

AMIRA PRESS

The
WOLFEN
Lover

TESSA LANE



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, who inspires the romance in my heart.

Chapter One

Michael moved restlessly in his sleep. He thrashed in the dim cave where he lay. The nightmares that haunted him each and every night made his body spasm. He twisted in misery, held captive by his dark dreams.

He dreamed of his pack and the night they were attacked. He moaned, emitting a low, animal sound, and he thrashed upon the pelts and leaves that were his bed. His nightmare took him back to that terrible night, when he had lost the ones he loved the most. And he began to cry in his sleep—not for the first time.

Michael woke from his terrible dreams just before the dawn. He opened his eyes to slits, watching the fire he had lit in the late evening turn to ashes. The night skies outside the cave were black and starless, and he closed his eyes for a moment as loneliness and despair overwhelmed him. For a long time, Michael had been alone, so alone. The inky expanse of night sky seemed to plunge him deeper into sadness.

Michael lay by the dying fire, and he opened his eyes and stretched out upon his pallet. *I am always alone*, he thought. *Day or night, it is always the same.* He had left his tribe some time after the attack, when the vampire clan descended upon the Wolfen cave and destroyed their peaceful existence forever. He knew no visitors would come to ease his solitude, for all the creatures of the forest feared him now. *They know I'm dangerous*, he thought, and he rose and began to prowl the cave. His thick muscles ached from another tortured sleep, and only movement helped to ease the pain.

The fire was ashes now. Michael noticed the walls of the cave seemed painted with strange shadows, which seemed to cast mysterious images over the cold stone, like clouds moving through a stormy sky.

Michael hated the nightmares. He could see his mother's face, her soft fur streaked with blood. He could hear the cries of the wounded. Every night they died again, and every night he could only watch helplessly, just as he had on that macabre All Hallows' Eve. *I was young*, he thought angrily. *I was too young to defend them, and now they are dead.* Michael had cowered in the back of the cave with the other young wolves. They were hidden in darkness, and the others held him back from running out to fight the vampires. He would always hate them for that.

Michael had other dreams, too, at times disturbing dreams. He dreamed of mating, and he would wake up aching with the desire to share his body, and his heart, with another. He would arise each morning, draw warmth from the rising sun, and he would be a man again. For each morning, he awoke a young man and not a wolf, and he never made peace with his own magical nature.

Michael sat down on his pallet as dawn drew closer. The cave was cold now, an icy chamber. He groaned in pain as the change began, his sleek coat turning to warm, golden flesh, his animal limbs lengthening and becoming the lean, taut limbs of a human.

Michael sat up, feeling the pain recede. The transformation was over now, over for another day. He stretched and rose to his full height. His skin was covered in gooseflesh as he stood up, completely naked in the morning chill, and went to find his clothes. The warm, animal smell that permeated the cave reminded him of the night before, when he had hunted and dragged his prey back to his lair. He was Wolfen, and none but his own kind could understand the terrible hunger that forced him out in the woodland. No one but his own kind could feel the joy and freedom that was as tangible as the rough ground, when he ran with all his strength, on his four legs, feeling his prey grow closer and closer.

Knowing he must get rid of the carcass by the mouth of the cave, he wrinkled his nose at it. As always, he marveled at waking each morning, clean and scented, with none of the blood and sweat that always clung to his Wolfen form. *I am magical indeed*, he marveled, pulling on his clothes that he had hung on a thick branch he had broken off and brought in to the cave.

He stared down at his own body. It was smooth and almost hairless. He ran his hands through his short, dark hair. Sadness no longer filled his heart. It was morning now, and his anger took over.

Michael had all the beauty and animal grace of the Wolfen kind, and he knew this was a gift of the Creator. At one time, he had praised his God in thankfulness, each night, for the Tribe. His pack had been as he was, and he had joyfully shared his life with them. After that night, when the vampires came, his old life had become impossible. He was motherless and afraid, separated forever from the only ones who could understand him.

Now, he spent his days seeking revenge and trying to fight the irresistible urge to mate that seemed to come upon him so often as he grew into a full-grown creature. Michael felt guilty for such feelings when he remembered the night his pack was attacked. What right had he to ask for love or happiness? When almost all the others had to die in terror?

Michael could not help but think again of his nightmares, and he could never tear his mind away from the night his mother was killed. He grieved and he raged against his enemies and his own kind.

Never again would he look into his mother's eyes, see her tenderness and her compassion. His heart seemed to explode with pain, and the desire for vengeance was all that was left in its place. From that day, he had decided to seek the vampires and destroy them. He would use his human form to deceive them, and he would especially enjoy killing the one he remembered most, the one who had murdered his mother and had drunk her blood.

The other young ones did not wish to fight. *Cowards*, he thought, angrily. *They are nothing but cowards, more concerned with their own safety, than with avenging our kind, and our terrible loss.*

He made his plans, gathered food and supplies for the other young ones, and waited for the elders to return, or such that remained. But no one came. There were four of them out there—two males and two females—but they had not returned. All had abandoned the young wolves, or else they had died trying to escape.

He saw to the burials, and he maintained the ancient rituals as well as a young one could, but all the while, he knew the time was coming when he would pass on the leadership of the pack, and he would go on his quest. He would find the murderers, and he would make them suffer.

He waited until the moon was dark, and he moved through the night while hiding by day in caves and other shelters. When the morning came, he would cloak himself and walk through the forest, his eyes blazing.

He knew the vampires well. The tales had been told to all of the pack, and he knew they hunted wolves for sport, or when they could not find human victims. He had listened to the stories, but he had never believed.

Now, he wracked his brain for all the details, and he moved toward the village they came from, full of dark purpose. Each day, he went a little farther from the depths of the forest, and all the while, he grew stronger, more mature, his royal Wolfen blood showing in both his earthly forms.

He moved through the great forest, day by day, growing ever closer to the village where the vampires ruled, their pale bodies hidden by day, in a great estate that the villagers knew to avoid. The desire to hunt warred with the desire to mate, and he moved, man in sunlight, wolf in shadows, to the town where he would find his revenge.

Chapter Two

Laina sat in her bedroom sketching a portrait of a Wolfen creature. She had been forbidden to draw them anymore, but she could not help herself. They were a source of fascination to her, and she had to hide the pictures under her bed when she finished them.

She moved the piece of charcoal along the paper, capturing the lines of the strong haunches, and the fierce, proud expression she loved. She wished that her mother and father could understand why the Wolfen kind were so special to her, and her eyes filled with tears as she thought of their extinction at the hands of her parents.

I should be happy, she thought. *I am a princess*. But she was not happy. She was like a fish out of water, and she had never blended well with her own people.

Laina was the youngest of all the vampires and, according to her clan, the most beautiful of them all. She was the product of a royal father and mother, after all. Laina was proud of her strength, for she appeared so delicate and feminine. *And yet I am so strong*, she would marvel when she hunted. When she had been younger, she would hunt with her parents to learn their ways. In time, she became more independent, and she would devote herself to sketching and writing instead. She would hunt alone and spend her days depicting the tales of her kind in storybook texts with drawings, calligraphy, and knot-work borders. Laina was an artist, and she brought the lore of their clan to life with her pictures and words.

I deny my hungers every day, until I can't control the urge to feed, she thought wearily. *And I will be like this forever, for all of eternity*. Her role as historian for the clan only made her more unable to forget the truth of who she really was.

Laina finished her picture and admired the beauty of the wolf she had created, based on images in her own memory. *It has been a long time since I've seen a Wolfen*.

She hid her portrait in a pile with the others and moved to her vanity table. Staring at her reflection, she wondered why she was so uneasy in her own skin. But still she went through the motions of maintaining her beauty, because it mattered so much to her mother and father. She began to brush her long, raven hair until it shone against her skin, so pale and white. Her eyes were onyx black, and her lips were deep reddish brown, although she did not paint them. *They are the color of blood*, she thought sadly, *stained with the lives of others*.

Laina should have had no qualms about her existence, strange though it was. She was treated well among her kind, and she avoided the village where her strange beauty was legendary. She had no interest in humans, especially not the simple folk of the village with their archaic spells against magic and their fears of so many things that need not be feared. *We are all you need fear*, she would think as they made their sacrifices to their gentle gods.

I am a vampire, she told herself, and she walked to her window, watching the people walk, far from her high turret. She felt odd as she watched the town's women with their children. She felt a sense of loss she could not reconcile. *I was like them*, she would think, sadly, *in another life, perhaps, but now. I am only this, and I drink their blood while they walk through the dark forests, alone and fearful . . .*

How many have I killed . . . but not their children. No, I will never drink from that well. I will never kill a Wolfen, either, she thought angrily. *Not like the rest of my family.*

When Laina was young, her parents had gone into the forest to wage a Halloween attack on the Wolfen ones, whose powers threatened their own. Attacking the pack while they slept, her mother and father had destroyed their queen and left the young ones to die. They had come home blood-drunk and exultant while Laina watched them with huge, dark eyes. She had hated them that day, that they would destroy another magical tribe, so like their own, just to cement their own power.

When she was young, she had always dreamed that the two tribes could merge, so that they would all be stronger, and so that there would be variety and new pleasures in life outside of the clan and simple hunting. On that day, she loathed what she was, and her heart turned ever colder toward her own kind. She continued to hunt, for how else could she survive, but she dreaded the hunger that seemed to kill her compassion and blacken her heart.

The others saw her as an oddity, but still they cared for her in their own way. They permitted Laina her strange sensibilities, but they could not understand her fears and sadness. They gloried in their power and beauty just as Laina had, before that Halloween night. They posed and preened, garbed themselves in pilfered jewels and gleaming satins in shining jewel tones that made their paleness beautiful, instead of fearful.

They were all of the same cloth, every one of them, Laina thought in misery, and she lay on her bed and closed her eyes against the painful truth. Laina knew her royal lineage was her only defense against exile. Her mother and father would permit her eccentric behaviors, as long as she did not go too far. She knew, though, that there were limits, and she tried her best to share their views when she spoke and to echo the thoughts of the tribe.

Tonight, she longed to escape, and she remembered her solitary trips to the forest where she had watched the wolves, shining silver-grey in the moonlight, and had marveled at their beauty and grace. They had fascinated her, and she had longed to see them in their daytime form, but the sunlight would harm her, and it was dangerous besides, for they had their own powers. *Or so my father had told me.*

How can I not love them? How can the other vampires not feel this way, too? Laina loved all animals—their agility, their grace, their raw instincts, so like her own. Unwilling to on them, she preferred the humans who she knew were criminals, or sinners. She would play God, choosing the worst examples of humanity she could find and punishing them by draining them of their own, tainted blood.

Feeling the hunger again, Laina twisted on her bed. She was growing hungry, and soon she would take her next victim. She would watch a human for days beforehand and plan her attack. *They must always deserve it,* she thought. The rough men who struck their wives and made them cower were always her favorite targets. The women who sold their bodies for a couple of coins were often second on her list, unless she saw some sadness in them that matched her own.

This night, she wished she could ignore the blood-lust that consumed her, and instead go to watch the wolves as they slunk into their caves. *It is my only joy*, she thought, smiling into the darkness. *But it has been taken from me.* And she wished, as she had so many times, that she was one of them. *They never came into our clan and waged murder. They are good, and we are evil.*

Her mother and father laughed and chattered downstairs. She could hear them from her room. But inside, they were cold, stone cold, centuries of power clouding their judgment. . *But I am young*, she thought feverishly. *I am still young. I can still imagine the wolves running free through the forests of the night, and I can still dream.*

With a sigh, Laina rose to her feet. She crossed the floor of her bedroom to throw open the window, watching the pale crescent moon in the sky. She gathered a bundle that contained another dress and cloak about her waist, and she went to the window. She stepped onto the windowpane, crouched, and pushed herself out into the crisp, dark air. The familiar joy of flight filled every corner of her lonely heart. *I cannot stay*, she told herself. *I am one of them, but I feel like a stranger, and I would rather be alone forever than be here among the destroyers.*

Laina loved to fly, as high as she could. She circled the great forest and found her target, the caves where the wolves made their lair. She started at the edge of the forest, determined to find the Wolfen kind who were men and women by day and to feel their magic.

She knew it was dangerous, but she did not care, for what could immortality bring but a lack of fear and discretion? She landed gently on the cold forest floor, her robes swirling around her slim body, and she went to the first cave she saw, moving as silently as a ghost.

Laina would grow hungry and need shelter from the sun in just a few hours, but for now, she was free. She peeked into caves, and she listened, and she tried to sense the wolves where they lay in slumber. She found a few empty caves that seemed to carry an animal scent, but she saw no signs of their pack. Wandering free, she wondered if her mother and father had watched her flight and if they would let her be or seek vengeance.

She found the cave in the early morning, when it was still dark, and she tiptoed in, watching flames dance against the walls. A great wolf, all alone, slept by the fire, his body moving restlessly. She knew he was Wolfen because his silvery color was pure and distinct and set him apart from other wolves.

Fear and excitement filled her heart as she watched him sleep, so fitfully, with his head hidden from her view. She knew his eyes would be beautiful, and she longed to stroke his pelt in the warmth of the dancing flames.

He is so large and beautiful, she thought, moving closer to his body. If he woke, he would attack her, but she did not worry. She could simply rise into the air and out of the cave like a great bird. She went to him, until she was very close, so close she could touch him. She marveled at the softness of him.

She felt some joy in her heart because she had always dreamed of touching a Wolfen creature, and although she could not say for sure, this wolf seemed to be male. She wondered with rapt curiosity how he would look in the growing daylight when she must

hide. What would he do if he woke as a man and discovered her in his private lair? She imagined his eyes, his animal eyes, running all along the length of her body, appraising her. What would it feel like to be the subject of his Wolfen gaze? *Would I be frightened, or excited?*

She sat close to him and wondered if the other young ones were dead, if he was the only one left now. She was certain he was one of the young ones, now almost grown. Wolves grew fast, and she knew he must have witnessed the terrible attack her parents had waged. Staring down at him, she focused her thoughts on him, almost willing him to awaken. She could feel the strong energy of his body as it rose and fell with each breath.

As dawn neared, she grew indecisive, watching him stir a little. She could still find other shelter if she left now, but she did not want to leave him. She felt certain he would change soon. How could she deprive herself of this, her only dream! *I must see him as a man*, she thought wildly. *I want to see another magical being who is not one of the clan, like me!*

Dawn came and knew her answer—she would rather risk his attack than leave this place, which made her feel so alive, so . . . human. She began to murmur to him, so gently. She made sure her voice was alluring and comforting. The wolf stirred, small noises of pain echoing in the large cave, and he began to writhe under her hands. She stepped away, just a little, and waited, excitement churning in her belly.

As she backed into the shadows, he changed, writhing on the pelts he slept upon, groaning in a voice rich with pain and suffering. His body seemed to blur as the magic took hold, and it seemed only seconds until the limbs of a man emerged, and the silver-grey of his fur turned to smooth, bronzed skin.

Even the cave smelled different now, a human smell she knew so well, the smell of warm, fragrant human blood, the most delicious of all. She watched his eyes open, feeling joy she had never before experienced. The sky was lightening, but it was dark here in the corner, and she would be able to observe him until he chose to attack her. He would notice her scent soon, the alluring mixture of flowers and warm skin that mimicked the human. It helped her to entice her victims, especially the men, but it would also alarm him, and there was no way he would not sense her presence.

He stood, stretching his long limbs in the cave, his body naked and perfect. His smooth shoulders seemed to be carved as perfectly as those of a statue created by a master sculptor. His hair was dark, like hers, but his skin looked so warm, so . . . succulent. His eyes were silver-grey, with flashes of blue, and her own eyes widened at his beauty, for she had never, even among her own beautiful kind, seen such perfection of coloring and feature. His chiseled face was a study in angular, masculine beauty, and his soft, reddened lips seemed to cry out to be kissed.

She looked down, staring at his strong, muscled legs, so much longer than hers, for she was petite, and he must be a foot taller than she. She could not help but notice the hardened cock that stood out from his body, and she felt her thoughts grow hot. She had not been with a human, but she knew what they did. She had seen them, when she was out hunting for prey. She had come upon couples of all sorts, men thrusting into women, moaning in pleasure.

She felt her own body grow warm in the cold cave, where the fire was turning to ash as he reached for some rough clothes that hung upon a branch. He looked around him, moving with animal grace as he pulled on a tunic and pants and rough brown boots. *He is like a prince*, she thought, sighing, running her hands over her body, feeling her nipples harden. *I want him to touch me, to love me . . .*

Laina knew he sensed her, and probably had since his eyes opened. She gazed at him and waited, ready to fly but unable to budge from where she stood. He walked toward her, his eyes blazing, and he stepped into the shadows with a dagger of iron in his hand. It glinted silver in the darkness.

She was excited rather than afraid, when he came closer to her. She felt a hot flush creep up her throat as she took in his chiseled features and saw his look of shock.

Laina continued to meet his gaze. She felt as though they were suspended in time, each taking their measure of the other. The moment seemed to last forever, and Laina felt some burden lifted from her, some feeling of loneliness she had never, ever been able to shed for her whole life.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

Laina grew excited as she watched his eyes stray to her lips and then her breasts. She could see the tension in the lines of his body, and she admired his animal grace, so like her own.

“You are a vampire!” he said, but still he did not attack her. He only stared at her.

“I have come to be . . . your friend”, she whispered, comfortingly. “I am not like the others, and I have never been like them. I left them, for I know what they all did to you, and I don’t wish to live among them anymore, ever.” She reached out for his hand, but he pulled away from her, his jaw tight with anger and perhaps fear.

“You cannot be my friend, if you are what I think you are,” he answered softly. “We are enemies and always will be. You must leave here now, for I wish no contact with you. You are a monster to me, and your kind are killers, ruthless and cold . . .”

Destroyers, she thought sadly. *He speaks truth.*

“I will never harm you,” she said quietly. She smiled, using all her charm to try to soothe his anger.

“I will never, ever hurt you,” she murmured, her soft voice rich with pain and with kindness. “I am not so different from you, for you are Wolfen, and magical, and so am I. Like me, you must feed. It is in your blood. It does not make you a monster, and I choose my victims carefully. They are bad people, people who deserve to die, not wild creatures of the woods or magical beings. I want to be close to you. That is why I have risked so much to come to you. I will not hurt you. I have no other place to go” She finished, softly, tears choking her voice.

“Go back to them!” he thundered. “I will not take care of you, or anyone like you. I hate all your kind and always will. You destroyed my mother, who loved me well, and left her drained and lifeless. There was no pity for her, and I have none for you.”

She walked out of the shadows, closer to where he stood. She wondered what he would think of her face in the stronger light. She was pale, it was true, but there was a luminous quality to her skin, and she did not look frightening. *I want him to desire me*, she thought *I do not want him to find me cold and monstrous*. Laina decided to take a risk.

She stepped in toward him, mere inches from his beautiful face. She leaned forward to kiss his warm cheek and felt the stubble upon his jaw, so human. He smelled like a human—warm blood moving in his veins, eyes hot with emotions she could only dream of feeling.

Perhaps I am feeling them, at last, she thought, exultant. She reveled in the softness of his lips.

“We are not meant to be together. We are too different,” he said, more gently now.

She shook her head sadly. “I am different from them, and I can never . . . love . . . one of them, as I should. I need you. You are the only one who makes me feel like this. No matter what I am, or who I should be. I have loved you from the first moment I saw you, sleeping by the fireside.”

She shivered with pleasure as he went to her and buried his carved, full lips in her hair. She sensed he had always felt different, too, different from the others. *I know our souls are alike*, she thought. *It is like looking into a mirror*, she thought, wonderingly. *Can it be true . . . that there is another creature like me, but not exactly like me, also lost and alone, unable to understand his own kind, as I no longer understand my own?*

She held him close, longing all of a sudden to protect him, though he towered over her. She knew his trust was thin and weak, yet it seemed to strengthen every second he held her in his arms.

* * * *

“I am going to kill them, all of them,” he murmured, and he kissed her satiny hair. “And you are going to tell me how it must be done.”

“I will help you,” she said, adrift with love. He felt, almost despite himself, that he had come home at last, safe and warm in her arms. He closed his eyes against the soft, golden traces of daylight that filtered into the cave. “I hate them, too, for what they did to you,” Laina told him, running her hands over his shoulders. And his heart was touched by her honesty. He led her to the pelts where he slept, and sat down with her, looking into her face, for the cold, joyful look the others had shown when they floated above his mother and the elders and prepared to feed.

She is not like them, the animal part of him answered, and he relaxed, drinking in the unearthly beauty that was like a dream to him. *But she knows their secrets and all their ways, and I need her. And I am so lonely . . .*

Chapter Three

Laina's mother went to her room, later that night, to let her know the clan was going hunting. Laina hunted alone now, but her mother, Melissande, always wished that she would share this ritual with them. She found her daughter's window wide open and bed mussed but empty. Melissande stared out in the night sky and she wondered where the girl had gone. She was not known to fly out from her own window. When she went to feed, she always told the family first.

Melissande sat in Laina's room and looked through her things, angry and bewildered at the changes in her daughter that she could not understand. *I did not know that she would have the courage, or the stupidity, to leave all of us.* She held her daughter's hairbrush and stared into the mirror where Laina would brush her silky hair.

It was the attack on the Wolfen kind that started the changes, she thought. Laina has always been . . . strange . . . about the Wolfen. I remember all the pictures she drew of them and the way she romanticized those foul creatures, as though they were faeries or angels.

Melissande threw the brush onto the ground with a thump. She ran down the stairs and told her husband, Alastair, that Laina had run away. "She's gone to find those awful Wolfen creatures, the ones who survived," she spat.

Her husband nodded. "She still cares for them, yes."

His voice was dangerously quiet, and Melissande wondered if she would have to take the blame for this. *After all, I am the girl's mother.* That was why she had been left alone on that Hallows' Eve night. She would have ruined the attack with her protests.

"I am sure she has gone to them, as you said." The king sneered, his eyes dark with hate.

Melissande shuddered at the thought of the daughter she had raised so carefully, so painstakingly, consorting with her enemies, with mere animals. Melissande had always made sure Laina had the finest of everything. She felt emptiness as she looked about the great house that was their home, and forlorn.

"If Laina has gone to them, is she doomed?" she asked Alastair, and his eyes were like ice. He merely stared at her. She knew it was a fatal mistake.

Melissande could never understand why their daughter had seemed so unhappy with them. The royal bloodline filled her daughter with the strongest power and the potential to enjoy every pleasure, for all of eternity. The king seemed likewise confused by his child.

"She's very powerful, you know," Alastair said, reaching for a glass of wine. He drank deeply, his lips stained with the ruby red wine he loved the most.

Melissande had never really believed this about her daughter. She seemed so fragile and quiet. But the king had told her again and again that Laina was the only other in their clan who could eclipse him. He had given her that power himself.

“She is just a child,” Melissande said in protest.

“There are no children among our kind, my wife,” he roared. Our bloodline is as old as time itself. Even in biblical times, our kind fed and prowled the ancient squares and villages, cloaked in robes and hoods.”

Melissande knew this was true. Alastair had made her what she was. Without his blood, she was nothing. For this reason, she worshipped him.

Long ago, he had rescued her from death, and she had been a sinner of the worst sort. She was not sure what fate would have greeted her if he had let her die. Instead, she had been permitted to drink his royal blood and become immortal. What greater gift could she have asked for?

Melissande stood up and paced the room, her thoughts going back to the night when Alastair had rescued her. *Would God have damned me to hell?* she wondered, thinking of her human life. In hell, there would have been no power for her and no glory. Here, the world was like a toy she could play with.

Melissande had once shared all the passions of a woman, and all the darkness of the worst sorts of humans. When she had been betrayed by a lover, she had killed him, driving a knife into his flesh as he slept, and slitting his throat. She had also killed the woman who slept beside him, young and blonde and rosy, as Melissande could never be. Melissande had given Laina her dark beauty, but none of her vengeful nature. Laina killed because she must, to feed, but Melissande drew power from death, and she reveled in it, in the feeling of taking life from another.

She had loved the man she killed, or so she told herself, but she had killed him in cold blood, her rage like ice, and she had enjoyed it. Alastair had come to her in her prison cell. She knew not how he entered the little room, but it did not matter. Her terror had been so great, as he sank his long fangs into her throat. She had wondered afterward if the evil of her deeds was only another enticement to the vampire king.

He had drunk deeply of her and then, letting her be, waited for her to join him as one of the undead. He had pressed her mouth against his own throat and whispered for her to drink. Soon enough, she had felt the timeless hunger, like a sort of aching lust, and she had done what he asked. Then, she had slept for a while on the cell's little bed, her eyelids fluttering, and woken up as one of his kind.

It was so easy, Melissande thought, still grateful for that night. Her family had disowned her, and she knew that the scaffold would have awaited her. For that, and for the betrayal of her true love, she hated all of humankind and took fierce pleasure in feeding upon them and leaving them dead. Especially, she preyed on couples, and she preferred young, blonde women, with ivory skin touched by a coral flush in their cheeks and bright blue eyes.

The strong men, so like the one who had spurned her, were also favored victims, and she always felt a surge of the rawest power when they fell to their deaths like toy soldiers under her steady gaze.

Why can't my daughter understand that humans hurt other humans . . . that they lie? That they are no better and that they are so much worse. Being of our kind is honest. All beings prey on others, only we are truthful about it, instead of lying and betraying. Melissande felt fretful and angry, and her pride was injured. All the other vampires knew she had not been able to keep her daughter with them and that she had failed as queen. Although none of them could die, there was a pecking order to their ranks, just as in any society. By losing Laina, who was strange but royal, and the chosen historian of their clan, she had reduced her own reputation and decreased her power. She had failed as mother and as queen, and she felt the derision of the others, and rage filled her heart, as her pride swelled up in her, filling her with ego and hate. The clan had not loved Laina, but they had needed her in their own way, for there was some safety in numbers and some comfort in seeing the royal bloodline continued.

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The king watched his wife move about the room, but his mind turned as he decided what to do about his daughter. He loved Laina in his own way. She was an extension of his very being, but he did not love her for herself. His ancient bloodline was the purest, and the most revered of all, and Laina was his princess.

He knew Melissande would be angry if he destroyed their child, but he did not care. He would wait only a few more days before he set out to find the girl. If she failed to return, he would destroy her forever. He could learn how it was done. He was the only one, of all of them, who knew how to find out, and he guarded the secret carefully.

How strong is Laina, really? he wondered. And he felt a great weariness. *I never thought I would come to this,* he thought gravely, refilling his glass. But still, he must make his plans. Melissande would accept his decision, for she owed him everything and her own security was always foremost in her mind. He cheered up a little at the thought of his wife. The vain, selfish creature that she was suited him very well. He enjoyed the little traces of humanity that would erupt in his still-young queen, who was not yet cold or hard enough to be completely of his kind.

The queen would harden like marble, as he once did, with every passing year making her more ruthless and bold. For now, she still struggled with some human failings, which were more like memories, and she still mourned and raged at the things that a human man had done to her.

I will kill Laina. I will find out the ancient ways, and I will kill her, he thought, staring at his wife. "She will be destroyed if she threatens our clan," he told Melissande. Her back stiffened as he spoke. He asked his wife to gather his court around him, and she left the room to do his bidding. She did not meet his eyes.

He went downstairs and gathered the vampires who served him. He spoke quietly with them. They did not know his name, only the power they could feel held them to him. They knew he was a natural force that they could ignore at their own peril.

He stared at Byron, a younger vampire who was the most trusted of his advisors.

“Byron, you must go to the forest. Laina has gone from us, and I know she seeks the Wolfen creatures who remain.”

The younger man nodded. His eyes were filled with rage, and the king was pleased to see his anger. He knew Byron had no pity, but that he loved his daughter well. *This will be a test for him*, he thought. *A test of his loyalty to me.*

“What should I do when I find her? I cannot kill her?”

“Bring her home. That is all that is required. When she is here, I will see to the rest. But she must not be set free for any reason.” He stared into Byron’s eyes, looking for weakness. The younger vampire ducked his head a little. He adored Laina, and everyone knew that he did.

Byron sighed. “Very well,” he muttered, and he rose, gesturing for his men to follow him.

The king watched him draw himself up, his face like stone. Alastair grinned and knew he would do anything to keep his favor. Even this.

Laina stayed in the cave with Michael, and it became their home. By day, she stayed in the gloomy half-light, and at night, she would venture into towns, but never her own, looking for the unworthy and punishing them for the betterment of all mankind, or so she believed.

She would never let him see her drink, for he was in his Wolfen form at night and seemed more dangerous to her. In the night, she would stroke his soft fur in their firelit cave and feel his contentment, and she was everything now, to him . . . mother, lover, sister . . . It mattered not what you called it. But it was love. When he returned to the cave, his face soaked in animal blood, she grinned as happily as she did in the mornings when the change was done, and he stood tall and dazzling in his day clothes.

Michael told her that they should go to the village and that he would find a way to destroy the vampires who laughed as they killed his mother and the others. For a few days, though, he gave in to the feeling of oneness he had with the tiny vampire who swept the cave like a village housewife and made tea from woodland herbs and flowers.

“You are my mate,” he would tell her. *But yet we have not shared our bodies, not completely*, Laina thought in frustration.

We will mate, and I will love you well, she would think, performing her little tasks that she did with such joyful precision. She began to use dyes and sticks to paint beautiful images on the walls of the cave using the pigment from berries, and at night, when the fire was lit, the bodies of animals and creatures she had drawn upon the walls would wrap the cave in their primitive beauty.

I must convince him to stay here, with me. He must not fight this battle. We will both be doomed. I must make him forget his mission, and I must somehow keep us safe, safe from their revenge. And I must never

forget that all of this could be a trick, a mere enchantment, and that he might only be pretending to love me. But she could not convince herself of this. It was too painful to bear.

After a few nights, she felt tension and something like fear that ate away at her serenity. She wondered if Michael could smell her fear and sense her worries as he could never do in his manly form. He would growl at her sometimes. She could not understand his language, and during the day, he was as smiling and sweet as always.

She had her answer a couple of days later. "You are afraid," he had told her one morning, as he stretched his limbs. It was not a question, but a statement. His voice was calm and quiet. It was her favorite time with him, when he was newly a man, and she watched him quietly and longed for the comfort that she was sure would come when he held her and mated with her.

"Yes," she whispered, sadly. "They are coming for us, just as we come for them." She played with her skirts, her eyes unseeing, for she was back with them in that terrible place in her mind. She hated to think of their dark plotting, the way their fangs would show as they grinned. They loved death, because death meant Wolfen blood.

"They are coming for me," she whispered. "And they will strike without warning. I feel them now, planning and waiting. But who knows if I will have the warning I need when they decide to punish me. And you must not be here. They will drink your blood."

He moved closer to her, placing his warm hands on her shoulders. "You are mine, and I will protect you, my . . . love. You must be . . . my mate, and the Wolfen always protect their mate, always." He kissed her slowly, sensually, his hands roving over her body.

"Tell me how it is done, how they can die," he said into her ear, his voice low with excitement. She let his hands move over her breasts and felt her breath quicken. She was sure his body was burning with desire, just as hers was.

Her eyes were dreamy as she reached out to him. "We must be mates," she said quietly, "two creatures as one, and then I shall share all my secrets. I swear it to you."

Chapter Four

Another night passed, the wolf entwined with Laina, his head on her heart. In the evening, just at twilight, they would move once more, leaving the cave that had been their treasured home. Laina would assist Michael in anything. She knew that now. Nothing could stop her from giving him the secrets he wanted, and she was certain that she could make this choice, to punish the cruel ones who would kill another magical tribe without remorse or compassion.

Laina stared into the darkness, sleepless and watchful, always waiting for them, always diligent. Her whole life seemed different now, with her strong Wolfen at her side, and she cherished her moments with him, for she did not know if they would last. Would they be able to survive the struggles that lay beyond the sanctity of their stone haven?

Morning seemed to take an eternity to arrive, and Laina always wished that she could go out in the bright sunlight and see the world as a mortal woman, or even as a Wolfen could. But it was not to be. She must hunt at night when she needed to, and she must stay inside, sentenced to the gloomy interior of the cave while Michael roamed in the fresh air.

He was careful with her, never chastising her for what she was. They had learned to understand each other, and it was good between them. Trust seemed to flow between them, and no words were needed.

She watched him stir in the coming dawn like he did every morning, his wolf's body growing tense and wracked with pain. She stroked his soft fur, murmuring words of love and held him close. She could feel the sweat through his pelt, and she wished she could take all of his pain and keep it for herself. She tried to hold onto him while the change came so that he should not be alone, but his wracked body twisted away from her. Suddenly, he fell on her and lay upon her, his huge, muscular body heavy and tense.

She longed to feel his thighs along her own and longed to stroke his glossy black hair and smell his heavenly scent, so different from the animal smell in her nostrils. Michael groaned, in the voice of a man. He changed, his body thrashing against hers, but she did not cry out or try to get free. She waited until his transformation to a young man was complete, and she felt his hardness pressed into her. She felt her heart beat fast as he ran his hands all over her body, still fierce and animalistic, and pushed up her skirts.

Never before had he gone so far, and her body met his in response, because she could wait no longer. The days and nights they had spent together, the trust they had built like a fortress, stone by stone, was being rewarded with kisses along her throat and with hands that roved over the soft, dark hair between her legs. She moaned softly, desperate for his lips on her mouth, for his soft tongue against her own.

Michael got on his knees and loosened her bodice, hungrily, with his eyes half closed. He stripped her to the waist, never speaking, his hands seeking her breasts. She stared dreamily, drinking in his beauty, stroking his strong, hairless chest and his full, muscular thighs.

Laina felt the heat rise to her head, making her dizzy and weak as he put his lips upon her breasts and sucked her nipples. She trembled with longing as he ran his lips down her midriff, over her stomach. His eyelashes fluttered upon her skin, and every sensation was exquisite, every sense was heightened. He pushed her down onto the furs that were their little bed and pushed her legs apart. He stared down at her, stroking his cock with one hand until it was huge and swollen.

Then, he fell on her like, and he was wild and abandoned. He pushed his hard cock inside of her, groaning louder now, animal sounds mixed with human. She could feel the sacred magic of their mating, and she opened herself to him, gasping a little as he entered her so roughly and with such desire. Feeling him inside her, she put her hands upon his hips and moved with him, her eyes closed.

He was not gentle with her, for the animal in him was so strong, and she was aroused by his roughness and his loss of control. She began to feel things she had only dreamed of as he moved in and out of her, sweat beading his brow. She reached down and touched her slippery sex, as he pounded into her with his hard cock over and over again. She was wet with excitement, and her own touch made her hotter and wetter still.

She ran one hand along her breasts, unthinking, playing with the nipples, and she saw his pleasure as he watched her through slitted eyes. She began to buck and writhe under him, and giving in to her body, she moaned in pleasure and felt the great swell of ecstasy as she climaxed. She tightened around his cock, shuddering and trembling, and she felt the warm gush of his seed deep inside of her as he came. He stayed silent, unmoving, his breath ragged as the waves of pleasure engulfed him, and he closed his eyes.

Laina, dazed with love and happiness, grinned up at him, for she had always been unsure just how it would be and whether she would feel what mortal women felt.

Michael rolled over beside her, and stroked her body with one hand as he cooled down, a sheen of sweat visible on his face and chest. "I take you as my mate, now and always," he whispered. To her, it seemed he whispered an ancient incantation. "I will protect thee and honor thee for now and always, and we shall live our lives as one."

Laina felt tears fill her eyes, and they were tears of elation. She repeated his words, her heart bursting with joy. Michael rose up and rummaged among the cloaks and sacks that held his few possessions, and he walked back toward her, his eyes as tender as she had ever seen them. He placed a ring with an amber stone in a golden setting upon her pale finger. "My mother's," he whispered. "She put it on every morning, and every night she hid it with magic."

"My love," Laina whispered and kissed him deeply. Laina laughed a little in wonder because she was so enthralled him, she was love struck. For a moment, she felt almost embarrassed. She had always led a solitary life, where emotions were guarded like treasure lest they be wounded or misunderstood. But now, her whole heart was laid bare . . . to Michael.

"My mate," Michael answered, and he laid her down again, for the cave was dark enough for her, and he was ready again.

Chapter Five

Byron gathered his underlings to plan the mission into the forest. The vampires were clustered around a long, mahogany table, their sleek heads close together. It was daylight, but the bright sunlight was blocked from their view by heavy tapestries hung upon the windows. No light filtered in to the dining hall, and Byron saw that all their pale skin was like parchment in the gloom.

“We must go to the forest, but no one must see us,” Byron said, his voice intense. He had made his peace with what must be done, and he wished to gain the king’s favor. Bringing back Laina and punishing her was becoming a pleasant thought.

“In the night, when the moon is dark, we must find Laina among the Wolfen caves and bring her back here. If she will not come of her own accord, we will take her by force. If she is not alone, we will feed on whoever is with her and bring back their head for the king.”

The vampires nodded. Byron knew such missions were rare and provided intense excitement in the ranks of the clan. He was sure the others were honored to be among the chosen. By ingratiating themselves with the king through the successful outcome of their mission, they could rise in the ranks and hold their heads high. *But no one will rise higher than I will*, he thought happily. Byron knew that when the king was happy, all was possible, and many favors could come to him. Only the most revered of the king’s companions were invited to hunt for him.

Once the princess is brought home, I will be treated to the finest wines and the best rooms at the estate. And all these men will be the inner circle as well. “We must not fail at this,” he told them gravely. “We all know that the king will be angry if we do.”

They nodded and murmured, and Byron saw the grimaces of fear they tried to hide.

“What if we do fail?” one blond vampire asked Byron, his worry showing in his pale eyes.

“We will be punished, and I will be held responsible,” he told him. “And I will hold all of you responsible for my pain and discomfort.”

“But Laina is strong,” the blond vampire continued. “She is as fast and clever as any of us are.”

“Shut up!” Byron roared, and he felt his head pound. He knew Laina was his equal, or more. It made him angry that he could never be the stronger one.

The other vampires simply stared at Byron. No one spoke.

“You cannot fail at this. I will be there to make certain that you don’t,” he said menacingly. And he sent the others out to prepare. *I need to be alone for a moment*, he thought. “Laina, how could you do this?” he wondered aloud. *And what will happen to me if I fail?*

The king provided for all, Byron knew, but he could turn on him in an instant should he fail. And his wrath was legendary. *He could banish me forever.* Byron knew that to be part of a clan was safety in numbers. The life of a renegade vampire was fraught with peril.

He went to say good-bye to the king, an hour later, and his heart beat like a sparrow's. The king did not look angry, but he was harsh in his final words.

"Go now, while the moon is dark and hidden," he said roughly, "and attack any you find while they sleep. If they are awake and aware of you before you attack them, you will see the danger and magic that they bring. This is why they must all be destroyed before the Wolfen grow to adulthood and achieve their greatest powers. They are terribly strong, as strong as we are. They have abilities you have not yet witnessed."

"How does it taste?" Byron found the courage to ask the king. "The Wolfen blood."

"Like honey," the king answered, and they laughed. Byron had been left to guard Laina during the Halloween attack, and so he did know that pleasure . . . yet.

If I find her, Byron thought, *I will slake my lust upon her, where no one else can see.* Byron had spent years living in the same estate as Laina, watching her beautiful, dark eyes move past him, and imagining her smooth body under his. He would have this chance to take what he wanted, and he would feel her lips, her hair, her whole body, as he had longed, too, for so many long years.

Laina, he thought, almost sadly, *you should have been my bride. I could have ruled with you under the king and queen, and what a royal couple we should have made. Why did you spurn me, time and time again?* Byron knew he was the most handsome and refined of all the male vampires, and he could have his pick of any of the women, but for him, there was only . . . Laina. And that would never change.

Byron was in his room putting on his cloak and getting ready to leave when Melissande appeared in the doorway. She held him in her sultry gaze, using her considerable charm as she always did, and she beckoned him closer. "You shall have Laina for your bride, if you succeed in this. The king has just told me."

Byron glowed with the very idea. He beamed at the queen and nodded. If he could bring her home, she would be his, again and again. Life was long, Byron mused, and the touch of another was like a drug to him, a balm for loneliness. Whatever happened in the moon-dark forest, he would have her, one way or another. And he would be crown prince, as well.

The other vampires were waiting for him downstairs, ready for battle. He smirked at them, feeling his tension and fear disappear. Soon he would rule over them all, with only the king to answer to.

"It's time to go," he said, almost cheerily, and they all slinked out into the night.

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Michael and Laina left their home the night of their mating. The night was dark, for the moon was almost hidden, and tomorrow, there would be no visible moon at all. For Michael, it was a magical time. The romance of the mating made his heart pound.

Laina carried her own things, and Michael's, in a small bag, so that he should have clothes, when morning came. Michael gazed at her, and he felt hot waves of pleasure run along his nerves as he remembered their mating and the moment he was inside of her. He longed to lie with her again and again and to give himself to her. His love was like a newborn creature, hungering and thirsting, unable to see beyond those desires. He was dreamy but watchful as they moved through the forest. *I am her protector*, he thought warmly. *Life feels real now*, he knew, his eyes moist. He had known that other Wolfen creatures loved. He had seen the looks on their faces and the way they were with each other. But he had not ever felt this.

Michael was, for the very first time, completely contented. And it was as simple as that.

Laina had told him of Byron and the way she resisted his love. He knew she was waiting for him. He knew it in his heart. And he was sure Laina dreaded the moment when she would have to part the veils and learn the secret of killing a vampire. *When she does, she will give her very life over to me.*

I must trust, completely, with a clean heart, he thought. *As she trusts me.* He remembered the hate in his own soul that first moment in the cave. *She has risked so much to love me*, he thought in wonder.

This risk was one she would take for the sake of their love, but Michael knew she was frightened. The veils between the worlds were found in a treacherous place, he knew that, and were inhabited by beings so powerful and so dark in their magic. She must muster up all of her courage and conquer all of her terror to meet them as equals. "I don't know if I'm strong enough," she had told Michael one night in tears, and he had kissed away her fears.

Tonight, she walked beside him, and he was sure she was terrified. In his animal form, he could do little to comfort her.

She had told him that she wished she could fly with him in her arms, but she was afraid she would be clumsy in flight and that they would die. And so she walked through the night, never complaining, never wearying, and the village grew closer with every step. *But she must dread our arrival*, he thought.

One more night of this, he thought, rubbing against her body as she moved beside him, *and we should be close enough.*

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The queen paced in her rooms as her husband told her of his plans. She was conflicted, torn between some small desire to protect her child and her status, and the need to punish the girl for her stupidity. In the end, it did not matter whether or not she approved of this mission, for the king's word was law, and all knew this to be true.

She looked at her husband and nodded, and her mind raced with the possibilities. If Byron should return with Laina, they would be married, and a great royal wedding should help to distract the clan and raise her own status once more. If, however, Laina was destroyed in the secret, ancient ways, the queen would be shamed forever. She hid her anxiety this night, and she decided to use her powers of seduction to please her husband. She had painted her lips so that they shone as Laina's always did, a deep, rich red of fine wine. She had added a little rouge to her cheeks, and she glowed in the candlelight, seductive and acquiescing. Her husband gazed at her and drew her close. His attraction to her had not dulled with time, although he would dally with others, even human women, before he fed on their crimson blood. The king and queen moved closer to one another, and their lips met.

She would give him her passion and reassure him that his choice of queen was the correct one. She would not beg for her daughter's safety, and she would keep her power however she could. *Laina must pay for her mistakes, not me*, she thought, coldly, unbuttoning the king's fine shirt. *I will not suffer for her folly and recklessness*, she decided, as she fell upon the bed and enjoyed her husband's expert caresses. *If she dies, she dies*, Melissande thought angrily, and she made sure to give the king every ounce of expertise she possessed. *No one helped me when I rotted in that little cell, only the king, and in the end we are all alone*, she knew. She would not pity.

She straddled her husband, riding him until he groaned, displaying her slim midriff and full breasts. She reached over and dribbled some wine along her nipples, so that they seemed to shine with blood. She leaned over him so that he could suck the rich red liquid from her erect nipples, and she felt the intense pleasure that would soon bring her climax. *This is all that matters*, she thought. *Passion . . . I will not let that silly, ungrateful girl take away what I have.*

Chapter Six

Michael and Laina found shelter in a shallow cave, where the strong night winds bit into their frozen bodies. Light snows swirled into the cave, and there was no fire to warm them, as all the branches they found were wet and would not burn. Laina dug deep inside herself, snuggled into Michael's fur, and tried to remain positive.

Her mind turned to the past, to the people she had killed and to the whole saga of her life, which seemed now only a blood-soaked adventure full of death and loneliness. She sensed some doom in the very air as she stroked Michael's silver pelt and murmured endearments to him, as much to soothe herself as to soothe him. His soft, animal growls were gentle and smooth and comforted her as she fretted and tried not to give into the terror inside of her.

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Over the sky, the king's emissaries worked fast, moving through the night skies, their eyes glowing unnaturally bright. The caves of the forest were their targets, and each of them would land near a different one, looking for the elder wolves, if they lived, and for their wayward princess, Laina.

Byron moved against the icy wind, feeling no discomfort. His joy was like a shield, protecting him from the world around him. He landed on the forest floor, his eyes scanning the dark woods. He could sense her. He knew she was close, so close . . . It was only a matter of time. He walked through the forest, alone and unafraid, feeling power surge through every fiber of his being.

The dark skies were not lightened by the snowfall. He took in the inky beauty of the night, and his heart swelled in his breast. He imagined Laina cowering within a cave, and he could almost taste her full lips and smell the sweet scent of her frightened body. She would be as helpless as his victims, and he would be merciful. If she fought him, he would subdue her, and return her to the estate intact . . . to be his bride.

The Wolfen frightened him not at all, for there was no way he could believe their power might eclipse his own. He only thought of her . . . of Laina. She had been the first thing he had ever wanted that he could not have . . . and she was to be his. Nothing had ever been denied him since the night he was changed, and he thought little now of the human life that went before.

He found a few empty caves where he stealthily moved, for all vampires were light-footed and sleek and were able to move silently and carefully toward their prey. He found a large cave, and his eyes adjusted to the blackness, and he grinned as he saw the delicate paintings on the walls, zoomorphic figures of animals and delicate knot work borders that could only be the work of Laina.

Feeling her presence, he wandered the cave, almost able to smell her, and something else . . . an animal musk that he knew to be Wolfen. The other vampires had told him the stories of their scent and how it aroused the hunger . . . and of their taste, sweet, so very sweet, and addictive to the vampire palate.

He wandered over to an abandoned fire pit looking for clues. He found an old pelt upon the ground, and picked it up, its tan fur dirty and cold. He pressed it to his nose, and he smelled the scent of sex, faint but unmistakable. He saw the traces of blood that dotted the old fur, and he trembled with rage. Had his Laina, his virgin bride-to-be, been defiled by a . . . beast? He imagined the Wolfen atop Laina's slender body, touching her in ways that had always been denied him, and he dropped the filthy pelt and stormed out into the night once more. Anger twisted through his body like a serpent, and he walked onward, knowing he would have his revenge.

* * * *

"Someone is here," Laina whispered in the darkness of her cave, while Michael nestled beside her, deep in slumber. "I can feel him . . . or them. They are very close now." She thought of waking him and moving on, but the night was growing stormy, and there was nowhere to run. Being out in the forest would only make it easier for them to find her. She waited in the dark, and with her eyes tightly closed, she meditated as the king had shown her in an attempt to lower the veils between the two worlds.

She whispered the ancient incantation and felt her spirit rise up over the forest into the other world, where all was possible, and every love and hate was recorded for eternity. She prayed, she knew not to whom and repeated the old words that she had always been afraid to utter. Her eyes were still closed, and as she moved her mouth, her head, her own quiet voice filled the darkness,

"Darkness made bright, sun come dark,
Our kind will see the otherness
Love defiled, hate made gentle now,
All is in readiness . . .
Tell us, o sacred ones,
The sacred secrets, as
Ancient as time . . .
. . . and give us our powers,
to do your will,
upon the air we climb, your own
creatures,
give us your will . . ."

Laina felt her soul depart and rise over the worlds, and she found herself alone in a barren place so desolate and dark that her spirit cried out with pain.

"You are here," a disembodied voice wailed, and she fought the terror that controlled her and made her shudder in the cold cave.

"I must know," she cried as bravely as she could. "I must know the secrets . . . to protect my love. I will die if you will it, but he must live, for he is everything to me, and I will gladly die . . . but tell me how they shall be destroyed, if it is right."

The voice laughed out. "It is easy to know what is right, is it not? What is good, and what is bad? Are you so sure that what you plan is not abomination?"

"I don't know!" she cried, tears choking her voice. "Please, give me your wisdom. I beg of you."

"The king shall reign until the moment when the new royal will rule. Who shall say who that is and if it is you. Would you take the reins of your clan or see them all destroyed forever, your own brethren, simply to keep your Wolfen lover?"

"They are destroyers," she told the voice, "and they destroy what you yourself have created. The Wolfen are a part of you, just as we are. We are all under your domain and your wisdom. Would you let them undo your own will?"

The voice laughed again. "No, I would not see the Wolfen disappear, for vampires are many, and they are few. I was not pleased to watch the deaths that night. It was an affront to me and displayed great arrogance."

"Tell me how the king must die then. There is little time, and I am not afraid to fight for my love and for those who remain."

"He will be vulnerable when he feeds. For the first moment the blood is on his fangs, he will be weak until he is sated. It is in this moment that you must strike, for in that moment, he can be destroyed."

The voice continued, and Laina felt the cold truth of his words. In that moment, when they fed, they were . . . different. She had felt it herself, and at once, she knew it was so. That fatal weakness, when the blood flooded the mind and senses, was the flaw she sought.

"A witch's dagger made of iron," the voice intoned. "Blessed with spells . . . that is your weapon. But the dangers are many, and the chances of success thin indeed. Think hard upon this path that you choose to travel."

Laina felt a coldness all through her body, the worst sort of despair. She sought the light, the heat, any warmth that could soothe this desolation which seemed worse than death itself. She opened her eyes, and she was back, still stroking the fur of her love, and she took a few ragged breaths and tried to compose her mind.

The one who spoke, he was the Creator, and she knew, at once, that even she could die. Only he knew the way, and perhaps the king did, too. She must find a dagger, consecrate it, and drive it into her father's body at the very moment when he plunged his long fangs into a victim. It would be difficult, well nigh impossible, and she sighed at the very idea of it. The king was known for his reflexes, his extrasensory abilities, which far beyond those of most vampires.

"I can do it," she told herself doubtfully. But first I must find one of the witches of the town, who are mercenary creatures, and pay them well. *Or I could kill them*, she thought, *and*

steal their things, but I must have the blessings. She shook Michael awake, though dawn was far away, and repeated to him in a quiet voice the things she had learned from the Creator.

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Michael listened in silence, unable to comfort Laina and unable to do anything but try to hide from her the elation that rose within him. Now, he had the secret, the ancient secret, and he would use it well. He would protect Laina, though. He would drive the dagger in himself, and then he would laugh over the king's dead body. And then he would kill all the others, one after another, all but Laina, his mate.

He rose on all fours and prowled the cave restlessly. He saw the tortured figure that was his love, and he felt a great tenderness, for she was as he was . . . able to die. They would both need to fight to survive as creatures should, and he would be a hero to her. He was certain of it. He nuzzled her lap with his head and wished he was man and could take her in his strong arms and soothe her with kisses. *She has given me everything*, he thought, dazed. *She has given me the key to her own death.*

"They are coming," Laina told him, and he nodded. They grabbed their things and stood for a moment, unsure whether or not they should flee. Michael shook his head, and they sat back down. There were no witches close by, and he knew there would be a battle this night, and that they would need to fight, only with their strength and wits. On the morrow, they could descend upon the village, that dangerous place, and find the weapon they needed so desperately.

Laina put down the things she held and settled down with Michael, and they both waited in silence, gathering their strength. Hopefully, the attack would happen before morning when Michael was but a man, and the sun would make the others weak, but there was no way to know. The sky would be dark for another couple of hours, and the waiting would be long and agonizing. There would be no impassioned lovemaking as in the everlasting darkness of their cave and no deep kisses to fill their hearts with hungry lust. The time for love would come again, if they were lucky, and if not . . . they had truly loved, at least.

Chapter Seven

The king and queen lay in bed sipping the finest wine, which the lesser vampires had stolen from their wealthier victims. They were clad in silken robes, their faces slack with drink. Byron and his clan brothers were moving through the night, taking care of their affairs, and the king and queen celebrated, smoking rare opium through a special pipe from the East and glutting themselves on vintage wine.

They had the other vampires serve them as was fitting, and they waited. The smoke from the pipe made Melissande fall into dreams, and it helped the king to open the veils. This time, though, he could not make his way through. He was frustrated, but the opium drained him of all aggression, and so he simply drifted upon the surface of dreams like a leaf upon the waters.

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Byron found the cave. He could hear the rustling inside. He could feel Laina like the snow that fell on his hair, and he could feel the fear, and something else . . . some power, emanating from the inside. He tiptoed to the mouth of the cave as silent as a ghost, and he entered, floating above the princess and her lover.

Had he taken her by force? Byron stared down at them as they gazed up at his floating body, waiting, their bodies tense. No one moved as eyes met eyes, and he stared at Laina's face looking for an answer. He saw her gaze down, protectively, at the wolf, and his rage burned inside him. He gathered all his fierce strength, for her one glance at the creature had confirmed his worst fears. She loved the beast or perhaps only the man, and she would never go willingly. He knew that . . . it would be a battle.

"Byron," she whispered, and her eyes seemed to beseech him to understand. He heard the strain in her voice as she pleaded with him. "Byron, please go. This is where I belong, and I will harm no one, if only you will leave us be."

"You mate with . . . an animal?" Byron snarled. "You mate with a mere beast? I cannot believe that you should lower yourself this way, you, of the royal bloodline, the ancient line. You have fallen, Laina. I am here to take you back to our kind." Above them, he watched the wolf closely, for he was taking his measure. The muscles in the animal were pronounced and strong. His shoulders and haunches were thick and powerful. But brute strength could not kill a vampire, only injure him and slow his movements. There was nothing to fear, he was sure.

"He is my love," Laina said, her voice hot with passion and with the need to make him understand. "My love, Byron. I tried to love you, I did, but I could not. It was my destiny to be with my Wolfen lover. I am not the same as you, and I beg you to leave me to my fate."

"I cannot leave you, for my mission is to bring you home and to kill any Wolfen I see." He sneered then, sure of himself, and of victory. What was Laina but a tiny, young woman, still girlish? And the wolf was but a beast like a large dog.

Byron smirked in the darkness. "Tonight, any of . . . his . . . kind that remain are being killed. All the clan's strongest men, save the king, are attacking the caves where they sleep, just as they did on Hallows' Eve. Your beloved beast is the only one left, I am sure. By dawn, the Wolfen shall be extinct, and our kind shall reign for eternity."

"No!" he heard Laina cry out, and then the Wolfen creature surged forth, pawing the air as he tried to attack. The wolf was wild and twitching, and his eyes were burning with hate. Byron knew he would be torn to shreds with his sharp teeth, until his parchment-like flesh lay in tatters.

Moving too quickly for the Wolfen to catch, Byron flew down to Laina and pulled her into his strong arms. He floated out of the cave with her while she screamed, and Byron could see other vampires flying toward the cave, ready to strike. The wolf ran toward them, running his hardest, and Byron watched him freeze as he saw the clan in the distance. The animal was hopelessly outnumbered.

Byron felt Laina lose her will to fight, her muscles growing slack. "I will go," she whispered in his ear. "And I will be your woman if only you leave him be. If not, I will kill you in your sleep. I swear it. I have learned the secrets, and you will die. So choose."

Byron watched the wolf stare up at the sky. He felt the power in Laina's words, the quiet menace that seemed to come from another being, a stronger being . . . the Creator himself. Only legend to most vampires, the Creator was real to some, and if Laina had made her way to him, she may well know how he could be killed. He dropped her to the ground and made a quiet pact with her while the other clan members grew closer. "Tell him to play dead," he ordered, making his decision. "Tell him to play dead, or we will drink his blood, all of us."

Byron watched Laina run to the beast and spoke with him quietly. He saw her lean into the creature's fur and whisper to him, but he could not hear her words. He saw her draw her long, sharp fingernails across his throat and lean over the wolf, so that it seemed she was drinking his blood. "Scream," he heard her order him, and he did, screams of death and terror that chilled even Byron's cold blood.

Byron cringed at the doleful sound, as Laina hunched over his throat, smearing it with blood from the cut she had opened on his belly. She stayed in place, seeming to drink, and smeared more blood about her own mouth and jawline, and then she rose. The wolf slumped, seemingly dead, and no more sounds came from his still body. Laina rose until she was in Byron's arms again. Her face was bloodstained, and her eyes were hard. Byron held her tight until they joined the others where they floated, waiting. Byron grinned at them and ordered them home. They laughed at the sight of Laina, one of them once more, for it was clear she had been held by the Wolfen beast and had her revenge. And she stared at them, her eyes like ice, and they flew to the estate, to the king and queen.

Byron brought her in, still in his arms, for she was weak with fear and loathing. His eyes blazed with triumph as he presented the beautiful princess to the clan. All the men who had gone on the mission watched to see how the king and queen would react. The queen's eyes were glazed, as they had been so many times, an opium glaze that all knew well. It made her

dreamy and pliable, and the king was in the same state. Byron hurried forward and made the speech he had planned during the long flight home.

“My king and queen, I found your princess, held captive in a dank, cold cave. She found the courage to slay the Wolfen, perhaps the last of his breed, and to drink from him. We shall never need to fear their power again.”

Byron watched the king, noting his puzzlement. “Indeed,” the king answered slowly. He watched the most royal of vampires fix his penetrating gaze upon his own daughter.

“Yes, Father,” Laina whispered, her voice ragged. “I am home. Please forgive me for running away. I often struggle . . . with who and what I am, but I now accept my high station, and I will have Byron for my own, and rule here with you.”

Byron waited silently as the queen came forward, looking closely at her daughter. She seemed tense under her bright, pleasant expression. He watched her lean close to her daughter, inhaling the animal stench that clung to her hair and clothes. Her nose wrinkled at the foul odor.

“My goodness, darling,” she murmured. “Go and have a bath. I’ll send the others to fill up the tub.”

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Laina nodded obediently, anxious to leave the others. She craved the feeling of peace that a hot bath would bring, and she no longer feared that her brother would destroy her. She ran lightly up the staircase, never looking back. She had made a hard bargain with Byron, but in the end, she was joyful, because Michael lived. Whether or not Byron would try to kill him in the future, she did not know.

Now, she must marry Byron in the dark ceremony she had always dreaded, and she would do it to keep Michael alive. *I will do anything*, she thought. *It doesn’t matter what is required of me. I will do it. Only . . . I do not want Byron to touch me. That is the worst of it, and the thing I cannot face.*

As her attendants took her robes, leaving her in only a thin, cream-colored chemise, she shooed them away and was alone at last. She soaked in the water, scrubbed herself clean, and she could hardly bear to be parted from his animal scent, which was like a part of her now. She felt like crying, but she remained quiet. It was safer to portray no emotion. Smelling of lavender and verbenas, she rose from her bath, not letting her gaze trail down her own naked body. It was hard, so hard, for her to forget the way Michael had touched her and loved her. It was torture to be anywhere but by his side, whether he was wolf or man.

Just the thought of their mating made her cheeks burn hot and her nipples harden. She could feel her longing for him in her loins, and she pressed her thin chemise to her nose, breathing in its animal smell. Soon, it would be thrown away, and she would only have her memories.

* * * *

Laina waited for her father, and he came to her that night. He brought her a glass of wine. He told her he wanted to hear about the ways of the Wolfen tribe. The two of them had often talked of the old legends. They both knew that the Wolfens had great power in their animal form. Laina sensed his curiosity, and she knew must weave a careful tale about the events that took place while she was with Michael.

Laina was certain that the other vampires had told him how easily she had won the battle with the Wolfen. "It was as though she had put a spell on him," she had overheard Byron telling the king. "He screamed, a mixture of human and animal sounds of pain, just as on Hallows' Eve," he had said. The king must have laughed at that, Laina knew, remembering how her father had used the element of surprise to overtake their enemies. He would have remembered those screams and enjoyed the terror he caused. *The screams would be like music to him*, Laina thought. *And the blood would be an exquisite blending of taste and pleasure . . . a potent brew, indeed, that he had no doubt developed a taste for.*

"Tell your story," he said as he watched her face. His eyes seemed to penetrate her very soul. Laina combed out her damp raven hair upon her bed. "Tell me your story, my darling."

She felt unease, for the king was perceptive. She began to speak slowly, choosing her words with care. She would mix truth with lies so that he could feel some sincerity, but some things she would never tell.

"I went to the caves looking for the Wolfens, the ones who escaped," she said. . "I found one. It slept by the fire, and its silver pelt was so bright, so shining. I knew immediately it was not a pure wolf, but a creature of magic, like we are. I waited for dawn because I longed to see it change, and in the first light of morning, it stirred near the ashes and became a man, a great beast of a man, and I was afraid."

Laina saw that the king's face was rapt with interest, for he had always been curious about the other tribe, and he had never seen their magic. She was careful to appear shaken by her ordeal. She let tears fill her eyes, and she saw him relax a little. She recognized the glassy shimmer that the remnants of the opium always brought to his eyes. "Go on," he told her, and she laid down her tortoiseshell comb and continued her story.

"I watched from the shadows, from a dark corner of the cave, as he changed, and I saw the magic, the moment when everything seemed to blur, and at once, he was something different. It only took a moment, but before me there was a man, fully human, or so it seemed, except for the eyes. His eyes were those of a wolf, and I could not stop staring at them, those animal eyes in a human face.

"He came toward me. He sensed me immediately, I think, and I was poised to attack, to feed. But . . . he spoke to me, and he was charming, and I listened like one bewitched. I was spellbound . . . and he grabbed me, suddenly, and before I could overpower him or sink my teeth into his flesh, he had bound me with some rope he carried, and kept me prisoner . . . for many moons."

Her father looked angry. But she knew the anger was not directed at her. All his hatred was for the Wolfen kind, just as it had always been. He patted her shoulder awkwardly, for they did not often share such easy affection, and it was not his way. She grinned at him, her eyes wet with tears.

Laina cringed as he asked her if the wolf had used her, as a man uses a woman. She had known this question would come. "Did he . . . take your maidenhead?" he inquired, his jaw tight. She had always been told that the gift of her virginity was to be for the next prince of the clan. It was not meant for some lowly creature in the woodland.

"No," Laina lied, her eyes downcast. "He did not abuse me, but asked many questions about us and seemed satisfied with the answers. He was as curious about our kind as we are about his."

"What powers has he?" the king asked. She knew this question was important. It showed that her father did not know everything about the magical tribe of wolves. The Creator had not allowed him to know. Laina tried not to show her relief, but she knew now that she could have some secrets. And that the secrets could help her protect her own love.

"I do not know. He was gentle, mostly. He had a temper when he was a man, but he was not unduly rough with me, and he could have been. He kept his distance, asking so many questions and observing me."

"Was he very strong, like us?"

"Yes," Laina answered. "I could feel his strength, stronger perhaps than my own, but in the end, I tricked him, and I drank of him. In the end, I was the stronger one. We are stronger, my father, and there is nothing to fear from the Wolfen. Perhaps there never was, and all this bloodshed and hatred was for nothing."

Her father looked down, and Laina tried to read the thoughts hidden by his inscrutable gaze. She was sure the Creator had turned from him after that bloody night when he changed the fate of the Wolfen forever. She knew he had spent hours trying to access the veils between the worlds, without success. No more could he go to his Creator, no matter how much opium he took from his pipe, and no matter how he meditated. This made him very angry, she knew, because he must rule his clan by his wits alone, without divine assistance. In the old days, he had always had divine assistance.

If the Creator was angry with her father, as she suspected, there was a chance for her and Michael. She shrugged aside her fears, and she felt stronger. Perhaps she could use all of this to their advantage.

After a long silence, Laina's father kissed her cheek. "Rest now, my child," he said, rising to his full height. Her father was an imposing creature, tall and broad of shoulder, and his eyes were diamond bright and pale, so unlike Laina's.

"I will rest, for now I am home and safe. I am sorry I ran away. I was confused."

“See that it doesn’t happen again,” he said, shortly. “Now, I will send the queen in to see you, and she will be harsh with you, I fear.”

“Please have her wait until the morning. I am weary to the bones, and I cannot face her now.”

“Very well,” he said, turning to leave. “But remember, any disloyalty to us can carry a heavy price, and we have long memories.”

“I know,” Laina said, dully. “I know you do.”

The room was empty, and the windows were boarded shut so that she could not open them. A guard rested outside her door, and more vampires prowled the grounds in shifts to protect her, or perhaps to keep her here like a prisoner. Laina sighed, imagining Michael running through the forest on his four legs, seeking his prey.

She longed for the freedom of the forest, where she and Michael could live as one. “I will be with you again, but will you want me, my love, when Byron has had his way?” she whispered and blew out the candle. *I will never let him touch me*, she thought, burning with the desire for her mate. *I will never let him. I will kill him and my father. The others are not strong enough to keep me here, and then I will find you, if it takes all of eternity. I will never fail you, my love.*

Laina closed her eyes, for they never really slept, her kind, and she pulled her pillow close to her and hugged it for comfort. She longed to stroke Michael’s silvery fur in the first morning light and to feel him become a man and mount her, fur turning to warm flesh, and mate with her like an animal, his lips and hands rough and hungry for her. She felt the ache in her loins, the longing, and it was like fire, fire that burned from within. *Michael*, she thought, desperate with loneliness in her luxurious prison. *Michael, I had no choice. They would have feasted upon your blood.*

Chapter Eight

Laina was sequestered in the great house as everyone made hushed preparations for the wedding ceremony. Depression weighed down on her as the days passed, and she went through the motions numb and sad.

Her gown was to be of garnet silk, the sacred color of blood, and her hair was to be braided with jet stones and grey pearls. Her ring, that Michael had given her, was hidden away, and she now wore a great ruby upon her finger to symbolize her link to Byron.

Laina needed to get into town to find the town witch, Helena, whose powers were renowned, but she could not get free of the guards and the clan members who swirled around her preparing for the ancient marriage rites. She was not free to leave, and she pined for Michael and wondered how he was. She could hardly stand to live one more day without him in her arms, and the thought of her wedding night, when Byron would touch her body, and violate her, was unbearable.

Byron had avoided her for days, in keeping with tradition, and he would see her on the night of their wedding. She was uneasy, for she could see his coldness toward her, even from a distance. She fantasized about driving the iron dagger into his flesh as he fed, of ending her captivity, and of stopping the wedding she dreaded.

Byron was cold with her when they did meet, his rage still present. He looked upon her as one defiled, but still he lusted for her, and she feared he would be cruel and rough with her when he took her to his bed.

She had heard tales from the others, who often whispered outside her bedroom door, about the terrible things Byron was doing to the town whores, who he raped and beat before he drank their blood. Never before had she heard such things of him, and she shuddered, for the vampires said he only chose the prostitutes who had long, raven hair, just like her own.

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Byron was cold and dissipated his eyes like icy diamonds when he stared into her face. He could barely wait to savage her, tie her wrists with silken cords, and have his way with her—it was all he thought about.

He would teach her a lesson, and he would not be gentle with her as she had not been gentle with his own heart. He imagined her with the Wolfen lover, her body responding to the beast's, and he felt hatred for her. He longed for the wedding night, when she would belong to him, utterly, for men still ruled in their clan, and women must submit.

Byron had not been careful with the prostitutes. He had dragged them into deserted alleyways and pushed up their skirts and forced himself upon them, climaxing as he drank their blood. He left them half naked, dead, and drained of their blood, and the townspeople were in terror.

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The local witch, Helena, profited richly from this fresh wave of fear by selling useless amulets and charms and saving her true magic for her own protection.

Helena lived in a fine house, and she could see the grounds of the vampires' estate from her back garden. There, she grew herbs and other things she needed for her potions, and she built a fortress of magic against the creatures of the night. Byron was vicious like the others, and she had seen him in her visions, but she told the townspeople that there were such creatures everywhere and that leaving would do no good. And so the villagers stayed, set in their ways, and they came to accept the dark lottery that would claim some of them.

Helena did not hate the vampires, for she was a practitioner of black magic, and she had much in common with them. As well, her riches and her pleasant lifestyle were dependent upon the terror that they created. Helena had an uneasy alliance with them in her own way, placating the villagers with the simplest spells and curses, and keeping them in the town. But Helena knew she was not safe, and she took pains to protect herself as best she could.

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Michael moved through the forest, desperate to find the village. He would find the dagger he needed, even if it meant killing or stealing, and he would avenge this—he would avenge everything. He felt the pain where Laina had dragged her sharp nail across his belly, and he raged at the creatures who had stolen his mate. He had let her go to save himself, and he had been weak.

They would have killed me, he thought. *There were too many of them*. Now he was full of anger, and he knew their secret, and he would make them pay. Laina had proved herself by saving him and making it possible for him to avenge his loss and reclaim his mate. *I will get you back*, he told himself, running faster through the forest, burning off his emotions, becoming only an animal. *I will hunt and feed, and then at first light, I will dress in the clothes I carry in my teeth, and I will go to the village as a man, and I will kill them all*. His heart ached all the while, even as he raged, for he was not safe in the little cave, with the princess to stroke his fur, and watch him all through the night.

How he would long for her, for her beautiful body, as the dawn came. *I cannot bear it*, he thought, stopping for a moment, dropping the bundle within his jaws, and lying down among the leaves. *I cannot bear it without her*.

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The wedding was planned, and the timeless rituals would be observed. The couple would drink blood from the same goblet, and then they would be joined with the ancient vows. Laina lay on her bed often now, depression weighing heavily upon her. She wanted to go into the village, but the townspeople shunned her, for they had heard the stories, and, despite her beauty, she could not travel unnoticed.

Laina thought about the villagers, who knew who and what she was. They thought their prayers and amulets would protect them. How wrong they were! She knew tales were told among the folk of the little town, about the people who disappeared, and whose drained

bodies were left behind like broken dolls. When they were buried, their priests intoned over them. It was said the people grew fearful of nightfall.

She was certain that the villagers turned to black magic for protection, and many charlatans promised them safety, if only they would pay for potions and medallions, but few were true witches or wizards. *If only they had real magic, magic I could use to get to Michael again*, she thought wildly. But she knew the village was no place for a vampire. The villages would hiss and make signs of the cross whenever her kind appeared. *How can I get what I need, when I cannot travel unnoticed*

Laina wondered if she could part the veils again and find a way to leave her vampire form and float free over the village, invisible and able to find the dagger she needed. Would the Creator assist her, or was she asking the impossible? She wondered, too, how she could have the blade consecrated, and she fretted, for every day that passed was like an eternity. For now, she must wait as every pair of eyes watched her movements, and the house was filled with hushed whispers and fevered preparations.

According to clan tradition, she was to remain with Byron forever. But he was avoiding her. He seemed to wait for the night he could revenge himself upon her, the sacred wedding night when he would take his due. She knew he would be cruel.

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He would savage her all the night long, until there was no desire left in him, only exhaustion. He imagined her upon the bed, her hands tied fast with a silken cord, and he thought of her blindfolded and subservient. He would make her beg. He would show her who ruled. And none could stop him once the vows were exchanged. Byron would get terribly aroused by his dark fantasies and had to fight the urge to bash her door in and strip her of her chemise. He acted the part of the loving bridegroom, but now his desire was rooted in hate. His love had changed because she was not pure, and she did not love him in return. His love had spoiled and curdled, and now it was a rotten thing.

Laina would glad that she was not human and that he could not take her lifeless body fly into the forest, and dump it there for the small animals to carry away the bones in time. She was safe from that, at least. The women of the village had more to fear than she did.

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Laina wondered about the witch in town, the one who was rumored to have true magic. The rest were all false, she knew. She was sure the old crone grew busy as the women disappeared and smirked as she did her accounts, for the more death and terror the blood-drinkers brought, the richer she became. *Can she help me?*

Laina thought of Helena often lately. She knew where she lived and that she must find a way to get to her. Helena could provide her with what was needed, and although she did not trust the witch, she knew Helena was her only hope. But Laina was trapped, and she could not rise into the night skies and take what she needed. Instead, she was a prisoner who had every luxury but had no peace or happiness.

The rituals of the wedding ceremony were simple but important. She and Byron would drink blood from the same goblet, and they would be bound at the wrists with a black silken cord while they repeated the ancient rites. Then the clan would surround them and take them to their wedding bed.

Laina had not fed well lately. Her heart was not in hunting, and she had found a way to feed that was easier for her. Never alone, she would take a couple of clan members with her, to the local prison, a terrible place, full of filth and rats, and she would feed on those who were scheduled for execution. She pressed bags of gold coins upon the guard, who lived in terror of her, and he would lead her down the dismal corridors and quietly open a cell door for her.

She would drink the blood of the rapists and killers who were going to die, and she would leave them drained. When she was done, she would put her hooded cloak, which hid much of her face, back on, and she would wipe her bloodied mouth upon her sleeve. Then she would sweep out of the prison without another word—until the next time.

Laina had come up with a careful plan for feeding, one that worked so well. She would have the guard go into the cell and slit a prisoner's throat, ordering him to leave the blade near his body, so that the death would be considered suicide. It was a tricky business for the guard, covering up such deaths, but he had no choice. Laina would kill him if he failed her.

Once or twice a week, she would go, her hunger fierce, and he would permit her entrance. The prison was small, she knew, but there were still many victims to choose from. She gave enough gold coins to the guard to cover the costs of paying others to ignore the obvious. And so Laina could feed without her usual ritual of watching potential victims and judging them. These criminals had already been judged, but Laina would often feel pangs of guilt as she knew the system was corrupt, and that she may have drained the blood of the innocent. But her depression and anxiety made her less concerned with such things, and feeding became a necessary evil, more than it had ever been before.

Laina would walk out of the jail, and her companions would emerge from their hiding places, and they would go home. And the wedding preparation would continue. Such was her life, and it seemed desperately hollow. She would lie in bed and wait for Michael, for rescue, but she did not know where he was or if he would come.

Chapter Nine

Michael stirred in his makeshift bed of leaves and pulled himself up. He had fallen asleep in the open, which was dangerous, and now it was day. He reached for his dirty clothes and dressed as the sunlight bathed his body.

Today, he would arrive at the village. He could already see the road to town in the distance. He would enter the village as a man, and he would find the dagger that would release Laina from the clan she hated. He still felt sad and powerless when he thought of his failure to fight and protect her, and it haunted him. As well, he felt the old loneliness that he had hoped was gone forever. *I should have taken her and gone far away with her*, he thought, *but instead, I was selfish and had to plan my revenge . . . and now she is gone.*

Michael reached the village in mid-morning and realized he had little money to pay for daggers and all the rest. He would have to steal. He was ashamed of his ragged clothing. His hair and body were sparkling clean, as always, but his clothes were old and filthy. Still, women turned their heads to look at him when he passed. His beauty was impossible to resist. His chiseled features and perfect proportions made him stick out like a sore thumb among the tired, hard-working men of the village, and he wished that he was not so conspicuous.

He walked into the local pub. "Do you know of a crone who can give me a love spell?" he asked a pretty barmaid. He watched her blush as she gazed at him. "I do know a witch," she answered, gazing up into his eyes.

She thinks me handsome, Michael knew, and he was glad. "Please tell me where she lives," he asked smoothly, trying to hide his intensity from her.

"Go across the village, straight across. Look for a grey stone house, with strange symbols carved into the door. That is where she lives. But she is a frightening woman," she stammered. "I do not like her very much. No one does. Surely you have no need to charms," she said, flushing pink. "You are very handsome."

"I do need a love spell," he said, grinning down at her. "I pine for a woman who will have none of me."

"You should find someone else," she said, and her eyes roved over his body. He remembered Laina's eyes, and the way she drank him in with her gaze, and he felt the familiar desire for her that was like a dull ache that never fully disappeared.

"I love her," Michael whispered, and the barmaid's face fell.

"Then go to the grey stone house, and she will help you. But she is not cheap. I hope you have money."

"Thank you," he said, and he turned to leave, conscious of his ragged clothing that did him no favors. *I must get these daggers, dressed this way*, he thought. *I will find a way.*

He walked through the village and knocked on Helena's door. There were strange symbols engraved upon the doorframe, just as the barmaid had said. There were ornate crosses and other symbols he had never seen before.

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Helena opened the door just a little, and her eyes widened at the site of his unearthly beauty. Their eyes met, for a moment, and Helena gasped, for she saw the strange eyes of a magical creature staring back at her in a human face so perfect it was hardly real.

"Come in," she said brusquely, ushering him into her hallway and closing the door tight. She felt no danger, only a great . . . pain . . . in him that she could feel in her heart.

"I need an iron dagger," he said, without preamble. "Perhaps more than one, and it must be blessed as well. Will you help me?"

She tensed, for she had never heard such a request before, and it showed some great knowledge of magic. She brought the young man into her workroom where an acrid stench of herbs hung upon the air, and she took in his ragged clothes. He looked like a prince in disguise, and she gestured for him to sit down. "Can you pay?" she asked him, narrowing her eyes.

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She was an ugly old woman, steeped in greed and in lies, and he knew she would not go out of her way for him.

"Yes," he said, reaching into his pocket for the golden ring his mother had given him some years past. It was all he had left, a ring that matched the one he gave to Laina. It was a simple gold mating band, inscribed with symbols that only the Wolfen would understand. "Will you take this ring as payment?"

She took the ring, and Michael watched her face. He was sure she could feel its magic, and her eyes widened. His ring was covered in the symbols of the Creator, symbols she seemed to recognize. She gasped aloud as she brought it into the light near the window. The workroom was dark, but he saw an expression of delight spread across her features in the dim light.

"I will find your daggers," she said. "I have two, I believe, and I will bless them for you now."

"You must hurry," he said, and she looked wary. He wondered if she saw the wildness in him, the animal that always lay just under the surface. *Can she read my mind?* he thought, worried. He hoped she could not see what he really was, but she seemed afraid now. He saw some fear in her face. If she knew, then she would tell everyone that legend was real. He did not trust humans with the secret of his tribe.

She went into a small back room for some time and returned with two tiny daggers, with razor-sharp points. She whispered spells, and the room seemed to grow darker, and the acrid

stench seemed stronger. He felt evil everywhere, and he wondered if she was tricking him, and he cried out. "Stop!" he said. "This does not feel right."

And then he fell to the wooden floorboards, his head pounding with pain. She had bewitched him, and he could not move. She laughed and closed the drapes tight so that no one would see in, and she crouched down to him, her face close to his. "So you are Wolfen, but still my spells affect you. You will stay here with me and tell me all of your secrets, or you shall die."

She placed the iron daggers upon a table, and just then, Michael heard a sharp knock upon the front door. He watched Helena run to the entrance, her face white with fear. Michael meditated, trying to break the spell, and he seemed to part the veils as he begged the Creator for assistance. He heard the witch through his strange reverie as she spoke to a man, and he screamed, the same scream he had screamed when the vampires had come.

He dragged himself to the table, for he could not get up, and he put the daggers in his pocket. He heard the commotion from outside as he stuffed the blades out of sight, and he heard the Creator speak in a strange language he somehow understood.

The Creator was blessing the blades! As the words moved through his brain, he heard loud footsteps, and so he screamed again, louder this time, and he saw a man appear in the doorway. "He tried to rob me!" the witch told him, her voice angry and frightened. "And so I bewitched him, and he screams to cloak his thievery, for I have not harmed him."

Michael stared at the man looking down at him and wondered if the daggers would be taken from him. He wanted to kill them both, but he was unable to move well because of the crone's spells. "I will get the police," the man said, and after dragging Michael's huge body to a post, he tied Michael to it.

The witch came over to him, and she looked tense and enraged. Michael held still as she searched his pockets. She sneered at him, because she could find nothing, and Michael felt a sense of peace, for he knew the Creator was protecting him. He knew that the daggers were consecrated now and were hidden with magic.

Michael was taken to the local prison, and he sat in a tiny cell, and he waited for nightfall. When he changed, he would attack a guard, or find a way out. And then he would find his Laina. The daggers were in his pocket. He could feel their cold blades, and yet the police had searched him and found nothing. He was elated, for he knew with the Creator at his side, all was possible, and he thanked the witch for her spells and evil because they had brought him here.

"What would she have done with me?" He lay down on the rough pallet and closed his eyes.

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The king and queen were ecstatic, for the wedding would happen on this night, and the dark celebration would surely attract the attention and approval of the Creator. The dark marriage

was a sacred ritual, and it was expected of the royal line. By bringing forth the new princess and her consort, perhaps they could appease the one who had turned from them.

They put every care into the preparations, but there was a problem. Laina would not drink the blood of the innocent in the rich, silver goblet that was kept for just such a purpose. She would only drink the blood of sinners, and she was adamant that the blood must come from a prisoner.

At four thirty, the king cloaked himself in hoods and went to the prison alone. In his cloak, he carried a bottle with a lid, and he would get the blood he needed. He moved into the darkness, overjoyed at the prospect of the wedding, and he slipped the guard a heavy purse of coins, such that no man could resist. Laina had told him what to say. The guard took one look at the skeletal features of the king, and he blanched and he let him pass.

The guard opened a cell door where a new prisoner, a thief and wanderer, who no one knew or would care about, was housed. He let the king slip inside and closed the door tight, telling him he would be back in twenty minutes. The king nodded and looked about the cell where a young man lay sleeping. He was big and strong and very handsome, and the king felt the hunger. Outside, the winter skies darkened with twilight, and the king went to the pallet and sat down. He could smell the sweet scent of the man, almost a boy really, and he could see the flush of his cheeks, so unlike the king's marble paleness.

He closed his eyes, quiet pleasure running through his body, and he lowered his head to the boy's throat. He could see his pulse where the blood surged, and he put his bottle close by, and he ran his fangs along his throat. The boy began to stir and thrash about, for the skies were growing black now, and when the vampire sank his fangs into his skin, he tasted the ancient taste.

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Michael woke up, his terrible pain bringing him to consciousness. He did not cry out, for he was changing, and that pain mixed with the terrible pain at his throat where the king was draining his blood. Michael felt weak as he reached for one of the daggers in his cloak. He drew back his arm, and using all his force, he drove the blade into the king's chest. Michael groaned and pulled the king's body away from him. Moaning in pain, he lifted his shirt to his wound to staunch the flow of blood. The change was coming, and he could feel the Wolfen feeling all through his body.

Soon, all animal, he prowled the cell floor and watched the vampire turn to ashes. Michael was not bleeding now, and he waited, the dagger in his teeth, for the guard to return. When he did, Michael ran past him, down the corridor, and pushed through the main door with brute force. He ran through the village and headed for the outskirts, where the estate was. Laina had given him directions, and now he was free.

He felt the joy of freedom and the feeling of power. He knew now that he was fully grown because his strength, his secret power that all Wolfen shared, was so strong it allowed him to push through a barred wooden door as though it were made of something flimsy and light. He ran faster, faster than ever before, his muscles burning. The villagers were a blur as he

ran, but he could see that they crossed themselves as he went by. They all retreated to their homes, and barred the doors.

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Laina sat on her bed, already garbed for her wedding. She was alone, brushing her hair, which would soon be braided with pearls and gems. She heard rough growling from outside, and she ran to her window and looked down. "Michael," she whispered, and she ran down the front steps with the clan close behind her. And she saw her love, vicious and wild, growling at the vampires surrounding her.

The vampires rose up in the air, poised for attack, but Laina turned and screamed up at them. She saw the dagger in Michael's mouth, and she grabbed it. Brandishing the knife, she stood close to Michael, and the vampires moved farther away, into the air. "This will destroy you!" she screamed at them, and Byron floated farther away.

"Listen to her," Byron screamed, and Laina was glad he believed in her power. "Let her go," he said. "The king will deal with her in his own good time."

Michael growled and pulled at Laina's skirts with his teeth. She ran with him, not looking back, until they were in the woods once more. She remembered her mother's face, icy with rage and fear, and she knew the king would destroy them for this.

Chapter Ten

They found shelter some hours later, another shallow cave, so like the others. Laina was pale with fear, and she held her Wolfen lover close, clinging to his body. She had the dagger now, but how could she kill her father unless he drank? And the king might have a dagger of his own. She felt her mortality like never before, and she was sure, before dawn came, that she and Michael would die.

The wolf licked her hands and face with affection. He did not seem frightened, and she longed for dawn, longed for the sun that would change him, so that she could talk to him. She stared out at the night sky, and she waited for her doom.

Michael slept, and she stroked his silvery fur. *At least I shall have these moments with him*, she thought, *for nothing else has ever made me happy*.

And the skies remained empty, and then grew lighter.

He was here, a man again. He thrashed and trembled, and she held him close, feeling his long limbs pressed tight against her body. She felt faint, just at his touch, and they kissed deeply and hungrily, their tongues entwined. The cave was cold, and the stone floor was hard, but it did not matter. Her whole body was on fire as he went on kissing her and tearing her bodice so that he could suck her breasts.

She pushed up her skirts with one hand, desperate for him, and grabbed at his body. "Please," she begged. He entered her, and she moaned so loudly, for it had never been this good before, and she gave herself over to him more completely than ever before. Her eyes were closed tight as she felt him move in and out of her, and she opened them to slits, and saw his face, so perfect in the gloom. She shuddered, long deep shudders that wracked her body, and the pleasure seemed to go on, over and over again, in waves.

Michael spilled his hot seed inside of her and lay against her chest, his breathing ragged. Neither spoke, and they were entwined for many moments in quiet ecstasy, until Michael rose up and covered her bare chest with his shirt.

"I killed your father," he said. "But I will kill no more of them. We will leave this forest forever, and we will have our dagger, always ready, and we will begin anew."

"He is gone?" Laina murmured. A world without the king did not even seem possible.

"Yes, gone forever, turned to grey ash, and he cannot keep us apart anymore. No one can."

"But your revenge is not complete," she said, staring into his strange eyes. He was fully a man now, so strong, and she could not stop staring at his beauty, which always made her dizzy and weak with love for him.

"It does not matter anymore. Being away from you is too high a price for revenge. Even the few nights we spent apart were like a hell that I cannot relive. From this day forward, you shall be mine, my mate, and we will live somewhere where they do not dare to come."

“My mother is not so powerful,” Laina said. “And Byron is afraid. He knows what I can do. When the king does not return, the clan will suffer, and there will be power struggles, and infighting. The clan will not hold. They will scatter in terror. We shall be safe . . . for now.”

“We will find a new place, a perfect home, and you will paint your pictures upon the walls. We will lie in front of the fire, and we will be together forever. The Creator has blessed us, and I have more powers now. I can truly protect you as I failed to do before.”

“You have never failed me. When I was away from you, I could barely survive. And then you came . . . you came for me.”

“You are my mate. Never again will anyone harm you or make you do their will. I swear it.”

Laina laughed softly and reached out her arms for him. The sun was shining, warming their dim and simple shelter, and her eyes were warmer still. “I love you, my Wolfen lover. I will love you forever, through the veils of the worlds, through . . . anything.”

“And I love you, my darling. My angel . . . whatever you are. I accept it, and I love you for it.”

Laina’s heart was light as they went on their journey. There was nothing more she could want, but simply to walk by his side. By day, she rested with him and made love to him. By night, she moved over the land with him, closer to freedom. Laina felt quiet joy as the Great Forest became only a memory. They found a new place where they were safe. The new cave was a sanctuary, close to another village, and she feared nothing now. She knew their love was a shield, blessed by the Creator. No one could harm them anymore.

The End

About the Author

Tessa Lane is devoted to writing the hottest erotica for today's readers. She enjoys playing Mozart and Bach on her piano as well as red wine, French perfumes, and great works of literature.