfe crouched down until he was level with Arden's sleeping face. He lifted a piece of her silken, white-blonde hair and rubbed the lock between his fingers while studying her and thinking aloud.

"Is that why she has so many enemies?"

"She has enemies because she left the Thymeria and went in search of vampyren heads. Along the way, she took on whatever stood in her path—most of which know how tae harbor a grudge. Cricket isn't stupid. She knows if anyone discovered what she can do, she'd be a dead Dhampir walking. Death brought about by touch isn't something immortals are keen on."

A pounding at the door brought Wolfe to his feet, a throaty growl vibrating inside his chest.

"Down, Cujo," Trevor scowled in annoyance. "It's only the delivery boy. I ordered a pizza since I canna go anywhere tae eat and the fridge is empty."

Wolfe followed Trevor as far as the bedroom door where he stopped and leaned against the frame, standing imposingly. Trevor removed a wallet from his back pocket and opened the new and improved front door he'd insisted Wolfe needed to purchase, which he'd gladly done. The teenage boy waiting just outside held up a pizza box. The fragrant aroma of sausage, pepperoni, ham, and cheese assailed him.

"Keep the change." Trevor shoved a wad of cash into the boy's outstretched hand, exchanging the money for the enormous cardboard box in his arms.

He slammed the door without a thank-you or good-bye and walked to the small dining table nestled between the living room and the kitchen. He plopped the box onto the top, opened it, took a slice, and eased into a chair. He took a huge bite, chewed, and then swallowed loudly.

"Well, do you want tae eat or no?" Trevor asked before taking another heaping bite.

"Don't you worry about things like poison? Arden cares for you. Taking you out would be an easy way to hurt her."

Trevor cleared his mouth and swallowed again. Then, he said, "I'm sure they would try tae poison me if given a chance. That's why I only order from Petrelli's. I saved their son from a rage

poltergeist a few years back.” He lifted the slice to his mouth, took a chunk between his lips and ripped it free, chewing as he said, “This pizza is clean.”

Wolfe pushed away from the doorframe and walked over. He took a seat and grabbed a slice, his mouth watering. It had been hours since he’d eaten, and as a Lycae, he needed the calories. The first bite was as good as the smell promised, the cheese oozing and the meat piping hot.

“Good, is it no?”

Wolfe nodded and consumed the slice in seconds. He quickly reached for another, but this time he chewed slowly, savoring the individual flavors.

“Do you plan on telling me what you’ve decided tae do? Or have you made up your mind?” Trevor asked before chomping on a portion of the crust.

“I’m taking her to New York with me. When we’re settled, I’ll contact Lucius Mercoix and request a meeting. I can’t do that here. Luke can’t take the risk of becoming involved. Not right now.”

“Why no’ take your place as Alpha? Pack unrest willna be an issue with you at the helm.”

Wolfe met the intense stare of the Warlock. “How long have you known?”

“I’ve been living in the Quarter for over a century, Lycae. I’m aware of the events that caused you tae leave. You canna continue tae run from the past. It is no’ your fault that a she-bitch tricked you with magic. It would no’ be the first time—nor the last—that a female has stooped so low.”

Wolfe set the pizza on the edge of the box, his voracious appetite gone. “I killed one of my own kin.”

“That’s no’ true. The magic she scribed with your name killed your kin, no’ you. Love curses are nasty. The only way tae break them is by death, sex, or the sacrifice of something significant. You could no’ have done anything tae stop what was set into motion, other than refraining from the sex that twined the magic.”

Wolfe’s mind drifted back, traveling to the not so distant past.

The memory of ripping out the throat of his brethren disgusted him. He had lost himself in that moment, unable to stop what his mind perceived and his body wrought. He couldn’t understand the possessiveness, the desire, and the raw need that consumed him when he’d met, and consequently fucked, Deidre, having foolishly believed that he had found his mate.

When the tainted Fae magic ebbed, he had learned what he’d done. Deidre was nothing more than a scorned female who ended the life of one of their own because he’d denied her advances years before. She’d used Wolfe as the means to the end, and she’d done it with a fucking smile on her face. He’d departed New Orleans and joined another pack shortly after, leaving his obligations behind and living with friends and relatives in New York.

But he couldn’t escape what he’d done, no matter how far he traveled.

“It doesn’t matter.” Wolfe shook his head and stood. “I can’t risk the pack here. I’ll take Arden home and take care of Lucius Mercoix after we arrive.”

Trevor reclined in his chair. “And how do you plan tae accomplish that?”

“I’ll give my vow that Arden will leave him be if he’ll do the same in kind.”

Trevor tossed the remaining crust of his pizza into the box before he went still. He spoke softly, eyes lowered. “That will no’ work.”

“The vampyren king isn’t stupid. He doesn’t want to war with the Lycae.”

“Oh, I have no doubt he’ll accept your offer. You’ll be doing him a favor. He’s been dodging that mate of yours for nigh on two decades now. She’s taken out his best masters and slaves time and again.”

“Then it won’t be an issue—”

“It most certainly will be an issue. Cricket will no’ rest until she has killed Lucius Mercoix and fulfilled her vow, and nothing you say or do will stop that.”

Wolfe felt sucker punched. He found himself sliding numbly into the chair he’d recently vacated, asking quietly, “She’s avowed herself?”

“She has.”

The new information changed everything he’d planned. Avowing yourself as an immortal meant you couldn’t turn away, even if you wanted to. It was more than a matter of honor. A vow was a living entity, something that could never be denied.

“Why did she do it?”

“The long answer would take away time I’d like tae use eating, so I’ll keep it simple. Lucius Mercoix killed her friend a couple of decades ago during a skirmish with the Thymeria human faction. The girl was still alive when Cricket arrived, and a wee touch was all it took for her tae see the assailant’s face.”

A dark cloud descended, heavy on his shoulders. Arden was avenging the loss of a loved one. There was nothing more dire or dangerous. She wouldn’t stop, even without the sway of the vow. That meant there was only one viable solution that didn’t involve ascending as the Alpha of the Bacchus pack.

Wolfe rose from the chair. “Where is the phone?”

“Who are you calling?”

“Taylor Martinson. I need to arrange a face to face with Lucius.”

“I doona like that idea at all.” Trevor frowned in disapproval. “The vampyren king is no’ stupid. He’ll know why you’ve come tae see him, and he’ll kill you before ever granting an audience. You need tae get on the horn tae Luke and tell him you’ve changed your mind about taking the job. Ascend tae your rightful place and take the son of a bitch down.”

Heedless of the warning, Wolfe walked toward the kitchen, searching for the phone.

“How long do I have until Arden wakes?”

“Donna be a fool, Lycae!” Trevor snapped and stood. “You’ll get yourself killed, and Cricket will avow herself twice tae the cause.”

Wolfe spun on heel and faced Trevor. He walked to the Warlock and stopped when only inches separated them. “I don’t have time to argue with you. I’m going to see Lucius Mercoix, and I’m going to do it while my mate is resting and unaware. It’s the only way to be sure she won’t follow, and to keep her safe from harm.”

“That’s a crock, and you know it. You place her in danger by putting yourself in harm’s way.”

“That’s my responsibility as her mate.”

“Horseshit.”

Wolfe growled and moved into the Warlock’s personal space. “Where is the fucking phone?”

Trevor didn’t seem frightened, just increasingly pissed off. “It’s your funeral, Lycae. I did no’ take you for a fool.” He lifted a hand and pointed across the way. “It’s on the wall just behind you.”

Wolfe turned, went to the phone, and yanked the cordless from the base. The Warlock had the right idea, but it was flawed. He couldn’t take control of the pack, not without their consent. And after the shit he’d put everyone through, he wasn’t going to ask.

If he was right, and he ended this mess quickly, he’d be back before Arden woke.

The line clicked over on the second ring.

“How may I direct your call?” a soft feminine voice asked.

“Taylor Martinson.”

“Who can I say is calling?”

Wolfe lifted his eyes and watched Trevor snag another slice of pizza. The Warlock didn’t seem interested in him any longer, enthralled by the fragrant greasy meal at his disposal.

“Tell him it’s Wolfe Trevlian.”

Chapter Eleven

“Cricket, wake up.”

Arden groaned, but the sound was muted. The blackness blanketing her was too good—too warm. She retreated, eager to return to the welcoming and blissful confines of sleep.

“We’re wasting time,” an oddly familiar male voice grumbled.

“Give her a few minutes. It takes time for daylily tae counter the effects of the nightingale.” A rough shake accompanied Trevor’s stern voice. “Arden. Wake up.”

She willed her eyes to open and struggled to focus as the black became grey. The weight of sleep still clung heavy, clouding her thoughts and reflexes.

“That’s it,” Trevor encouraged, and she felt a hand urging her to sit upright. “Open those lovely blue peepers for me.”

“We’re wasting time,” the deep male voice repeated.

“I heard you the first time,” Trevor snarled.

“What’s going on?” Arden managed to mumble, blinking rapidly.

“It’s your Lycae—” Trevor started to explain when he was shoved away and replaced by another body.

Arden lifted her chin and gazed up, homing in on the gargantuan Lycae bending over her. She’d met Adam Trevlian one time, when he’d come to Greyson’s after a tussle with a Chimera, and that had been enough. He was only slightly shorter than Wolfe, with the same dark black hair and hunter green eyes. His black t-shirt was wrinkled, as were his pants, and a dark shadow was spaced across his jaw.

“The Warlock tells me you’ve mated my cousin. I’d be inclined to dispute that truth, considering what you are. Then my brother got a call from a vampyren king that says otherwise.” Adam’s nostrils flared and he narrowed his eyes. “You don’t carry Wolfe’s scent. Why?”

She backed away, wobbling slightly on uneven elbows. “What is going on?”

Adam’s furious snarl and display of fang silenced her. “Answer the question.”

“I’ve only known Wolfe for twenty-four hours. You do the math,” she snapped and felt her cheeks heat. Her sex life was not open for discussion—to anyone. “Where is Wolfe?”

Adam ignored her question. “He would have claimed you. Even in that short span of time.” His eyes narrowed into slits. “We don’t leave our mates unmarred by our scent.”

“Like you claimed Kassia Lambert?” Trevor said smugly. “Word is you waited three years tae stake your claim on her, Alpha.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Warlock.” Adam rose from her side and faced off against Trevor. While tall, her friend was inches shorter than the massive Lycae. Still, he stood his ground.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Trevor smiled as if completely unfazed. “I’m just pointing out the facts tae assist a friend.”

Arden thrust aside the blankets and tried to stand, grimacing when her body protested the movement as if she’d been sleeping for days. “Would someone please tell me what in the hell is going on? *Where is Wolfe?*”

“He went to meet with Taylor Martinson three nights ago and never returned,” Adam answered, moving aside and allowing her room.

“Three nights ago,” she shrieked and staggered from the bed, stumbling over unsteady feet while grasping at the hem of the long, black T-shirt barely covering her body. “How long have I been out?”

Trevor stepped forward and grasped her forearms, holding her steady. “The Lycae went tae meet the vampyren slave the same night he brought you tae me, Cricket.”

Her stomach wrenched painfully, and for the first time in decades, it wasn’t due to bloodlust. She recognized the fear permeating her system. She’d had the same reaction when she’d learned Portia was being sent directly to her death. Her fingernails curved into Trevor’s skin, causing him to tense as she broke the surface. She let him go and stepped past, grateful her reflexes and mind were primed.

“Where is he?” she asked in a deceptively soft voice laced with menace.

“With Lucius Mercoix.” Adam moved closer, folding massive arms over his chest. “The bastard king thinks he can use our current dilemma to his advantage. He contacted Luke this morning, informing him Wolfe would be killed within the next twenty-four hours unless we deferred to his wishes.”

“And what wishes might those be?” Arden snapped, impatient and agitated.

“He wants to arrange a swap.”

“A swap.” She laughed bitterly, all but numb. She faced Adam, noting his grim expression and beautiful features. She stopped sneering, knowing the answer before she asked the question. “What kind of swap, Alpha?”

“My cousin in exchange for you, Daywalker.”

Her face was a blank slate, ensuring Trevor and Adam remained oblivious to the war raging inside. Handing herself over to the vampyren king meant eternal servitude or death—with death being preferable. There was no middle ground. If she entered the domain of Lucius Mercoix, she would

seal her fate. Killing off his kin would ensure she wouldn't be spared. Not by him. Not by his brethren. He would enjoy wringing every scream he could from her body.

It would be the most brutal kind of torture imaginable.

But if she didn't go . . .

An image of Wolfe's face flashed in her mind, his devastating hunter green eyes haunting.

"I'll do it."

Trevor snagged her arm again, his husky and accented voice difficult to understand. "Heed me, Cricket. The vampyren king will kill you. He will no' wait and see if he can bring you tae your knees before the fact. Revenge comes second only tae self-preservation. He'll see the matter done, and that will be that. You're going tae have tae let this go."

"Lucius will kill Wolfe." She snatched her arm free. "I won't stay here and let that happen."

"Doona go soft on me now! You've no' mated the Lycae. You will survive his loss with nary a tear."

"No." She shook her head, disturbed at just how wrong Trevor was. "I won't."

"It's no' possible. You canna love him. You've only just met!"

She didn't argue, wrapping her arms around herself. How could she explain what she didn't understand? A heavy weight crushed her chest when she conceived of tomorrow without Wolfe, as if a portion of her soul shriveled up and ceased to breathe.

"It's very possible, Sheriff," Adam offered amiably in her stead. "Wolfe saw something in her, and she saw something in him. It's the way of mates."

Trevor nailed her in place with tumultuous indigo eyes. "Damn it! I willna let you do this, Cricket. Do you hear? I willna allow it!"

"It's not your choice to make! I won't leave him to die. *I can't.*"

Trevor's usually calm façade dissipated, sending waves of magic off his body and coursing through the air. Objects began to levitate and the hair on her arms stood on end. His beautiful blue eyes flashed white, and she felt the power wafting through his skin. Several decorative artifacts crashed to the floor and the walls began to vibrate.

"Calm down, Sheriff," Adam ordered.

"I doona go by that title anymore!" Trevor thundered and turned on the Alpha. He lifted his arm and the casting wand nestled in the corner flew into his outstretched fingers. He pointed the blinding white orb at Adam and roared, "I allowed you into my home as a courtesy, Lycae. But I have no obligation tae you or yours. That girl is the closest thing I have tae family, and I will no' allow her tae leave. If you try tae take her, I will kill you."

“Don’t make me rip your spine out, Warlock.” Adam’s voice changed as his body began to shift, the muscles in his shoulders and arms contorting and broadening.

“I’d bloody love tae see you try, pup!”

“Stop it!” Arden quickly moved between them. She faced her friend, softening her voice and imploring him to listen. “This is my decision, Trevor. Not yours.”

The couch and dining table came several inches from the ground, the chairs quickly following suit. Lights flickered on and off, and cabinets opened and closed in violent slams and thwacks. The energy surrounding them was incredible. Loss of control was something Trevor rarely displayed, something Arden had only witnessed when he faced the Lich that had almost killed them.

“Trevor, please,” she whispered, moving closer. “Stop.”

“Cool off, Warlock.” Adam’s voice was smooth as butter. When Arden spun around to face him, he was utterly cool and composed. “Did you honestly believe I would sacrifice the only mate Wolfe will ever have to a fucking leech? Be sensible and stop the light display. Save that shit for Christmas or Mardi Gras.”

Trevor’s voice echoed from behind her. “Start talking.”

“It’s time my cousin ponied up and grew a pair. I’ve waited for him to do what’s right, hoping he would come to terms with who and what he is without interference. He’s just lacked the proper motivation to guide the way. If this won’t make that happen, nothing will.” Adam’s mouth lifted at the corners, his eyes shifting color. “We’ll force Wolfe to ascend and take his rightful place in the pack. The vampyren have been taking advantage of what I did to Demetrius Espada for far too long. It’s time they remember why it is they don’t fuck with the Lycæ.”

“His rightful place,” Arden echoed in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“As Alpha.” Adam smirked, the lines in his forehead and lips creasing in a manner that reminded her entirely of Wolfe. “He’s next in line to inherit the pack.”

Flashes of what had transpired in her apartment came rushing back, including his seemingly timeless shift. Only the most powerful Lycæ could change form that quickly. Man one second, beast the next.

“An Alpha?” she whispered dumbly.

Adam nodded. “And a damned powerful one.”

She shook her head in denial. “If he’s an Alpha, Lucius could never have touched him.”

“He’s an Alpha without a pack,” Adam stated, correcting her softly. “Without wolves beneath him to draw power from, he’s vulnerable.”

The furniture returned to the floor with a loud crash, the loud hum of magic dissipating. Trevor appeared beside her, casting wand lowered.

“It willna matter what you try tae do. No’ now. Wolfe said he would no’ involve the pack in this.”

“He will if she’s at stake.” Adam hiked his chin in her direction. “Wolfe will do whatever it takes to protect his mate. It’s ingrained in him as a male. And my sources tell me you have amassed quite a few enemies, Dhampir. Mating the Alpha of a powerful pack will ensure they leave well enough alone.”

“What do you plan tae do?” Trevor went quiet as he internalized, his dark brows creasing.

Adam’s face went from menacing to positively charming. He smiled, displaying perfectly straight and white teeth. “I thought you’d never ask, Sheriff.”

Trevor scowled and grumbled, “I told you. I doona go by that title anymore.”

“You do now.” Adam’s smile remained perfectly intact, bordering on conceited. “We need the strength of a Judge on our side if we expect to pull this off.”

“Goddamn it,” Trevor spat and glared at her. “You owe me, Cricket. I swore I’d never take up with souls again, not after Sarah.” She tried to speak, but he lifted a hand, silencing her. “Don’t bother saying it. I know you’re sorry. I can see it in those pitiful doelike eyes of yours.”

Shaking his head, Trevor turned to Adam. “What do you want me tae do?”

The Alpha’s grin extended, becoming truly wolflike as he drawled, “How long has it been since you’ve cloaked an army, Sheriff McAvoy?”

Chapter Twelve

Everything was covered in a thick red haze of rage, preventing Wolfe from thinking clearly. The taunts of impending death and torture no longer mattered.

He was beyond communication.

The shift had come hours ago, when the moon parted the clouds and touched his skin. With the heat of that glorious soft, white glow came something else, something primordial.

He heard the call of the moon, the need to go to and claim his mate. It consumed him entirely, blocking out everything else around him. When the opportunity was presented, and he was freed of confines of the silver cage, he would rip out the throats of his captors and leave them to rot.

Then, he would go to his female.

Arden.

He rotated in the confined space and tried to calm himself by resting on the cool bedding of the truck. The heat of the moon was heavy now, and relief would only come when he buried himself fully inside Arden's tight, wet sex, plunging into her pale body again and again until this need was spent, his temper cooled, and his mind cleared.

Instinctual urges crafted erotic images that tormented and teased him. He wanted to tongue her until she came, just as he had on the counter they'd nearly destroyed. Then, he'd see her on her knees once more, sucking his cock while he told her all the wonderful and delicious ways he was going to make her scream his name. He wanted to hear her beg for more, wanted her to whimper and writhe beneath him as her sex clenched and milked his entire length over and over again.

His entire body shuddered violently and he struggled for control.

He wanted to introduce her to the Lycae way of mating differently, taking his time as not to frighten her. He would hurt her if he took her like this. Nipping and scratching at her porcelain skin, bending her over whatever object gave him the best leverage to take her from behind, pounding into her silken heat until they were locked together irrevocably.

As soon as I'm free . . .

Shame swamped him, along with a profound regret. He should have heeded the Warlock's warning and gone to Luke. With the power of the pack, Lucius never would have caught him off guard with the goddamned silver net. He would have demolished the entire vampyren easily for attempting such a thing.

But now . . .

Now he would have to claim Arden for the first time under the heat of a full moon. And because of that, his mate would suffer his decision upon their union as a consequence.

Will force myself to go slow, have to be gentle.

His mind returned to the present when a vampyren appeared, running from the line of buildings along the waterfront. Wolfe lurched onto his feet, listening intently. He heard the whispers, knew of their plan. But the Sheriff's vow to protect Arden gave him hope. She wouldn't come here, not if he could prevent it. Luke would arrive at any time to inform the vampyren that there would be no exchange, and if he were lucky, the pack would stick around to see him free.

"The Dhampir and the Warlock approach, sire," he announced when he neared.

Wolfe growled low and bowed his head, studying the vampyren, unwilling to believe.

"You're certain?" Taylor demanded. "You're certain it's her?"

The vampyren nodded. "It's her."

"Are they alone, as promised?"

"We've placed eyes all around the perimeter. There is no one else for two miles in either direction."

Lucius spun around and glided toward the cage. Laughing arrogantly, he stopped at a safe distance from the bars. "I told you she would come, Lycae."

Wolfe lunged for the bars and snarled, displaying fangs that wanted to rend the flesh from the vampyren's bones. Lucian moved closer, and Wolfe snapped his jaws, snagging empty air. The vampyren's caustic grin infuriated him, sending him into a teeth-flashing frenzy.

Then, the most delicious scent of honeysuckle and linen caressed the lining of his nose.

Chapter Thirteen

As Arden approached the dock, she found the circumstances cheesy, yet poetic. Her vow would end in the same place it had begun, in the harbor mortals now referred to as Dead Man's Dock.

Her eyes flittered over the buildings, lingering on missing bricks here and there in the foundation. The place was much the same, only this time, there were no bodies littering the concrete with fresh blood and death.

"What are you thinking about?" Trevor whispered.

She smiled, turning to her friend as they walked to the meeting place that may or may not be the end of the line for both of them. A beard had begun to form, pervading the places left bare by his goatee.

"A vow long past," she answered reflectively.

He returned her smile, but there was sadness and fear in his suddenly dark eyes. He averted his gaze and started to say something when she placed a hand on his shoulder. She knew what he wanted to say because she felt the same. They were two people forced to form a dysfunctional family on the foundation of grief and loss. Where one went, the other would surely follow.

"You don't have to say it. I can see it in those big blue eyes of yours." She mimicked his angry words from hours before and leaned over to kiss his darkly shadowed cheek. "Me too."

Trevor stepped in beside her, mirroring her long strides. "So it's come tae this. I thought that Lich would be the end of us, no' a horde of vampyren." He glanced at her. "Do you think we'll make it?"

She shrugged and answered softly, "Maybe."

They walked for several more paces until the smell of salt water hung thick in the air, the crash of the waves smashing against the rocky surf and wooden beams loud and crisp.

"Do you think they'll make it?" Trevor asked quietly, face forward and eyes focused.

Arden peered over her shoulder and gazed down the empty alley shadowed by darkness but revealed by light from the full moon.

She met Trevor's curious eyes and answered, "Maybe."

Violent snarls echoed from the dock, overriding the crash of the surf on the night tide, each vicious one snaking into her heart and crushing it painfully. She tried not to wince, knowing the time and place to console and pacify her captured beast would come if she kept her eye on the prize and her mind on the plan.

"Here we go," Trevor muttered as they exited the buildings and walked to a caravan of vampyren surrounding what appeared to be a horse trailer of some kind.

She scanned the faces as they neared until she found the one she sought. Relief only lasted until anger suffocated the fear she carried.

Lucius Mercoix was the very image from Portia's vision—beautiful, large, and entirely deadly. He was dressed similarly, in an expensive dark suit and tie. His white-blond hair was trimmed short, bloodred eyes gleaming, and his fanged smile flashed brightly in the dark.

"Stop there, Mr. McAvoy," Lucius instructed in a lyrical lilt.

Arden felt Trevor's absence as she continued forward without him. She glanced at the mass of bars and metal and noted it wasn't a horse trailer at all, but rather a truck transformed into a cage. The bright silver rails mirroring the moon above cast light upon the large black shape thrashing madly inside. Tenderness and longing squeezed her heart, making it difficult to breathe.

As much as she wanted to call out to Wolfe, she couldn't.

Not yet.

Stepping forward, Lucius ordered sharply, "Suffer unto me. *Kneel.*"

Wolfe's enraged snarls accompanied her compliance, his fury made all the more horrific by the sounds of claws scraping against polished steel and silver.

"I'm here, leech," she spoke flatly, eyes on the slacks before her. "Release the Lycæ."

"Look at me."

Slowly, she lifted her chin, until she met his bloodred eyes.

"I'm going to relieve you of the burden of your head first," Lucius informed her smugly. "I plan to mount it on my wall as a trophy."

The loud crashing noises caused by the truck's wheels bouncing and shifting on the concrete were nearly deafening. Wolfe's snarls became one constant growl, so throaty and gravelly it made her skin shiver and her spine prickle. When he was finally free, he would unleash unholy Armageddon on every leech in the vicinity. And when he was done—his body, fangs, and claws bloodied—he would be coming.

For her.

"I wouldn't recommend that." She managed to speak over the gut wrenching sounds, completely calm. "My life isn't worth waging war with the Lycæ."

Arching a blond brow, he asked, "Are you offering to repudiate that ridiculous vow of yours?"

She ground her teeth and answered tersely. "No."

Lucian made a motion with his hand and returned with a sword nestled inside his palm, the hilt held reverently within his long, pale fingers. “Then it’s a risk I’m willing to take. I want to see your life’s blood spilled and consumed along the stones at my feet. I want to watch as you bleed out and the light fades from your eyes.”

“Last chance, leech,” she whispered.

The sword swung, arching back, and Trevor’s loud roar extended to the ocean. “*Dies Irae!*”

The night sky filled with light, all black becoming white, blinding and radiant. Several werewolves shimmered and appeared alongside her. The first threw his weight into her and sent them tumbling to the left, the other launched at Lucius.

“It’s a trap!” Lucius snarled, swinging the sword round and into the chest of the werewolf with a sickening slurp. He kicked the body to the side as blood spurted and he braced for battle. The wolf attempted to find its feet as Lucian moved in for the killing blow, and the Lycae next to her took his place, lashing out with vicious teeth.

The resonating rip of flesh tearing and bones breaking engulfed the alley, followed by the bitter tang of blood. Arden staggered to her feet, awestruck by the sight of wolves converging upon the large silver cage as vampyren tried to cut through them, firing sidearms and delivering blows.

Howls echoed in the blue hued night, cries of solidarity and fellowship. Adam had warned her ahead of time, preparing her for the sight of the ascension. Wolfe would feed off the energy and strength of the pack, taking it into himself.

When that happened . . .

A lone reply, deafening in its intensity, carried over them all.

Wolfe.

Chaos erupted. Throaty wolvern snarls, shrill hissing, and the rip of claw and fang floated to the water—drifting out with the tide. She reacted, rushing for the cage that rattled and shook. The bars slowly warbled as Wolfe’s head and shoulders pushed them apart. His shimmering green eyes locked onto her.

A hand came around her throat, stopping her progression and bearing her head back until something sharp tore through the thin turtleneck and replaced it.

“I’ll still have your head, halfling,” Lucius spat, twining his fingers into her hair.

“Yes,” Arden snarled and swiveled, bringing her torso around. “You will.”

She turned despite the blade that pierced her skin and tore through muscle and tendon. Her hands wound up his waist, past his chest, until she held his face in her hands. This was what she had waited for.

The time had finally come.

Closing her eyes, she whispered, “A life for a life,” and released the anguish locked inside that had driven her for so very long.

Pure misery permeated her soul, the pain so intense she could no longer bear her own weight. Lucius cried out as her hands, burning white-hot, acted as a tether to keep her upright when her knees sagged and her head fell back. He struggled feebly against her and released the sword, which clattered as it bounded harmlessly along the cement.

She used his fear against him, feasting on his terror. Emotions from the long dead burst free from the carefully constructed confinement she composed to shroud them, each memory a taint marring her soul. She danced with the mistress called madness, beseeching her forward, embracing the lunacy that dwelled within. Together they swayed, tormenting and antagonizing their prey.

She fed Portia’s death back to Lucius—every brutal blow, each agonizing swipe of his deadly claws—until she came to her death. The vampyren king felt the dull thrust of a clawed hand ripping at his own heart, experienced what it meant to accept impending death, to know the end was at hand. He hollered pitifully, the sound weak and desolate, in her mind’s eye. As he struggled, she laughed, wanting to see him suffer, incensed by this chance to witness his descent into depravity.

A scream resonated inside her head—of rage, of grief, of loss—when she realized where the sadistic tendency would lead her. She tried to pull away, to avoid the all-knowing lure that she might never recover from.

Dimly, she perceived Trevor’s frantic voice shouting, “Separate them, *now!*”

Her body was jostled, moved back and away. When her hands were ripped free she raged against the lost contact, separated from those last lingering memories of Portia and the misery that tore cleanly from her soul.

“Shh, *t’keira*,” Wolfe’s husky voice whispered as the sweet, woodsy smell and searing heat of him surrounded her like the midday sun. “I’ve got you.”

She tried to open her eyes, determined to see him, but the darkness held her within, laughing mockingly, taunting her with the madness she had knowingly called upon. She thrashed against the unyielding arms holding her so tightly, clawing madly and screaming until her throat burned.

“It’s all right, Cricket,” Trevor murmured soothingly, and she felt a heavy palm rest upon her forehead. “When you wake, it willna hurt anymore. I need you tae rest. Sleep for me now.”

He chanted something in Latin, his voice incredibly soft and comforting.

Slowly, she ceased to struggle, enchanted by the brilliant, colorless light that appeared and floated just ahead. It basked her in waves of reassurance and serenity before the calming luminosity turned blue, then grey, and eventually cased her in black.

Chapter Fourteen

The first thing Arden became aware of was the warm body pressed snugly against her, a rhythmic heartbeat resounding loudly beside her ear. Then, Wolfe's intoxicating scent traveled past her nose, hovering in the confines of her parched throat. She nestled closer, tucking her hands into her chest.

The large hand on her bottom slid up, gentle fingers traveling along the indentions of her spine. She opened her eyes, peering up and taking in the smooth skin along his chest until she met Wolfe's sultry gaze.

Frowning slightly and struggling to think, she murmured, "What happened?"

"It doesn't matter," he growled in a throaty timbre, urging her onto her back and coming up and over. "All that does is that we're together. Right here, right now."

He pressed his entire body against her, slid a knee between her knees to separate and part her thighs, and she quickly discovered they were both stark naked. A low moan caught in her throat when she felt his shaft pulsating against her, the thick length throbbing, long and hard.

"I can't wait any longer for you, *t'keeira*," Wolfe said and licked a path from her shoulder to her breast. "It's taking all of my control not to slide inside that hot sex of yours."

He nipped at her skin with sharp fangs and held her still as she squirmed and thrashed. The bloodlust evaporated, replaced by a physical need so intense she wanted to scream. She clawed at his shoulders, dragging him closer, and he growled quietly against her breast. Any previous resistance she'd experienced was gone, replaced by the desire to taunt and satisfy this male.

"*Your male*," an inner voice reminded, encouraging her to lure and tempt.

Desperate and yearning, she struggled against the arms and body that trapped her. Her sex clenched with each stroke of his tongue, her bare breasts straining as they sought the warmth of his mouth.

"Wolfe," she begged, arching her back in complete surrender. "Please."

"Don't worry, hellcat. We'll get there." He soothed a strong nip of his teeth below her nipple with the caress of his tongue and chuckled darkly when she cried out. "I have to make sure you're good and ready for me. I want you so hot and needy you'll go all soft beneath me, taking anything and everything I want to give to you. And I have a hell of a lot I want to give you, *t'keeira*."

His hips ground into her, the smooth, broad head of his cock brushing against the edge of her sex drenched in pure liquid heat. Her entire body quaked, her limbs trembling violently. Her whimper was muted as his lips left her breast, captured her mouth, and his naughty tongue disappeared inside. Each deep stroke was heaven, sending electric tremors down the back of her neck and creating a ball of heat in the pit of her stomach.

He ripped his mouth away, and when she clutched his shoulders, he grasped one wrist snugly in each hand and placed her arms over head, holding her in place as he gazed at her trembling body

hungrily. His eyes were no longer dark, glowing brightly instead, and his upper and lower incisors were slightly tipped. But she felt no fear, only a debilitating arousal.

The urges returned, encouraging her to entice and attract her mate.

Tempt.

“Wolfe.” She closed her eyes and licked her lips, thrusting her breasts out by arching her back.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. I want to remember you just like this.”

“Please,” she whimpered helplessly.

“Tell me what you need, *t’keera*. I want to hear you say it.”

“You,” she groaned, and wriggled. “I need you.”

Wolfe released her hands and shifted his big body back, resting on his heels. His cock jutted out from the dark thatch of hair between his legs—proud, long, and impossibly thick. The bulbous head was painfully swollen, almost purple, the crown rounded and smooth. Meeting his multihued irises, she watched in awe as the colors shifted and intertwined.

“Show me.”

Her wobbly limbs couldn’t obey fast enough. Scrambling on hands and knees, she rushed to the space between his outstretched knees. Wolfe’s hands twined in her hair as she opened her mouth wide, took the head of his cock between her lips, and rotated between licking at the shaft beneath and sucking the tip.

“More.” Wolfe’s fingers tightened in her hair and he moved his hips.

She flicked her tongue along the soft bottom portion and swallowed him down, stopping only when he brushed against the back of her throat. Wanting to take even more of him, she struggled to relax. Each pass took him deeper, then deeper. A bitter saltiness coated her tongue, the taste unique and entirely male.

“Stay still,” he ordered hoarsely, wrapping a hand beneath her jaw and keeping the other nestled snugly at the base of her head. “I want to take those sweet lips for a ride.”

He pumped his hips slowly, claiming her mouth as he would undoubtedly claim her body. She breathed through her nose, relaxing her throat. Each time she moaned, Wolfe went deeper.

“Your mouth feels amazing,” he groaned, thrusting between her lips rhythmically. “But I bet that tight sex of yours will feel even better. Are you wet for me, Arden? Do you want my cock buried so deeply inside your body that you scream from the pleasure of it? I know I do. I’ve thought of nothing else.”

Her painfully empty inner walls tightened and released, and she moaned louder, wiggling her bottom. Wolfe thrust into her mouth, creating another kind of torture. She dug her fingers into the sheets, fisting them tightly. The head of his cock swelled, becoming wider and longer, and Wolfe's hand released her jaw as his fingers slid free from her hair.

"That was nice, *t'keeira*. One day soon, I'll let you finish me that way. Would you like that?"

She purred against his flesh, attempting to please him with greedy sucks of her mouth. He moved away from her tongue until his length slid free from her lips. His voice was unsteady, vowels slurred and rumbling. "Not tonight. The heat won't pass until I lock inside you." His hands slid beneath her arms, guiding her onto her back. "It's my turn."

He shoved her into the pillows, placed her feet over his shoulders, and slid down until his face was directly between her thighs. He gazed past her sex and met her dazed eyes. "When you come, my name had better be on your lips."

Those dazzling green eyes, unrepentant and demanding, never veered away from her face as his tongue darted out and flicked the sensitive nub at the top of her sex. Her eyes slid closed and she shuddered, gasping for breath.

"You're as sweet as honey," he growled against her sensitized flesh. His fingers parted the outer lips, revealing her entirely. She felt the warmth of his breath and the coolness of the air when he pulled away.

"Wolfe," she moaned, shifting her hips, wanting more.

"*Do you want to come, t'keeira?*" The thought echoed through her ears as if he'd spoken it. But she wasn't telepathic, had never been.

Mindless, she asked, "How?"

"We are connecting to one another, cher. Soon, you'll know everything about me—my past, my present, and our future. Open your mind and your heart, give yourself over to me."

His tongue slid into the moist depths of her core, driving her mad with need. Images of Wolfe sliding into her from behind, of his teeth lodged in her shoulder, and of him pinning her down combined with whispered promises in her mind. He would be as rough as he was easy, as demanding as he was giving.

"I want you like this, Arden, helpless and completely open to me. I want you to trust me enough to do whatever I wish. Do you trust me not to harm you?"

"Yes," she thought in response, unable to speak.

The deep laps of his tongue quickened and he slid two fingers into her, scissored them, and pressed against the spasming inner walls of her core. She cried out at the fullness, panting pitifully.

"Please, Wolfe."

You're so tight, like a hot satin vise. I don't want to hurt you. I have to make sure you're ready.

She lifted her hips to meet each stroke of his fingers. "I am."

He continued to tease her with his tongue, focusing on the area just below that most sensitive part of her sex that would grant her release. As his fingers turned and contorted, brushing against that sweet spot that caused her to quiver, she mewed and twisted on the pillows. She was so close. All she needed was that one last act to send her over.

"Is this what you need?"

His lips settled over her clitoris, suckling the small bud into his mouth.

She screamed his name as she came, swamped by the sheer joy of it. There was no bloodlust to taint the feeling, no need to take more than he was willing to give. She exalted in the release that felt as if it carried her quivering body from the mattress and into the ceiling. When the glorious sensations ebbed, she sagged onto the pillows, breathing heavily.

The relief she experienced upon the realization she never once wanted to drink during climax was substantial. She could enjoy this part of a relationship with Wolfe without marring it with her deplorable need for blood.

"Beautiful," Wolfe murmured, sliding his fingers free and sucking them into his mouth to lick them clean. When he removed the fingers from his lips, he chided, "But you're wrong, *t'keeira*. I'm willing to give you more than this. And I can't wait to show you just how much we'll both enjoy it."

Chapter Fifteen

Wolfe moved toward the pillows and cradled Arden against his chest. Shifting their bodies, he turned her so that she straddled his waist. He pressed his back against the dark oak headboard and used his hands to guide her over his throbbing cock.

Wanting her to know just how far he was willing to stretch himself for her, he answered the question mirrored in those luminous sapphire eyes.

“I want you to be in control for as long as I can stand it. When the heat hits fully, I won’t be able to control myself, not entirely.”

He fisted his cock, guided the head to the wet folds above, and swiped himself back and forth to coat the tip with the liquid heat of her body. With each pass, he was rewarded with Arden’s throaty groan, her husky cries of need sharpening his own.

“Hold on to me,” he instructed, working the tip inside.

She placed one hand on each of his massive shoulders and arched her back as he languidly slid into the hot welcoming entrance of her femininity. He released his shaft, grasped her hips, and guided her down while remaining perfectly still. Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead, his muscles and bones aching with the effort it took not to shift and claim her under the heat of the moon.

Her sex was incredibly tight and snug, difficult to penetrate even as her body clutched and surrounded him like a glove. Sharp fingernails bit into his skin as he slid into her scorching core inch by slow inch, experiencing the most pleasurable kind of agony, until her soft bottom rested against his thighs and he was balls’ deep inside her.

Arden’s eyes slid closed. Her voice quaked when she crooned, “You feel so good.”

“So do you, *t’keeira*. I want to stay inside you forever.”

His hands drifted from her hips to cup her breasts. He marveled at the nipples that peaked and pebbled as he rotated his thumb in light circles across their surface. Arden’s head falling back granted him full access to the creamy globes, which he took full advantage of. His hungry lips created a path from the hollow of her throat to her breasts. He repeated the same soft motions of his thumbs, replacing them with his tongue.

She began to move, gliding up the length of his cock until she held only the tip within. Slowly, she lowered herself, sliding back down until he was deeply inside her. She rode him lovingly, each rise and fall purposely smooth and slow. A blissful sigh of contentment echoed in his mind, a voice so quiet he had to focus to hear her.

Her bloodlust grew stronger with each stroke of his lips and tongue, and as that happened, she fought to suppress it. The connection that continued to grow and flourish between them told him what she refused to admit openly.

She was ravenous, so thirsty her teeth pulsed.

His cock swelled, growing larger as he recalled her drawing sweetly on his skin that first morning, her lips and tongue unerringly gentle. Her feeding on him was beyond erotic. He was providing for and nourishing her, something he was born to do, and the wolf under his skin reveled in it.

Releasing a breast, he slid his arm around her back and followed the arch of her spine with his fingers until he cupped her head. She righted herself with the guidance of his touch until she was eye to eye with him once more. Her irises were incredibly dark, a breathtaking midnight blue.

“Drink,” he whispered and pressed a fleeting kiss to her lips. “I enjoy it as much as you.”

“You do?” she asked, frowning in uncertainty.

“Your bite makes me harder than a diamond, *t’keera*.”

Her full pink lips curved and she nibbled on the bottom one. Grinning impishly, she said, “I don’t think that’s a problem.”

He returned her smile, rolling his hips. “I think you’re right.”

“What if I can’t stop?” He heard the fear in her voice. She shook her head, took a shaky breath and said, “The last time . . . I almost didn’t.”

He lifted away from the headboard until her face was nestled against his shoulder. “Trust me. When the time comes, you’ll stop. We have the entire night to enjoy one another.”

For a moment, he worried that she might refuse, but then, she moved forward. Pieces of her long, wavy hair tickled his chin and chest, teasing the skin along his stomach. The soothing flicks of her tongue sent shivers up his neck, and he shifted restlessly beneath her.

She struck carefully, sinking her fangs deeply into his throat. The first draw caused them to groan in unison, his hoarse and deep, hers high and soft. She began riding his cock, timing her swallows with each mind-blowing plunge. Her hips writhed and gyrated until she found that sweet spot that would bring her climax.

She ground against him, desperate for release.

“There’s my good girl,” he murmured, driving his hips up to greet her. “Come for me.”

Her entire body erupted into infinitesimal tremors—arms, legs, and torso quaking. He heard her scream his name in her mind, felt her glorying in their union. As the orgasm ebbed, she pulled away from this throat and lapped at the small wounds left behind with light motions of her tongue.

“I love the way you taste,” she sighed, sated by his body and his blood.

“After tonight, you’ll never drink from another,” he informed her possessively and growled softly at the thought. She started to argue and he silenced by placing a finger against her ruby-colored lips.

“My blood is strong enough to sustain you, *t’keeira*. And as an immortal, I’ll recover the loss quickly. It’s my duty and privilege to see you cared for in all things.”

The bed protested when he lifted both of their bodies and turned, flipping her onto her back. He gazed down, thinking his mate resembled a fallen angel amid the black pillows and sheets. She started to reach out for him, but he stopped her, sliding free from the molten heat of her body and urging her onto her stomach. The sight of her pale cheeks inflamed him, the moment of claim so near he could feel it humming in his bones.

He tried to keep his voice from cracking, from revealing exactly how close he hovered to the shift, but failed. “On your knees.”

Her weight shifted as she brought her knees up before spreading them apart. Her sleek sex glimmered in the lighting, the lips swollen and red. He quickly palmed her, searching her heat with probing fingers. She moaned and pressed back against his hand, coating his fingers with honeyed cream.

“Christ,” he groaned, sliding in and out of her sex. “You test me like nothing else. I want to take you so hard your teeth will chatter, so fast the walls crumble to the ground around us.”

Her next words broke his resolve.

“Then do it.”

All of his good intentions were cast aside, squelched by the beast under his skin that demanded nothing less than her total submission. One hand went to his cock, and the other went to the back of her neck. He shoved her face into the pillows and fed his entire length into her tight heat.

When he was at the hilt, he released his cock, but not her.

“*Trust me*,” he thought desperately.

“I trust you,” she whimpered against the pillow. “Anything you wish, Wolfe. I know you won’t harm me.”

Growling loudly, he rolled his hips. The scent they created was overwhelming and brought even more of the beast from within. His fingers were firm, but loose around the base of her neck, his hard thrusts sending the head of his cock into the plush lining of her cervix. She didn’t move, utterly passive, allowing him what he needed—to know she belonged to him completely.

“You’re mine, Arden,” he snarled, taking her as roughly as she allowed as his climax approached.

“Yours,” she echoed meekly.

“*Only mine*,” he thought desperately.

“Only yours,” she whispered.

Skin slapped loudly against skin, each thrust harder than the one previous. The tip of his cock contorted as the barb extended just beneath the crown, a pain that was its own kind of pleasure. He released her neck and lifted her torso from the pillows, bringing her onto her hands and knees. She trembled, and he knew she remembered the images he'd intentionally fed her earlier.

"You need to relax for me, *t'keira*. It won't hurt if you relax."

Brushing aside her hair, he revealed the elegant curve of her neck. He caressed the soft skin with his lips before he bit down gently, waiting for just the right moment to pin her in place. Her body never went tight as his barb engaged, snagging into the softness of her fornix. His teeth penetrated her skin, trapping her beneath him, ensuring she took all of his seed as the walls of her sex milked him relentlessly.

Together, they climaxed, bodies detonating in ecstasy at precisely the same moment. As the pleasure washed over them, so did the memories of the past and present. He saw what it meant to be orphaned by a mother who was never around, just as she saw how devastating it was to leave everyone and everything he loved to protect them. The emotions and heartaches merged, shared between the two, until they knew one another more intimately than any other possibly could.

When the storm passed and she sank into the pillows with his arms tucked securely beneath her stomach, he rested his pelvis against her. He pulled his mouth away from her shoulder and licked at the small punctures.

"Incredible." Arden breathed the word in awe. "That was incredible."

He chuckled, bowing over to nuzzle her back. "We're not done, not yet."

His body reacted with perfect timing. His still hard cock jerked as another orgasm seared through him, sending her over the edge as well. She cried out, clutching at pillows and writhing beneath him. The pleasure continued, going on and on, until they each relaxed, breathing heavily.

Wolfe hoisted himself above her and held her in place with his arms.

"I've slept enough in the last few days," Arden complained softly. "I shouldn't feel so tired."

"It's instinctual, *t'keira*. Your body is reserving as much energy as possible for later. After we rest, we'll do this again, and then again."

She went still, and he heard her heart beating frantically, sensing her nervousness and her desire.

"You're not serious."

Though locked together, he relished the thought of sinking in and out of her satin sex once more.

He shared the image of taking her in the bathtub in the adjoining room, her pale body straining above his dark, her blond hair framing her face and shoulders. He would hold her against his chest as he engaged in her body next time, keeping her tightly against him as the pleasure washed over

them again and again. He wanted to see each expression on her beautiful face, wanted to know that she received just as much as she gave.

“Yes,” he murmured in a sensual promise, pressing his lips to the indentation at the base of her spine and grinning against the smooth skin when she shivered. “I am.”

Epilogue

*Cosby, Tennessee
Ten Months Later*

Must run faster.

The soft patter of springing footsteps was absorbed by the warmth of the earth, each one as giving as the grass beneath. Arden breathed in the cool autumn air, her eyes sharp in the dark. Trees came and went as she traveled through the dense forest, the scent of Cosby Creek just ahead. Patches of green and brown barreled past, merging together as she ran through the foliage. The steady pounding of her heart was deafening in the silence, each thrum in harmony with the feet that carried her closer to her destination.

Faster, faster, faster! She chanted to herself, picturing the wide creek with mossy slabs of stone and rock that would shimmer like a beacon in the moonlight.

The trees thinned and she saw the shiny sliver of water waiting just twenty feet ahead. She launched herself toward it and basked in victory.

Tonight, she would win. She would make it to the other side.

"So long, bow-wow," she antagonized mentally, thrilled and exhilarated, nearing the swirling water.

"Not so fast, hellcat." Wolfe's husky voice laughed in her mind.

A pair of strong arms snagged her from behind and took her to the ground. The blackened night spun, the stars above becoming the grass below. She landed across Wolfe's chest, groaning in spite of her knowing smile.

"It's not fair," she grumbled, going limp against him. "You're faster here."

"We can't play like this at home, *t'keeira*. Running along rooftops is all well and good until someone snags a camera and takes a picture." He rotated their bodies, coming over her. His dark hair was messy, his green eyes bright. "Besides, if we were in the Quarter, I couldn't do this."

When his face lowered, she parted her lips, eager to feel his tongue invading and ravaging her mouth. Her legs parted as he settled against her, his weight familiar, his presence comforting. His frame molded to her as if they were designed for one another, an interlocking puzzle of two.

"I'm going to take you under the light of the stars," he growled playfully against her lips while reaching down to cup her ass as he rolled his hips.

"And I'm going to let you," she murmured in return, writhing beneath him.

A soft vibration against her inner thigh caused them both to groan, but it wasn't in pleasure. Wolfe released her bottom, shifted, and pilfered inside his jeans for the cell phone he detested.

“I’m sorry, *t’keeira*,” he apologized, tugging the buzzing hunk of metal free.

Smiling at his stern expression, she lifted a hand to cradle his cheek. “It’s all right. It comes with the job.”

He lifted the phone, flipped it open, and snarled, “This had better be important.”

Arden watched Wolfe’s agitated face, trying not to listen as Luke’s voice echoed in the night through the phone speaker. Wolfe was Alpha of the Bacchus pack now, with Luke as his Beta, and she respected all that came with the responsibility. It was an important role, one Wolfe was meant to fill, and it ensured she could live out the remainder of her life without fear.

No one wanted to risk the wrath of an Alpha. Not if they wanted to live.

She smoothed strands of hair that were tangled in the shadow at his chin in an attempt to calm the large Lycae male whom she loved more with each passing day.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Wolfe sighed, lowered his head, and stole a quick kiss before he continued. “We don’t dabble with wizards.”

Wolfe listened as Luke’s voice bellowed through the line before ordering tersely, “Contact Sheriff McAvoy with your problem. If he can’t help, *then* you can call me back.”

He snapped the phone closed without saying good-bye, tossing the offending piece of technology several feet away. Her laughter was soft and light, the love she felt intensified by the connection they shared. She felt his adoration and the wonder he never ceased to experience at her nearness.

He cupped her face and peered down, brushing his thumbs against her cheeks.

“Now,” he murmured, lowering his head and nuzzling her nose. “Where were we?”

The End

About the Author

Jaime Saare is a normal gal with a taste for the macabre. She started writing on the down low when she was in high school, keeping her work a carefully hidden secret – until now. In her spare time you can find her enjoying the simple pleasures in life, including: shooting a game of pool (straight eight if you please), listening to her favorite band (NIN), or spending time relaxing with her husband and rambunctious brood. You can visit her on her homepage: www.jasaare.com