

The Veil 1

Ruby: Uncut and on the Loose

Ruby Fontenot, a Cajun hermit, loses control of her life when she's tapped to become the last Lineage Chieftain in a paranormal world she had no idea existed. With the power to change the face of The Veil by choosing its leaders, Ruby is now a wanted woman. Once she meets a member of the Veilerian High Council, what began as a fight for her life turns into a fight for her heart and her freedom.

As the High Council Representative, Lucian Ravenswaay has spent decades searching for the elusive Lineage Chieftain only to discover she's his life mate. But this vampire has bigger plans than settling down; he wants a Council seat and to get it, he'll have to turn Ruby over to them. The line between what he wants and what he needs is blurred and making the wrong choice could mean the destruction of an entire society.

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Danica Avet

EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

There's a proverb that says "it takes a village to raise a child". I think the same thing could be said for a book. This book is my baby. I've nurtured it, watched it grow, had to bite my lip when it fell down and was bruised (or edited), but it wasn't mine alone. The idea for Ruby's powers is actually derived from my mom's love of genealogy. I thought, "How cool would it be if you could touch a person and see their entire family tree?" The next thing I knew, Ruby was born. Thanks, Mom. My brother was the very first person to read Ruby's story. He encouraged me, told me what he saw wrong, and acted like my personal writing trainer. If I didn't write, he wanted to know why. Thanks, Phillip. The people in this story are fictitious, but I wouldn't have been able to write about any of them without my crazy family and friends. Y'all are all the inspiration a writer needs.

I also couldn't have done this without the wonderful people at Siren. You took a chance on me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And Angie, I swear there are no babies with horns and nose rings in this book!

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Chapter One

"Bliss02 doesn't know what she's in for!" Ruby Fontenot moved her mouse in an intricate pattern, effectively annihilating her archenemy's animated orc. "Take that, you filthy orc!"

She let out a satisfied laugh and sat back in her chair. Her online enemy had been dogging her for weeks. That'll teach her. Ruby stretched her arms over her head with a happy sigh. She just loved pitting her strategies against others.

Briggs groaned and rolled over, ignoring her good humor. "You're no fun," she scolded the bulldog as she signed off her character and began shutting down the computer.

Living alone in the middle of nowhere might keep some people from happiness, but Ruby preferred the isolation. Life was much better without countless encounters with people who were either cruel or completely misunderstanding. People tended to stare at her or ask stupid questions like, "So what's the weather like up there?" They didn't know what to make of a six foot plus female built like a brick house. Not to mention, she much preferred not worrying about seeing anyone male or female but the mailman and the delivery company.

"Let's go to bed," she told Briggs, who was playing dead.

The squat bulldog hopped to his feet and beat tracks to the bedroom, his claws clicking on the hardwood floor. The house had been her grandmother's childhood home and, as was common in homes down the bayou, most of the house was built of cypress. She passed a loving hand over the soft, worn fabric of the floral sofa. The floorboard creaked under her weight as she walked across the room, the sound a comfort on a lonely night.

The house was solid and comfy and all hers. If her father hadn't been smart enough to teach Ruby how to trap in their beloved swamp and be wise with her money, she'd have lost the only home she'd ever known. Gently straightening his old Winchester on the wall, she mused that his stern belief in life insurance also meant she had a comfortable, though not extravagant, life. She rarely bought anything new, grew and caught her own food, and ordered necessities through that marvelous invention, the Internet.

Sighing with contentment, Ruby stretched again, eager to get some sleep. Something caught her attention just as she turned off the living room light. She frowned as she walked to the picture window facing the bayou. Using the curtain as a shield, she peeked out at her yard.

The moonlit swamp she called home appeared empty and comfortably normal. She only saw the tiny clearing her house stood in, her old Mustang sitting in the driveway, and the bayou hugging the front of her property. Cypress and oak trees loomed over the water and her little house, their embrace almost appearing creepy in the gloom.

Ruby's eyes adjusted perfectly to the darkness as they scanned the front yard. Seeing nothing strange, she moved to the window on the side of the house facing the woods. The trees were thicker as they huddled around her small shed on the back of her property. The horseshoe shape of the bayou surrounded her house on three sides, leaving this one side facing land. Once again, she used the curtains as a shield, peeking through the wispy lace to see the side yard. The pitch-dark lane leading from her house to the highway three miles away also appeared normal.

She frowned, her eyes flicking back and forth, searching for the disturbance. Nothing moved. Then she realized what had caught her attention. The animals and insects that kept up a constant pulse of life in the swamps were silent.

Since the only thing that could trigger such a change in the environment was either a human or a large predator, Ruby crept across the living room to grab her crossbow and bolt from the gun cabinet. The weapon had been a gift from her dad on her twelfth birthday and, having used it for so long, loading it in the dark proved no problem.

Her heart pounded as adrenaline flooded her system. Ruby crept through the living room, hoping she didn't have a predator of the twolegged variety. She didn't want to shoot someone.

She opened her front door, pleased it didn't make a sound, and stepped onto the front porch. Keeping her back against the wall of the house, she padded to the side facing the woods. The trellis attached to the porch hung heavy with jasmine her mother had planted. The scent teased her nostrils as she concealed herself behind the blossoms.

The silence was dense. Expectant. The hairs rose on the back of her neck. Of all the times to forget her night vision goggles. Cursing under her breath, she forced her body to relax. Her eyes would adjust.

Ruby placed her finger on the trigger of her crossbow and patiently waited to see what it would do.

* * * *

Lucian Ravenswaay stood stock-still as he caught a trace of spicy flowers in the night air. The unique fragrance seemed out of place in the swamp with its moss, decaying vegetation, and stagnant waters. The scent came from the southern side of the woods, drawing him like a moth to the flame.

Slipping through the trees, he came to the edge of the woods and spotted a small house ahead. In the near perfect darkness, he could see that the house seemed to be in good shape and his nose told him it was inhabited. Catching whiffs of the perfume coming from the house, Lucian yanked on the reins of his instinct, which clamored to investigate.

Shaking his head to empty it of anything not related to the assignment, he surveyed the area for his prey. His eyes gave him no clues about what kind of person lived in the house other than an extremely neat one with an affinity for older cars. The Mustang parked in front of the house gleamed in the dark. The yard was neat with a pristine lawn and no knickknacks cluttering the ground. The house was well-kept with a jasmine crowded trellis blocking the view of the front door.

Lucian dismissed the smell as belonging to the flowers, opening his other senses to search for the fugitive. The only presence he detected was a wavelength from the person who lived in the house. The pulse of energy was strong. Stronger than most humans he'd come across. Curiosity almost had him approaching the house to find out who would choose to live in complete isolation, but his duties kept him hidden in the dark.

His team had been out for five days with no break as they hunted down Julius Blue, the last Lineage Chieftain.

To hell with that. He needed a break.

"If we don't find Julius before dawn, we're out of here." He sent the thought to Pagan using his race's telepathic ability. She owned a private investigation agency, but was helping him tonight as a favor.

"What's up, Big Daddy Fang? Not enjoying your nature walk?" she shot back. "Friggin' alligators are the size of elephants out here!" "So you don't want to get back to the city and do a little relaxing?" he asked her as he stared at the house. He really wanted to see who lived there, but fought the compulsion.

"Do I come across as stupid? Of course I want to get the hell out of here," Pagan grumped, cursing him when he laughed.

"See you at The Pit then. Try not to break a nail."

With a final glance at the house, Lucian turned away, heading northeast deeper into the swamp. The spicy flower scent followed him, trapped in his sinuses and teasing him with the unknown.

* * * *

Ruby's body relaxed as the threat moved on. She'd heard a very soft sound and then the feeling of menace around her property instantly diminished. The crickets began to sing and frogs croaked as the danger moved away from her house.

She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Ruby still wasn't sure what the hell had been out there, but she'd instinctively felt the danger and prepared herself to take action. Now, as the adrenaline drained from her system, she was more exhausted than before.

Ruby surveyed the yard one more time before heading back inside. She locked the house up tight, but took her crossbow to her bedroom. Briggs was in the middle of her bed, snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

"Some guard you are," she told him in tired disgust.

Obviously unimpressed by her ire, Briggs farted, turning over. Ruby snorted and got ready for bed, putting her crossbow on the nightstand before slipping between the sheets.

There was no way she was getting a restful night's sleep.

* * * *

The morning dawned bright and clear, the glorious sunshine accompanied by the songs of birds and a wispy breeze indicating a beautiful day lay ahead. Ruby went about her regular morning chores, trying not to think about the possible intruder from the night before. Once she realized she'd peeled the same potato twice, she quickly threw everything in the fridge and headed into the woods, her crossbow at the ready.

The tracks she'd expected to find were nonexistent. Whatever she'd sensed had either cleared its tracks or she'd imagined the whole thing. Knowing she had nearly no imagination, Ruby was certain her intruder had been a person who'd intentionally cleared away any trace of his presence. Her father had taught her how to trust her gut reaction, using it to help her track. Her gut told her someone had been here.

She bit her lip and studied the woods, looking for some clue as to who it had been and what their intentions were. Nothing stood out to her and, considering her tracking skills, the person who'd been watching her house had to be an expert at stealth. Her father had trained her, and he'd been the best tracker in the swamps for nearly thirty years.

Deciding not to waste her time looking for clues that weren't there, she went back inside, keeping her crossbow at the ready. After cleaning her house and lugging the weapon with her everywhere, she decided to calm down the paranoia, finally putting away her trusty crossbow. For a couple of hours, she still jumped at any sound that seemed out of place, but when nothing happened, she decided maybe she'd imagined the whole episode after all. No one could clear their tracks so well that they left absolutely no clues of their presence. Shrugging it off as too much RPG and not enough sleep, she went outside.

Walking along the small path next to the house, she inspected the exterior. She loved her home. Some spots on the exterior walls were chipping. She'd have to strip and paint the house again soon.

Levy Fontenot had taught her everything she needed to know about living in the unforgiving swamp, and she'd learned well at his knee. He'd also been the center of Ruby's life. She stepped back to check the roof. Looked good. She resumed her walk to the shed. After the scare last night, she wanted to set up some traps around her house. There was no telling if the cougar—it had to have been a cougar would return, and she didn't want it getting close enough to come after her or Briggs.

The scent of jasmine on the hot air teased her nose, reminding her of Levy's insistence that she learn to care for the flowers her mother had loved. Levy hadn't talked about Ruby's mother very often, but when he did, it was with deep love and sorrow. He'd adored Zoe and had wanted nothing more than to spend forever with her. Ruby made the mistake of asking about her maternal family once, and Levy's angry, almost defensive, reaction kept her from asking again. They were no part of their lives, Levy said, and the subject died there.

Shaking her head to clear it of sentimental thoughts, Ruby opened the door of the little shed. She frowned as it stuck. She could've sworn she planed the bottom of the door a couple of months before. Ruby sighed sharply. There was always something to fix or replace out here. Gah, she thought sourly as she yanked on the door with all of her might.

A little man crouched in the doorway of her shed. She leapt back with a shout. She wasn't overly worried about him because he was so tiny and she was so...not.

"Who the hell are you?" she shouted, forcing her body to relax in case he attacked. Anger and a tendril of fear coiled in her stomach, making it churn.

He didn't answer, his eyes taking her measure just as she took his. He was wearing an almost sheer robe opened over a loincloth. His eyes were completely blacked out, no iris showing, no whites. Utter darkness. Shock held her immobile. With a growl, he launched himself at her. Stumbling back, she fell on her ass.

Chapter Two

Feeling ridiculous with a hundred and two pounds of saggy skin and brittle bones pinning her to the ground, Ruby fought. She'd always been almost abnormally strong for a female and, for the second time in her life, she thanked God for her strength. Bracing her feet on the ground, she bucked her body, trying to throw him off. One hand gripped his shoulder to aid his removal.

He shouted again in a strange language, keeping his place by grabbing her throat. Surprised at the strength in his hands and the intense heat pouring out of them, Ruby gasped for breath, thrashing beneath him, her fists battering at his head. She wasn't going down without a frigging fight!

A strange lethargy pulled at her as her attacker kept talking in that strange, singsong language. Her fists slowed their angry swinging, and her body stopped trying to buck the man off. Forcing herself to look into his eyes, she gasped, "Why?"

Time seemed to stand still, and Ruby swore she could feel her heartbeat slowing until it felt as though it beat every other minute, and then like it barely beat at all. The bright afternoon sunlight began to fade, and sparks exploded behind her eyelids every time she closed them, so she struggled to keep them open.

Her vision tunneled, and at the end she could see the vague figure of a person. For some reason, she panicked. Something, a whispering, wordless compulsion told her not to go near the figure. The person was short, possibly a woman, even though the menace didn't seem to match the figure's size, but that was all she could tell. The fear and uncertainty forced her back to herself, and she felt a moment's relief before she remembered she was still dying. *Screw this.* She was going to die, and she'd make sure her accusing eyes would haunt the geezer for the rest of his miserably short life.

The thought filled her with a strange sense of peace and in the back of her mind, Ruby wondered at her vindictive nature. As a selfimposed hermit, she hadn't realized she would crave vengeance so much, but supposed she'd never put herself to the test before.

"You're not going to die, kid, so stop thinking about it," the old man said as he wheezed and crawled off her, finally letting go of her throat. He slumped on the ground, his body seeming far more fragile than it had moments before.

Ruby coughed, her body racked with pain as it pulled in lifeaffirming air. She lay on the ground, her arms splayed out as she stared up at the sun-laced oak trees overhead. She wasn't going to die. At least not at this moment. Maybe the old guy would decide she needed a new hairdo and take off her head. That would be the icing on the cake right about now.

"Not everything's about you, sweetcakes," the geezer huffed from beside her. He hacked loudly. "If I had the strength, I would've kept going, and you would've been my last choice." He looked her over skeptically. "Okay, so you're not that bad. A few years ago," he leered at her as she made a disgusted face. "Right. Anyway, so you don't have time for the whole shebang, sweetie. It's going to be short and sweet. Although, it isn't all *that* short, if you know what I mean. Heh, heh."

"Yuck," Ruby rasped, pushing herself to a seated position and scooting several feet away from what she was beginning to think was a serial pervert with violent tendencies. Maybe if she got to her feet, she could outrun him, although in her current condition she wasn't sure she'd get far.

From her new position, he didn't look threatening at all. He looked like he should've been on the cover of an AARP magazine for

pygmies. Deeply golden skin was stretched taut over a small, bony face topping a wrinkled body barely five foot four. His hair was a shock of white against dark skin, and his bushy black eyebrows nearly met over a wide nose. He barely had any teeth left except for the two at the bottom that poked out of his mouth when it was closed. Ruby mused if he had any wrinkles he would look like Briggs.

"Bulldogs are disgusting," the pygmy said with great dignity as he stood up and brushed off his robe and loincloth.

Wait, she thought. Was he reading her mind? So far she hadn't said anything because her throat hurt so much, but he'd answered every one of her mental comments. "Wh—" she croaked. "You're reading my mind?" she finally rasped out, her throat raw. "Who the hell are you? What are you doing in my shed?"

"Not like it's hard to read your mind, toots. You're not exactly Einstein," he told her despairingly, though Ruby was too stunned and in pain to really take offense. "And I'll tell you who I am just as soon as you tell me what an Amazon is doing in seclusion."

She gaped at him. An Amazon?

He's crazy, logic told her.

I wouldn't be so hasty to judge, a new voice said in her mind, startling her to her feet.

Pygmy man's gaze started at her feet and looked up, and up, and up. "Jay-zus..." he whispered. "I thought I was just imagining how tall you were."

Blushing with embarrassment, Ruby cleared her throat and tried not to pay attention to the morbid curiosity on his face. She was quite used to the attraction she gathered everywhere she went, which is why she'd stopped going places.

"Look, mister, I don't know who the hell you are or what you want, but this is private property. I'm asking you nicely to leave before I call the police," she told him, tucking a strand of her wavy hair behind her ear.

"You'll do no such thing," he said sharply, snapping out of his awe-inspired stare. "You need to know what's going to happen before I die, girl, so just sit quiet for a minute."

"Shit, did I hurt you?" Ruby immediately forgot about her embarrassment and his attack, reaching for him to help him to her house.

"No!" he shouted, stepping away from her before she could so much as touch the fabric of his robe. "You can't just touch people, you fool! God!" He panted, grabbing his chest as though it hurt.

Ruby bit her lip and wondered what his problem was. "Are you having a heart attack?"

"What?" he asked in surprise. "No! Stupid females. Why did I think I could do this?" He paced around, flapping his arms and muttering to himself.

"You said you were dying," Ruby began quietly, trying to figure out what was going on. She felt like she was on a roller coaster with no discernable end in sight.

"Well, yeah, we're all dying," he told her sarcastically. "As it is, I'm going to die before you are, so there are a few things you need to know that'll keep you alive. So just sit down, shut up, and listen to me, okay?" When she attempted to ask him something else, he exploded. "Do it to make me happy so I leave you the hell alone, okay?"

"I'm still calling the cops," she warned as she pulled a chair out of her shed and sat down to humor him. This had to be the most bizarre day she'd ever had. She pondered the possibility that this wasn't, in fact, real. She didn't do so well with strangers, and this man was stranger than the usual. The only answer she could come up with to explain this weird turn of events was that she was dreaming. She'd fallen asleep after the cougar scare and was now dreaming the day away. She was so lost in thought she missed half of what the man said until he suddenly popped up in front of her face, demanding an answer. "Yes," Ruby said immediately, having no idea what he wanted but guessing he would be happy to hear an affirmative.

She guessed wrong.

The little man's face turned purple and, for a second, she thought he was going to have a stroke right in front of her. "You haven't been listening! Not to a single thing! That does it!" He stepped up so close to her it would've been termed 'invading her personal space' and hissed, "What is your name, human?"

"I'm not telling you my name! You're intruding on private property—" Ruby began before she was cut off.

"I don't give an elf's ass. What is your name!"

She glared at him, but after several long minutes of the silent staring contest she caved. "Ruby Fontenot."

Raising his arms to the sky and throwing his head back, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "As of today, I, Lineage Chieftain Julius Blue of the Elkfire Line, declare Ruby Fontenot to be my heir. She shall hold the position of Chieftain for all of her immortal life, guiding the Veil in its responsibilities, advising The Council as it requests, and aiding all who need it. Ruby Fontenot Blue of the Elkfire Line shall pass on the responsibilities and duties of her position to he who is most *qualified* when she begins to fade," Julius said, giving Ruby a dirty look. "I declare it as the Chieftain, and so shall it be!" He finished with a sharp clap of his hands.

His words and clap echoed in the still afternoon. Ruby's forehead furrowed as she looked at Julius. His breathing grew labored, and his body was suddenly bathed in sweat that seemed to sparkle in the sunlight.

He looked almost magical, even though she didn't believe in any such thing. Julius probably wasn't even his real name, Ruby rationalized. Besides, she lectured herself as she watched the gold beads of sweat roll down his face and neck, there had been no clap of thunder or lightning accompanying his freestyle monologue. Just when she'd convinced herself he was normal, Julius lifted his eyes to her face. They were no longer black, and his face no longer stretched tightly over his bones. He looked as though he'd aged fifty years while she watched. Cataracts lightened those snapping eyes while creases lined his face as though drawn by an invisible hand. She gasped.

Ruby jumped to her feet and caught him before he fell to the ground, careful not to touch his bare skin. "What the hell happened?"

He laughed dryly. "Women. Never just accept something without a thousand questions, do you?" he asked, his voice a pale comparison to the rich timbre it had been before. He coughed softly, his tiny rib cage lifting valiantly as he strived for breath. "I told you, Ruby Blue, you're my heir. Ruby Blue," he said musingly and laughed again. "What a stupid name for the last Lineage Chieftain."

He fell silent, his eyes closing as his fragile body seemed to collapse. Ruby looked around desperately, wishing for once she didn't live so far from civilization. He might be a weird little guy who'd tried to kill her and mocked her at every turn, but he didn't deserve to die here.

"Mr. Blue?" she asked quietly, gently jostling him in her arms. Each movement of her body made his undulate as though on an ocean, which showed just how much body mass he'd lost in the last twenty minutes. If she didn't get him out of here and to a hospital soon, she feared he wouldn't be much more than a bag of bones in an hour. "Mr. Blue?" Ruby asked again.

His eyes blinked open slowly. "Dammit," he wheezed. "Woman, you need to—" He struggled to get the words out, the effort painful for Ruby to watch. "Need to get out–out of here. Coming for y–you…soon…last Chieftain."

"What are you talking about? Who is coming? Your family?"

The hatred and fear on his face froze Ruby's breath in her lungs. For the first time, she feared he wasn't insane because something in his face spoke of real horror and pain. "She is coming...will want...to possess the...last Chieftain. Can't let her. Beware the eye. Hide..." he hissed, his body deflating as his breath rattled out in his very last expulsion.

Julius's breath exited his body in a burst of red mist that hovered over them.

Completely stunned and unsure what to do, Ruby sat there with his body in her arms, staring at the mist. It was probably some kind of gas being used in biological warfare and if she breathed it in, she'd be infected too. So she held her breath.

The red rippled, showing deeper tones of burgundy and some dark oranges in the center. It was beautiful in a faintly menacing way, she thought uneasily. She moved her feet, tensing her legs to spring up and away if it moved closer. No sooner had her body obeyed her commands did the cloud of red envelop her, coating her from head to toe.

Cool, peaceful, and tinged with a hint of some exotic scent she couldn't name, the mist crept into her body, saturating her every pore. Ruby wasn't an overly spiritual person, but feeling the vapor seeping into her skin was like being dipped in a river of peace.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back, letting it overtake her. She braved a deep breath and it rushed inside her, filling her up. The taste was akin to cotton candy and the most sinful chocolate, sliding down her throat and warming her from the inside out. With that breath, she knew things about the body in her arms.

She knew his name was Julius Blue and he had once been a young Chieftain apprentice who was chosen as successor to the previous Elkfire Chieftain, Mahlaan. Ruby could see where each and every Chieftain joined the line, where they came from, where their families came from, until she saw the first Chieftain whose name had been lost. She saw every limb, every branch, and every twig all interconnected like a great tree. They were all humanoid, though some had special extras like horns or pointed ears. Ruby moaned, her mind bombarded by images and impressions. The line sped up, flipping through each person again until it came back to Julius and showed her a younger man named Norman. This was Julius' heir, she knew.

Norman had known he was going to die because he refused to give up the location of his mentor and the secret to a Chieftain's transition. His eyes rose and seemed to stare directly into Ruby's even though she was seeing everything from his future. His lips moved, and she read "Don't fail us" right before a blue light surrounded him.

First, nothing happened, and then she could see the pressure closing in on him. He gasped for air as great bands of some invisible force tightened around his torso. Bones began to snap and that's when he began screaming. Norman threw his head back and screamed until he could no longer get air. He writhed in pain until he was dead, until there was nothing left of him.

"Oh, God," Ruby breathed, startling herself out of the trance.

Suddenly, she knew what Julius had done to her. She'd seen how he used the last of his strength to bestow his powers onto her. The Chieftain. She was the Lineage Chieftain, and she alone had the ability to determine the perfect leaders of the Veil. She was also on someone's shit list because Julius had given her his Instinct, a wordless voice that urged her to run. Now.

Waking to find that she still sat in front of her shed filled her with relief, but seeing that Julius' body had disintegrated down to dust while she was in the trance shocked her.

"Oh, God," she said again and tried to get to her feet. For some reason, her knees wouldn't support her weight, so she collapsed back to the ground amid Julius' dusty remains. "Oh, God!"

Panic began to well up inside her. The...Instinct told her to run. Danger was near, and she needed to get the hell out of Dodge right now or she'd be joining Norman and Julius. Remembering Norman's demand that she not fail them, Ruby forced her knees to lock when she stood, wobbling on her feet like an ungainly colt. She didn't remember the trip to her house, only that she ran inside and began throwing clothes in a suitcase. Ruby had no idea where she was going, who she was going to run to, or even who she ran from, but the Instinct told her to flee for her life. Fear nearly choked her, and she heard herself gasping for breath, nearly sobbing in terror.

Ruby stopped with a bra and panties set in her hands. She needed to calm down or she'd hyperventilate. She tried deep breathing, but that was so not working. The fear roiled in her stomach, tearing its way up her body.

In the bathroom, she ran the cold water and began splashing it on her face when she noticed she had dark red and orange markings the size of half dollars on each of her palms. Using the tip of one finger, she traced the marking on her left palm. It didn't hurt. The marking seemed to be embedded deep in her flesh, just a little *lagniappe* to top off her sterling day.

Ruby snorted loudly. It looked like a tribal wreath, all sharp lines and exaggerated curves. She laughed loudly, the sound more than a little hysterical. She needed to calm down and think rationally, she chanted over and over, but another voice inside her said, "Fuck rationalization. Get your ass in gear!"

She closed her eyes and braced her hands on either side of the sink, trying the deep breathing thing again.

By the time her heart calmed down and she didn't feel as shaky, she was lightheaded. It would have to do because the hair on the back of her neck prickled in warning. The Instinct said to leave, and she would follow it.

Nodding to herself, she blinked open her eyes.

Everything was normal, structure wise. Untidy brown hair straggling into face. Check. Sharp cheekbones and stubborn chin. Check. Long, straight nose and thick, naturally arched eyebrows. Check. What was out of place? Her once brown eyes were completely blacked out like some kind of freaky monster in a horror movie. There was no telling where the iris began or ended, just solid black. Exactly how Julius's eyes had been before he completed the ceremony. As she got more freaked out, red flecks began to simmer in the depths of the black.

To put the proverbial cherry on top, she had a tattoo on her face. The design looked a bit like the marking on her palms except it wasn't circular so much as curvy and on only one side of her face. Deep red with dark orange shimmering around the edges, it curved up from her neck to the left side of her face to frame her eye. The tattoo design flowed down her neck where it was thin in the front, but got bigger on either side. She frowned recognizing the shape. It was the exact same spot Julius' hands had been when he'd strangled her.

She screamed.

"Oh, my God, what happened to my face?" she screeched at her reflection, causing Briggs to woof from the other room.

"Oh, God," she moaned at herself. "I look like a circus freak...where the hell am I supposed to hide looking like this?" she wailed at her reflection.

Ruby looked around her comfortable little bathroom, sniffed at the homey touches she'd put on the antique cottage, and knew she'd never step foot in her comfortable world again.

Chapter Three

"Pagan has a lead."

That was all the warning Lucian got when Chieftain Julius came out of hiding.

He'd been sitting in a dark corner of the notoriously raucous metal bar called The Pit when word came down. Jackson St. Marie passed the message along and blended back into the crowd. The only beings around him were all human females, and the ladies were eyeing him like he was their favorite candy.

Lucian ignored them and looked at his message. Just four words, but they changed his entire weekend. He would've spent most of his time following leads, but he would've rather spent the daylight hours trailing a few femoral arteries and having a lot more fun. Now he'd be chasing down the last Chieftain and trying to get the git to the Council's Region Five safe house, as directed by his mentor before the Eturi got to him first. At least, that had been the plan before Pagan got involved.

He stuffed the message in the pocket of his jeans and paid his tab. The blondes who'd been eyeing him most of the night looked anxious to see him standing up. If he thought for one minute he would be back in town, he'd chat them up for an address and phone number, but as it stood he had a feeling this assignment was going to take him to hell and back.

Lucian knew his appeal. Hell, having lived for nearly three hundred years, he was pretty comfortable with his masculinity. He didn't understand it, but he went with the flow. Women seemed to love the black-red hair he refused to cut falling to his shoulders, honoring his deceased brother's memory, and they went weak-kneed over his height, which he found to be a pain in the ass when he wanted to walk through normal sized doorways. More than a few women had even said they fell in love with his bedroom eyes, whatever the hell that meant. He just knew they were green and he saw perfectly in absolute darkness with them.

None of those human women knew he was a vampire or the heir to the Oculum, or "eye," of Council, the ruling body of the Veil. Hell, there weren't many humans still alive who knew anything about the supernatural community that existed parallel to their safe little mundane world. The Veil had been so named because it was hidden and would remain so forever as long as the Eturi didn't screw it up for everyone.

That's where Lucian came into the equation. As the Oculum-se, his sole purpose was to spy out problems for Council and see if things were going to develop in favor of the Veil or the Eturi. If things weren't looking so good for his people, then his job was to either end the threat on his own or send in the Guardian Elite. Most of the time, he ended the threat on his own. His mentor, Oculum Bianca, appreciated his skills, and if she sometimes thought his duties should include a little one-on-one time with her, he didn't let it bother him. He'd even taken her up on the offer more than once.

Jackson appeared on the opposite side of the bar, nearly as tall as Lucian, and signaled that Pagan would be waiting at their prearranged destination with the information he needed to make the grab. Lucian gave a nod before giving the blondes one last wistful look. Ah well, there were women all over New Orleans and if he were lucky, he wouldn't be on this assignment much longer.

As he made his way to the designated drop-off, he sent Pagan a message. "How in all the nine hells did you figure out the Chieftain will be at the d'Ours?" he asked in complete bafflement.

'It's simple,' she snorted to him. 'I talked to Kali. She said the Chieftain was loaded for bear and headed east. Then I realized if I were the Chieftain, I'd go for the most populated area around, which is New Orleans. Then, it was just a simple matter of canvassing all the hotels in the area for things involving bears, and that's when we came across d'Ours.'

Lucian's head was hurting by the time she finished her explanation. He didn't see how anything she'd learned from Kali could lead to that particular hotel, but he decided to go with the flow. Pagan's hunches were usually right.

Heading down Royal Street, he knew that convincing Council to hire Pagan and her team had been the best two hours in bed with the Oculum he'd ever spent.

* * * *

Ruby meandered her way across South Louisiana, sticking to the back roads and away from people if she could. The constant feeling of being watched hadn't entirely left her since she'd run from her house. She'd packed as much as she'd dared, took her emergency cash out of the freezer, and hit the road. For once, Ruby was thankful she was alone in the world.

The way she was traveling, there had been no chance to stop and tell anyone where she was or where she was going. *She* wasn't even sure where she was going. She'd hit the road and stopped as little as possible. Once in a while, the prickling feeling at the back of her neck would subside, but it would come back just as fast and she'd be speeding down the highway again.

That would have to end. Briggs was passing too much gas from the never-ending travel and she wasn't sure she could stand the noxious fumes any longer. She had to stop somewhere and let him get settled in.

They were currently on LA-310 eastbound for New Orleans, which had seemed like the perfect place to lose herself. Briggs was not taking his new status as a world traveler lightly. He sat staring morosely at the passing scenery, his furry butt planted on his travel box so he could look out the passenger window of her '86 Mustang. At nine o'clock on a Friday night, the roads were beginning to thicken with partygoers heading into the city to experience sin New Orleans style.

As if sensing her checking on him, Briggs looked at her over his shoulder. He farted. She gagged.

"God help us, Briggsy," she coughed and rolled down her window. "No more treats for you until we're settled somewhere."

He just sighed at her, the most long-suffering pet in the world.

A car of teenagers sped by, honking and hollering. "Whooooo! Meet us at Razoo's!"

"Yeah, yeah," Ruby muttered and kept to her lane.

Forty-five minutes later, she parked in an overpriced parking garage.

Ruby leaned her head against the steering wheel for several long minutes, not quite sure she was up to facing the crowds on the streets below the parking garage. Could she actually do it? Could she immerse herself in the waves of humanity below? She wasn't quite the same person she'd been the last time she'd braved such large crowds. Something told her she *could* walk down there and she wouldn't freeze. She wouldn't feel the same panic she did any time she was around people. The power burned in the back of her mind, seeing the many possibilities before her.

Walking out on those streets, she could get lost among them for a little while. Maybe she could buy enough time to formulate a more solid plan. Sometimes the strange instinct cautioned her that not all of the beings were after her death, but even then, she wasn't easy with the sensation of being followed, no matter whom or what followed her.

Briggs shifted his weight, bringing her mind back to the present. Of course, the chances of her roaming around the city unnoticed were slim. Ruby didn't kid herself. With her extreme height and now the tattoos adorning her face and neck, she'd stand out even more, no matter if she wore sunglasses to hide the blackened eyes. People may not remember everything about her or where she was going, but they'd remember having seen her. Simple as that.

She did think about using a baseball cap to hide her femininity, but some innate sense was instantly repulsed by the idea. It shuddered along her spine, down her arms and legs, making her clench her fingers in discomfort. No, dressing up and pretending to be a man didn't flip her Twinkie. Once she pushed that plan completely from her mind, her body relaxed. Frowning at her bizarre subconscious behavior, Ruby flexed the muscles in her arms and legs, hoping to ease the tension.

Her only option was to brazen it out and hope that by the time her pursuers caught up with her, she'd be farther away. She had no real option other than taking to the swamps, but something was missing from the equation, like some elemental component key to her continued survival danced beyond her reach. What it could be she had no idea.

The old Ruby surfaced momentarily, quaking with self-doubt and the familiar fear of rejection. Unbidden, a hard-learned lesson rose to mind, blocking out the view of the streets below.

Ruby scowled at the skyline. With one stupid, stubborn desire to be like a normal kid, she'd changed the entire course of her and her father's lives. Her lesson had come at the expense of her ever-patient father, but she lived with the results every day. She hadn't always wanted to be alone. She'd once dreamed of having friends and boyfriends, but for some reason, she frequently reacted aggressively towards males. That aggressiveness was what cost her father his sizeable fortune and pushed her towards hermithood.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she idly wondered if Julius had been correct and she was part Amazon. It would've explained so much, but she didn't believe in that shit. She was still having doubts about her new "abilities," and she didn't need to tack on mythological genetics to know she'd screwed up big time in her youth.

Dan Edwards had shredded her self-esteem and any confidence she had in her desirability by taking her virginity and abusing her trust. With that one act, she eschewed any contact with the outside world. Of course, the vengeful Ruby said with malice, Dan had paid for hurting her.

Her natural aggression towards men had come out with howling fury when Dan deflowered her, ending with Dan hospitalized from her attack. She'd spent a few nights in juvie while awaiting arraignment, cursing her stupidity in trusting a male not related to her. The trial had ruined her father's finances as well as any chance Ruby had at a normal life, but Dan had paid for his behavior.

Ruby scoffed at the thought as she rubbed her temples. She'd been paying for his behavior, too, with her inability to trust herself or anyone else. She was a grown woman. She could face the thousands of people on the streets below. Her father would've been strongly disapproving to see that his daughter had become a coward.

Levy would've told her to listen to her mind and soul, to figure out what was going on in and around her. Ruby closed her eyes and did just that.

The Instinct reared up again, flinging her head back as it burned a warning across her brain. *Danger. They were coming, and they were close*. Not sure if she feared having people stare at her on the streets more than she did the unknown element stalking her, Ruby grabbed Briggs and raced into the waiting arms of her worse nightmare.

Chapter Four

Armed with her overweight dog and her newly created Instincts, she headed into the Quarter. The daytime tourists had already headed back to their hotels and the more daring adventurers had come out with the locals just starting to crowd the streets. In the South, it was a rite of passage for teenagers to head to the twenty-four hour party town at least once and take in the sights.

Tonight, though, she wasn't looking for a good time. She sought a hiding place. Her heart pounded with anxiety, and her skin felt as though it would split if someone touched her. She needed to get away from people, get isolated. It wouldn't be easy since six foot two inches of woman was kind of hard to hide. Add to that an English bulldog with a flatulence problem and you've got a recipe for disaster, but Ruby couldn't have left him behind.

Briggs groaned at her, his claws clicking on the pavement. He hated walking more than he thought necessary which, in his case, was from the sofa to his food bowl. "I know you don't want to walk anymore, but you have to," she whispered to him as nonchalantly as she could, trying to keep an eye out for The Chateau d'Ours.

She'd flipped through the phone book at a gas station and found the hotel, listed as "a pet friendly and very reasonably priced hotel within walking distance of St. Louis Cathedral." Not that she was religious, but if the things chasing her were evil, then a Catholic church as old as St. Louis might be her only place of refuge. When she'd called earlier, the owner assured her the hotel never filled up because it was off the beaten path. Two hours later, she considered admitting defeat. Briggs was in the crook of her arm, snoring like a drunken sailor, having given up on walking six blocks earlier, and her feet were dragging. She stood on the corner of Canal and Royal Street, having crossed Canal four times already.

Some instinct made her stop and look around. People were passing her, all of them in a hurry to go somewhere. The hodgepodge of people littering the streets represented the true New Orleans. Some were dressed for partying while others were dressed for work, either going home, or on their way to their job. Some waited for the bus. Others stood around doing nothing. There were a few people watching the foot traffic as though waiting for a chance to take advantage.

None of those people caused her internal radar to go off. Something else made her want a wall at her back. Slowly, she eased away from the busy corner, wedging her back against the edge of the hotel behind her. She could see down Canal and Royal Street. No one seemed to be paying her any attention, but something was different. Not quite the Instinct, but something else was approaching and she wasn't sure if it was friend or foe.

Briggs woke up and looked at her balefully. Ruby put him down, holding his leash in a loose grip. She didn't want him hurt if something went down like a fight or if she had to run and she couldn't do either with his dead weight in her arms.

Two women sauntered up Canal, and she might've never paid attention to them except she saw an aura around both of them that no one else mirrored. The auras weren't a color like she heard people mention on talk shows, but appeared as intense heat radiating from their bodies. The invisible ripples distorted their surroundings but gave her a crystal clear view of them.

One woman was nearly as tall as Ruby with electric blue hair and tattoos all over her body. She was muscular without being bulky and moved like a panther. The other woman was petite and fragile looking with platinum blonde hair in neon rubber band spikes all over her head. She was rounder than the tattooed woman but no less graceful in her movements.

Ruby turned her face to the side, hiding her markings and pretended interest in the opposite direction.

"...we're staying at Chateau d'Ours as usual," the blonde was saying to her friend, waving her hand down Royal Street. "You should stop by to see him."

Ruby's eyes followed the blonde's hand movement. The hotel could be found down this street according to Blondie. She wasn't sure she could trust the coincidence, though, since her instinct was telling her it sounded like a trap. Who were they? Were they part of a trap? Why could she see their auras?

Blue and tattooed loosened a throaty laugh, saying something that didn't register as they continued walking down Royal Street. They paid little or no attention to Ruby, barely giving Briggs a look as he sat at her feet basking in his aroma.

Biting her lip and keeping her eyes glued to the duo until they passed from sight, Ruby felt the instinctive flight response begin to fade. Her tense muscles began to relax and her breathing calmed. She leaned against the building and closed her eyes with a shuddering breath.

"You okay, miss?" a deep voice asked from somewhere in front of her.

The instinct hadn't flared up again, so it was probably safe to assume the speaker didn't mean her harm. Cracking open an eye, Ruby looked around and finally down to see one of New Orleans' finest standing in front of her.

She nodded. "Yes, Officer," she croaked and stood straight. Just what she needed—to get involved with the cops. "Just giving my feet a break." Ruby attempted a helpless smile. That so did not work when you towered over an officer with a Napoleon complex and you looked like a refugee from a post-apocalyptic movie. "You have any ID?" he asked briskly, his cold eyes skimming over her body, pausing on the generous curves revealed by her tank top that just so happened to be level with his nose. Ruby watched his eyes dilate and felt her stomach sour. He wouldn't have been a bad looking guy if it hadn't been for the corruption in his eyes.

Ew, she thought with an inner grimace, pulling her license out of her front pocket. She'd stopped carrying purses around years ago because she hated things hanging off of her. Of course, that was before she took in Briggs.

The cop's fingers brushed the palm of her hand and Ruby saw more of Officer Doyle Green than she ever wanted to. Ruby saw his past. She saw that his mom and dad had raised him right, giving him the proper Catholic upbringing so prevalent in most of South Louisiana. He'd been an altar boy, never molested, though he'd claimed to have been when he was eighteen. The priest he accused had caught Doyle about to rape another altar boy, a kid too scared to come out about what really happened.

The downward spiral continued, growing worse with each offense. He'd committed sexual harassment at the police academy, and looted houses, stores, and pharmacies during Hurricane Katrina. She saw his future and the future of the kids he would abuse as a police officer. He wouldn't limit himself to males, but would torment and abuse both sexes.

He was hungry for power, and he would kiss the right ass to get it. He'd never marry, just continue a cycle of pain and humiliation until it all came back to him. The little boy he attempted to rape when he was eighteen would shoot him twenty years from now.

Ruby wasn't sure how long they stood on the street corner as she had a glimpse into the past and future of Doyle Green. She was horrified and sickened by what she saw and worried she made a noise to alert him, but she must've played it cool because he never looked up from her license. He studied it as though he were trying to memorize her vital statistics. Meanwhile, Briggs had decided it was time to see to his personal grooming, cleaning parts of his anatomy that weren't supposed to see the light of day.

With another glance at her chest, Green gave Ruby her license back and tried a smarmy smile. "Sorry to bother you, Ms. Fontenot. We've just had some problems with vagrants in town, and a pretty lady like you should be careful," he said, his voice just as oily as the glance he passed over her cleavage.

Ruby just gave him a tight smile. More like he decided he couldn't shakedown an almost local, so now he was going to try to load on the charm. It took everything she had not to beat the hell out of him where he stood, knowing what he would do to hundreds of kids and teenagers. She couldn't prove anything and that was the only thing holding her back. It was almost enough to make her lose her mind.

After a long silent moment, he tipped his hat at her and moseyed away, a man who would ruin hundreds of lives and cause the distrust of thousands because of his greed. Ruby shuddered and leaned back against the building, praying for strength. She had to figure out a way to keep from accidentally touching people again. There was no way she was going to have flashbacks and forwards like that every time someone touched her palm.

She stood there for several minutes. Briggs continued his impromptu bath to the amusement of the passing partygoers. Ruby couldn't have cared less. She was tired. Both she and Briggs needed some sleep so they could get back on the road as soon as possible.

Cars honked as traffic became heavier, and the foot traffic increased as people flocked to Bourbon Street, and Ruby decided she had to get her butt in gear. Tugging on Briggs' leash, she headed back into the Quarter to find her hotel.

* * * *

Malachi Cromwell watched her walk down the street, the sway of her hips keeping to a rhythm only she heard. It was a seductive dance that called to him. He smiled. She was his and she didn't even know it. His associate had promised the Chieftain to Malachi in return for a little chaos, and Malachi was only too happy to oblige. From the moment his Pet had informed him of the new Chieftain's sex, he'd known she was his.

He kept pace with her, watching the way the humans shot surprised glances her way. He snorted. *Fools*, he thought. They were intimidated by her height and the markings of a warrior on her face and neck. Little did they know that with her powers and physique, and with him by her side, she could rule all of them.

Curiously, she seemed to be following a Veilerian vampire and werewolf. Malachi frowned and quickened his pace. His enforcers kept to the shadows but didn't come any closer to him or his prey. He'd made sure they understood he would hunt the Chieftain alone. They were backup to make sure the bloody Council didn't get their hands on him or the Chieftain and, by the looks of it, his enforcers would get a chance to do their jobs today.

Smiling maliciously, he sauntered after his female, his eyes glued to her backside. He mentally prepared his approach at the same time trying to decide how he was going to avoid killing the Veilerians he was sure to fight with tonight.

* * * *

Lucian waited in the prearranged spot. Chateau d'Ours was the drop-off point. Pagan and Marie were supposed to lead the Chieftain down Royal, through the hotel, and into the trap. That was the plan at least. Chieftains were ornery fellows in Lucian's experience, not that he blamed the lads.

After eons of being chased around every continent, ring of heaven and hell, and dimension known to Eturians and Veilerians, Chieftains were bound to be wary of anyone. They stuck to themselves and only talked to outsiders when they needed to. But, having been after the last Chieftain for the past twenty-five years, Lucian wasn't leaving New Orleans without him, no matter how cranky the old guy was.

Patience was common to vampires and he had it in abundance, so he barely breathed as he stood unmoving in the shadow of the d'Ours lobby. His hiding place gave him a perfect view of the entrance and all who entered.

The message from Pagan had come to him at 8:56 and he'd been in his spot at 9:02. It was now nine thirty and he was still waiting for the girls and the Chieftain to show up.

Twelve Veilerians had come and gone through the lobby since he took up his post, and not one of them had noticed him. Four of them had been nymphs, three had been centaurs, two were werewolves, and the rest had been half-breeds of varying races. Luckily for them, none had been Eturians. That would've just been bad—for them.

His ears prickled. He could hear Pagan and Marie talking loudly. Lucian barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. They were horrible actresses. They strolled through the lobby, two lethal females trying to pretend they were tattooed versions of Valley Girls. They were chattering and *oh-my-God*-ing so much, he wanted to tell them to gag themselves with a spoon. They passed him, Pagan giving him a barely discernable nod. The Chieftain was right behind them.

Forcing himself not to tense, Lucian waited. His heart began to quicken. His body and mind focused on the hunt. He knew Pagan and Marie would circle back for support in case any Eturians had caught on to their game. He was ready.

Ten minutes later, he got his reward. It began with a pulse of power that reverberated through his body. The Chieftain was powerful, more than he'd been when the chase began some twentyfive years earlier. Frowning mightily, Lucian tried to think what could've happened to give the Chieftain such a boost of power. The pulsing, vibrant energy moved closer and closer until his other senses caught up.

First he caught a scent. It was awful. Like something out of a sewage. He fought the urge to gag. Under the sewage scent, he could smell spices, like jasmine or something equally exotic. His frown grew darker. That flower smell was familiar.

Then, he saw a dog. An ugly dog. Pushed-in face, two teeth sticking out of its mouth, a trail of drool behind it instead of breadcrumbs, its squat fat body waddling for all it was worth. It would pause, look around, and cock its hindquarters to release gas. It was so ridiculous Lucian choked on his laughter. *What the hell*...then caught his breath because there was no way on the Gods' green earth this was the Chieftain.

Chieftain Julius had probably sent this woman ahead as a distraction. That had to be it. Please, Gods tell him this wasn't the Chieftain.

She was nearly as tall as he was. That wasn't the problem. Dark brown hair, thick and cut short, but curly as all hell like she'd stuck her finger in an outlet. That wasn't a problem either. She was hot. Built like an Amazon—and he knew, since he'd met more than his share—she had curves that promised she wouldn't break if you wanted to play rough. Tattoos trailed from her face to her neck and her almond-shaped eyes were completely blacked out. The markings were similar to the ones Julius had on his biceps, and the blacked out eyes were a replica of the Chieftain's. That so wasn't a problem. He was a vampire. His eyes turned red when he was aroused. He didn't care that she was apparently the last Chieftain, and Chieftains were never female.

No, Lucian's problem with the Chieftain was that she lit his fire faster than a flamethrower. If he wasn't such a bloody cynic, he'd think she was his life-mate, but since he wasn't ready to settle down she couldn't be. He shouldn't be waiting to capture cranky old Chieftain Julius to bring to a safe house and see a female who set his body on fire just by looking at her. He wasn't sure what pissed him off more, that he was so completely unprepared for her, or that he wouldn't get to try her out since she was going straight to Council.

Without realizing it, Lucian revealed his position by growling and grinding his teeth. The woman stared at him across the lobby, her eyes meeting his with an intensity that hit him right in the solar plexus. She paused mid-step.

Lucian took a step forward, unable to help himself, and cursed because she stepped back, right into Malachi Cromwell.

Chapter Five

Ruby blinked rapidly, finding herself literally between a rock and a hard place. On the seven block walk to the hotel, she'd felt a low hum of threat, but that was it. The Instinct she'd come to rely on since Julius's death hadn't warned her of impending danger. Now, she faced a huge shadowy man who growled, his eyes glittering like a mean junkyard dog, and had backed into another man who smiled at her like she was a brand new toy he couldn't wait to play with.

Talk about shitty Instincts. From now on, she would go with her gut which said this was no place for an anti-social Cajun girl. Apparently, Briggs' gut said the same thing because he tugged hard at his leash, trying to go to the right. Deciding his instinct was probably no worse than the one she got from Julius, Ruby dove for the ground and commando crawled after the flatulent bulldog.

Right on cue, bodies appeared seemingly from nowhere accompanied by snarls and shouts that rose up over her head. Ruby flattened herself to the ground, crawling for the cubbyhole to the right of the door. Briggs headed for a little broken panel at the foot of a floor-to-ceiling window that was *just* big enough for him to squeeze through, but Ruby had a little more trouble.

She managed to shove her shoulders through, cutting them on the little shards of glass left in the wooden casing. Wedging her hands on the frame of the window and gritting her teeth, she pressed with all of her might, trying to fit her hips. Feeling her jeans and skin beginning to tear, she shoved against the wood, her feet scrambling for purchase on the floor on the opposite side of the window. Finally, with a grunt of pain, she slid through the frame, her hips and the tops of her legs slick with blood.

Briggs woofed once, impatient to get away from the racket, prancing in place with renewed energy. Ruby stumbled towards him, and they jogged down the street away from the fight. One more block and they turned north on St. Anne. Up ahead, she could see Bourbon Street. People wandered around the area, talking, laughing and not paying attention to them. The only good thing going for her so far was the black of her jeans hid the blood on her lower body. Ruby's upper body was scratched up, but most people ignored her as they would a homeless person.

Leaning against a building, she peered back towards Royal to see if anyone had followed her. Satisfied no one was there, she braced her hands against her knees with Briggs panting at her feet.

"That wasn't quite the way I intended to introduce myself," a wry voice said next to her.

It was the man who'd come up behind her at the hotel. Her Instinct had failed her again! Ruby jackknifed, about to take off running again but was stopped by a firm hand on her arm. She could have broken his hold, but she felt no panic, no shortness of breath, nothing warning her to run away. Confusion held her immobile.

"Shh," the man said, his voice soothing, his warm brown eyes entreating her to relax. "I'm not going to hurt you. I was just going to introduce myself to you and hope I could talk with you without those beasts interfering." He smiled somewhat sheepishly, showing off a dimple in his left cheek.

It was adorable. Ruby could feel herself gaping at him. She couldn't help herself. He was...cute.

They were nearly the same height, which afforded her a perfect view of his face He had dark brown, nearly black, hair cut close to his head in a rough, careless style that managed to look chic. His face was boyishly cute, from the slightly round nose and baby smooth cheeks to the big brown eyes and thick, long eyelashes most women would kill for. He was built on the lean side but had plenty of muscle on his body showing he either worked out or worked hard. Ruby bet he did both.

"What do you want?" she blurted out. No finesse. That was Ruby Fontenot. Blue, she amended. Ruby Fontenot-Blue.

Briggs sighed loudly and sat down, giving up the brave fight against gravity. The man looked at him and chuckled.

"You're the last Chieftain," he answered with his eyes still downcast. "You're very valuable to this world. There are some who'd say you're vital to their survival, and others who would say you're valuable to their world." His voice got deeper, and he finally looked up, his eyes glowing red. "But you're more important to me."

Ruby gasped. She'd known. Deep in her heart, she'd known there was more to this whole Chieftain thing than just seeing into the lives of people. She'd known there was more out there, but she hadn't *known* there was more out there.

"I think I'm gonna be sick." She grabbed her stomach and slid down the wall.

"Whoa, babe," he said, looking more flustered than she would've expected. "You're not going to throw up, are you?"

He spoke in a strange language and the shadows coalesced, forming shapes that hadn't been there before. One of the beings came forward and handed him a bottle of water, which he offered her. Ruby almost laughed.

Now her instincts clamored for her to get the hell out of Dodge. *A little late now, don't you think?* She held her stomach, hoping it didn't decide to turn itself inside out.

Briggs bayed at the newcomers. The newcomers chattered back angrily, His Cuteness snarled what sounded like a command, and Ruby freaked out. At that moment, the man who'd growled at her at the hotel came tearing around the corner at a breakneck speed.

Ruby caught a glimpse of his face as he passed under a streetlight. And, really, why was everyone around here absurdly beautiful? Dark red hair shot through with black fell to his massive shoulders in a shiny curtain that would've made Pantene kill all their models. Strong cheekbones jutted out almost too harshly to be considered attractive but were softened by heavy-lidded eyes the color of jade. Ruby decided right then and there green was her favorite color. He looked like he would tower over her, which made her feel petite and earned her immediate attention. He was also royally pissed and coming down the alley like a Mack truck just a little too soon after the last confrontation.

"Oh, shit, not again," Ruby groaned. She threw herself over Briggs, pulled his body into her midriff, tucked her knees as close to her head as possible and took a deep breath. She couldn't run anymore, and if that meant getting her ass pounded into the ground during a supernatural rumble, then fine.

The Julius-infected part of her told her this was a bad idea while her gut said this was the best plan she'd had so far. She needed to rest up and form a more concrete plan before she rushed off again. She just hoped the fight ended before she ran out of breath.

* * * *

When Lucian rounded the corner and saw the woman with Malachi, he wanted to do more than kill. He wanted to destroy the demon's entire bloodline. He'd never experienced such a murderous rage in his long life and, by the look on Malachi's face, he knew it.

With a few of Pagan's lads on his heels, he faced Malachi and his enforcers in the alley with the girl and her dog curled in the fetal position in the corner of the building. Lucian didn't know if Malachi had harmed her or if she was playing possum, but knowing she'd been alone with the leader of the Eturi was enough to make him want to tear down the city.

His rage, so unexpected and explosive, almost made him stumble in surprise. Something about the woman stirred the primal beast who howled to possess her and kill anyone who tried to get in his way. For the normally easy-going Lucian, this about-face was staggering.

"She's mine, Oculum-se," Malachi said, using Lucian's title mockingly. "Even if you take her now, she'll come to me eventually." He smiled, his teeth a slash of white in the darkness of the alley.

Lucian bared his teeth in a dangerous smile. "You know the ladies always preferred me over you. I just didn't realize you were so desperate these days that you had to chase them down like a retriever."

He probably shouldn't taunted old Mal, but he couldn't resist. Their rivalry went back a couple hundred years to the days before the Eturi even existed. It was just too much temptation.

"You've never changed, Lucian," Malachi said, almost admiringly. "You never did know when to keep your mouth shut."

As if that was a signal, Malachi's enforcers attacked, going for Lucian en masse. Moving on instinct and skill amassed through years studying with the Guardian Elite, Lucian cut a swath through the attackers, heading for Malachi, who stood to the back of the hoard.

One demon jumped on his back and sucked in a deep breath, no doubt to cast a spell. Throwing his head back, Lucian crushed all the bones in the demon's face, stopping the incantation before it left his lips. The demon fell to the ground in a boneless heap. Part of him was aware of the Chieftain crawling out of the alley, sticking to the shadows, but the rest of his attention stayed on the fight. However, that split in his attention nearly cost him his head.

Spinning to the left, he avoided the blade aimed for him. Spinning back to the right, he caught the arm holding the serrated sword and snapped it. Lucian threw his attacker into the melee behind him, dodged another fist, and let his attacker's momentum lead him to a size seventeen steel-toe to the groin.

Lucian was ten feet from Malachi when a werewolf slammed into him, bouncing him off a dumpster. Normally, Lucian would've ricocheted off the dumpster and beat the ever lovin' hell out of the werewolf for daring to take on the Oculum-se.

Unfortunately, his head found a shredded piece of metal and burst like a ripe melon. Pain exploded through him, sharp and bright. Lucian fell, his blood spilling on the dark street like candy from a piñata.

For some reason Malachi's fighters pulled back, and before he blacked out, Lucian saw what looked like honest regret on his old childhood friend's face.

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Chapter Six

Ruby was back on her feet and mingling with the crowd on Bourbon Street before she even realized it. She cut through the shadows along the sidewalk with a stealth she hadn't even known she possessed. The soft shuffle of her footsteps was masked by the fighting behind her, the sounds of Bourbon Street ahead, and miscellaneous music pouring out of the surrounding clubs. She heard the loud boom of something hitting metal but didn't turn around. Her body positively crawled with the need to get away from the fight.

She crossed Bourbon and made her way to Dauphine Street. She just needed to put some space between her and them. Coming to New Orleans had been a bad idea. She freely admitted it. There were too many places for them to come out at her. With no idea who the bad guys were, she couldn't chance running into any of them again.

Her mind spun with the surreal experience. If she wasn't mistaken, some of those people back there had become monsters. She'd been too scared and shocked to do more than gape when wings and fur sprouted all over the place with snarls of fury and exhilaration. It had become obvious the sexy man with the long hair was a vampire because when he jumped in the fight, his fangs had slid out. Ruby shivered.

Spying yet another little alley, Ruby ducked into it, hunching down. Briggs quietly cuddled next to her, his body quivering. He huffed softly and licked her hand. Tears, something she hadn't allowed herself since her final hours at home, sprang to her eyes. All because of the soft, wet tongue on her hand. There was no way she'd just seen werewolves and vampires and whatever those other things had been.

"Stupid dog. You're gonna get us killed," she whispered.

"I wouldn't blame that on the dog," a female voice said at the opening of the alley.

"Son of a bitch!" Ruby yelled and sprang to her feet, the tears vanishing in a haze of rage. "Why don't you people leave me the hell alone?" Not caring if this person was a monster or not, Ruby stalked over to her, determined to take her fear and anger out on someone.

It was the blue-haired woman from Canal Street. She stood alone, hands on her hips, looking about as comfortable as could be considering she was covered in sweat and blood, and her hair was sticking up in every direction.

The woman wasn't about to take any crap from Ruby, however. "Look here, sister, if you think we enjoy chasing your ass to hell and back, you have another thing coming. If you Chieftains would just stay put, we wouldn't have to lose men to those bastards." Her violet eyes were turbulent and extremely pissed off. "I lost two of my best guys tonight protecting your ass, and you're gonna bitch at me?"

Ruby was taken aback. First of all, this was the first woman she'd met who was nearly her size. Secondly, when she growled, she was showing—yup, it was fang. Blue Hair was a vampire. Fabulous. This had turned out to be a stellar day. Hell, it'd been the kind of week that went down as never to be repeated.

Ruby closed her eyes and let the chick have at her since she obviously needed to rant and rave at someone. But when the woman went so far as to poke her, Ruby grabbed the hand attached to the pointy finger and twisted, completely forgetting about her new little ability.

Ruby saw Penelope "Pagan" Fairchild's life past, present, and future, and she was sorry that she hadn't been more careful with her choice of words earlier. This tough vampire had led a very long, charmed life up until seventy some odd years ago when her beloved parents had been murdered. Ruby shielded herself from the other woman's pain and let go of her hand. She didn't want to see or feel anymore.

"Look, Penelope, Pagan, whatever you want to call yourself," Ruby said rudely, enjoying the surprise on the other woman's face for one spiteful moment. Really, Ruby hadn't even known she was capable of these emotions. "I'm very sorry for the loss of your friends and that you've spent your time chasing after me, but I didn't ask for any of this. In fact, I'm not entirely sure what all of this is, so I'd appreciate if everyone would leave me the hell alone so I can adjust, okay?"

By the time she finished her little speech, she was yelling and some people were staring, but Ruby didn't care. Briggs punctuated her impassioned tirade with a loud woof and shook his drool over the woman's Dr. Martin's and leather pants.

Fine brows met over angry yet thoughtful eyes, but Ruby didn't stick around to find out what Pagan would say. She spun around and took off again. She was getting out of New Orleans once and for all.

* * * *

When Lucian woke up again he found himself in his temporary rooms above The Pit. The blackened windows were barely winning their fight against the deep summer heat, and his body was covered in a light sweat even though the air conditioning was pumping full blast.

The bare bones of the room reflected nothing more than that this was a temporary stopping point for him. Lucian didn't mind it at all. It was a place to lay his head and a few women, then an image of the new Chieftain flashed through his mind. Yeah, he wouldn't mind having her curvy body next to him at the moment. It had a king size bed that was immensely comfortable, a utilitarian dresser, a closet, and a chair. That was it. The bathroom was down the hall, and he shared it with up to ten different people, which was fine with him. The entire upper floor of The Pit was reserved for either the staff or visiting delegations of the Veil. Lucian had to admit Jackson had done a good job with this building when he'd been forced to retire from the Guild.

Lucian rolled over and grabbed his skull. His head was killing him. Looking at the clock on the wall, he saw it was noon. Not exactly the best time for vampires to be up and about, but he'd been living for long enough that a little sun wouldn't kill him, much.

Again, he thought of the woman. Confident that Pagan had managed to bring her to The Pit with them and that she was now in one of the other rooms, he crossed his arms behind his head and daydreamed. Just thinking of her being somewhere near had a devastating effect on his libido, and he was more than ready to hunt her down when his door opened. Lucian smiled hugely. He hoped she had a hearty appetite because he didn't want to waste any time before pounding in that tight body.

Unfortunately for him and his cock, which immediately deflated, it was Pagan. She looked a little freaked out, which was never a good thing.

"What happened?" he asked harshly. He just knew it had to do with *her*.

Pagan, the bane of most of the Eturi and, hell, most of mankind, bit her lip and looked uncertain, something which Lucian was positive he thought he'd never see in his lifetime.

"I don't think she's one of us," she said quietly.

He frowned, sitting up and leaning against his pillows. He didn't need to ask who she referred to. "What do you mean?"

She edged into the room and sat on the side of his bed, her face as open as a child's. "She doesn't know anything about us, Luc. I followed her. After the fight, which we lost, by the way," she said wryly. "You lost that fight with the dumpster, Malachi took off, and we had to carry you back here. We lost Karl and Drew when the Eturi sprang a trap on them while they watched out for humans." Lucian touched her hand, knowing how much those guys had meant to her. "You okay?"

She shrugged. "We all know what we signed on for when we took the contract to work with The Guardians. I just feel awful for their mates."

He nodded. Pagan might be one of the toughest beings he'd ever worked with, but she still cared after her crew like no other leader he'd ever worked with. He knew that by the end of the business day Karl and Drew's mates would have everything they needed to make the transition from life-mate to widowhood easier, and Pagan would do everything in her power to help support their young if needed. It was one of her few weaknesses, which she kept well-hidden from everyone.

"Anyway, I followed after our Chieftain. I don't think she's ever been among the Veil before, Luc. I don't even think she's even seen a vampire before," she said with a startled laugh. "When she saw my fangs, she went pale. I could actually smell the blood drain from her face, but she still stood up to me." She said it with grudging admiration.

Lucian frowned. If what Pagan said was true, then they were dealing with someone who was completely unprepared for the life she was leading. The Chieftain also had to contend with more vampire male she could ever want or prepare for. Most Veilerian females knew the score when it came to sex with a Council apprentice.

Because their lives were devoted to caring for the entire Veil, Councilors didn't have time to make lifelong commitments. The ones chosen were single and planned to stay that way for a hell of a long time. If, by some freak accident, they did become mated, the Councilors stepped down. If this woman had been completely sheltered from the Veil, then she was a rare jewel indeed, and he refused to feel guilty about his plans to take her.

On top of all of that, she was being chased by Malachi, who was probably one of the most cunning generals to oppose the Veil in eons. "So you think she was completely sheltered from the Veil and Eturi? Absolutely?" he asked wonderingly.

"Babe, it's almost like she's human."

* * * *

Ruby was back in her car, but the feeling of being watched followed her as always. She almost felt used to it by now. She wondered if the feeling was Julius keeping an eye on her, though she wouldn't put money on that. There had been something very final about Julius' death.

It was only Saturday, and she'd already been strangled and tattooed, had inherited some magical power, gotten caught in the middle of two supernatural brawls, and been chased by two gorgeous fiends. The way her luck seemed to be going, she'd wander into World War III by the end of the weekend. Could a girl get any luckier?

"Stop it with the negative waves," she told herself in her best Donald Sutherland voice and laughed sharply. She was cracking up, she thought. Briggs apparently shared her assessment because he just ignored her.

They were back on 310, headed west this time. Briggs had given up on giving her the cold shoulder and decided to go to sleep. Since leaving the vampire last night, Ruby had skulked around the Quarter, dodging people and shadows and feeling like an idiot. Briggs had tagged along gamely until two o'clock when he'd begun growling at her out of sheer grumpiness.

Nothing and no one had accosted her other than a few drunks who'd tried flashing her for beads. But when they realized all she had was a farting dog, they left her alone.

By dawn, she made it back to the garage, paid the exorbitant fee, and hightailed it out of town, all without seeing a single person from the night before. Ruby had no idea where she was going. She just rode with the traffic for a while, hoping she could come up with a brilliant plan. For a moment, her mind flashed back to the two men she'd met the night before.

They'd both been gorgeous in their own ways, outrageously so. One had seemed so reasonable, and the other had seemed possessed each time she saw him. His eyes had been green, but she could've sworn there had been a tinge of red to them. Both men seemed to want something from her.

She wished Julius could've given her a little more information before he died because she was floundering here. Having gone from being a hermit to having people chasing her from one end of the world to the other left her feeling more than a little unbalanced. Ruby sighed. Slight exaggeration there, but going by the previous night she couldn't operate outside the swampy confines of south Louisiana.

Half an hour later, she took the Houma-Boutte exit to Highway 90. She sighed again. Her subconscious destination was bringing her deeper into Cajun country. There were plenty of small communities here and there, towns where everyone knew everyone else, just like home.

Sugar Swamp hadn't been anything special, but it had been home. Located south of Thibodaux, it was just a little one road town that barely had a convenience store and shared a post office with another town. Her little house was at the end of a sugarcane service road that led into the swamp. She preferred it that way. She had been happy.

For some reason, the familiar refrain rang false. For once in a very long time, she imagined being a part of something bigger. Her new status as Chieftain was giving her more contact with strangers than ever, but knowing they needed her was a balm for her soul.

Ruby mumbled to herself. The days of her being invisible were evidently well over, so there was no use in pining over them. She needed to concentrate on the here and now. Like how she was going to evade vampires and whatever those other things were. She passed through towns like Hahnville, Paradis, and Des Allemands. Her mind calculated the towns and populations. She could lose her followers in small communities like this. Ruby's heart raced.

She spied a small road leading from the highway and turned off. No cars followed her. In the early morning light, the isolation of the road suited her mood and promised salvation. For the first time in the last three days, she felt hope that she might survive this after all.

By noon, she was firmly ensconced in Cypress Point, Louisiana. Nestled in the heart of Lafourche Parish, Cypress Point was a jewel of a small town. It didn't have a lot to offer in terms of sophisticated entertainment, but it was a hive of activity this time of year.

The Hourglass was a neat little hotel in the historical district, which really was historical. The buildings dated back as far as the late 1700s and were beautifully restored. The Hourglass was a converted general store, but you couldn't tell from looking at it. The exterior had the same stucco appearance as the rest of Main Street with the same colorful awning as the other storefronts.

The personal service Ruby got from the minute she checked in made up for the lack of an elevator. Her room looked over lazy Bayou Lafourche. It had a queen size bed with a bright duvet. Painted a soft rose color with beautiful hardwood floors, it was an adorable country bedroom. The dresser held a cute little pitcher and bowl set in a floral pattern, and Ruby was certain that Stella, the owner, had crocheted the doily the set rested on.

She felt safe in the little room, and Briggs rested comfortably in the dark recesses of the pet house she'd set up in the corner. His snores threatened to put a hole in the wall, but luckily she was the only guest on this side of the hotel. She made sure Briggs had plenty of food and water, and as he'd left his mark on plenty of tires and light posts on his way to the building, Ruby was confident that he would be okay on his own.

"Briggsy, I'm going out for a little bit. Hold down the fort. Don't answer the door for anyone and if anyone breaks in...pretend you don't know me," she advised him. He answered her with another snore and a soft expulsion of air, so Ruby took that as agreement and headed out the door.

Chapter Seven

Downstairs, she waved to Stella, who sat fanning herself behind the desk. The lobby of The Hourglass was unassuming and plain compared to the guest rooms. The dark oak desk held only the register and telephone. There was no computer at this hotel and no online booking because Stella, as the owner and operator, claimed to hate all things electronic.

"Going out?" Stella asked, her plump face covered in a light layer of perspiration. She'd told Ruby she was going through menopause and kept the hotel as cold as possible at all times because as she put it, "I'm so hot I could run around naked 'cept Henri would get jealous." A beautiful older woman, she'd had taken one look at Ruby's imposing height and said, "You'll need the long bed in 214" without even blinking.

Ruby loved her already. "Yes, ma'am," she said respectfully, careful to keep her face turned to the side.

Before her stop in Cypress Point, she'd stopped at a Super Wal-Mart and bought thick make-up for her face and gloves for her hands. She'd put on the concealer to cover her tattoos and hoped she looked like she had a bad birthmark. So far, it seemed to have worked. The gloves were mesh and she'd cut the fingers off to make them a little less noticeable. She felt more comfortable walking around. Of course, she looked like a punk reject. Thirty year olds should not wear fingerless gloves.

"Have a nice time in town then, dear," Stella said, taking a gulp of her huge glass of water which was filled to the brim with chunks of ice. "Is your doggy upstairs?" "Yes, he is. Is that okay?"

"Oh, yes. He's so cute. Is it okay if I bring him some leftover boudin tomorrow?" she asked with a cheerfulness that blew Ruby's mind. "We're going to a party tonight, and we always have leftovers."

"Um, sure."

"Wonderful. You have fun and check out the tattoo shop across the street. Kali does wonderful work. All the kids love her," Stella said with a chirp and waved her out of the door.

Ruby stepped outside and just stood there. Perhaps she hadn't covered her tattoos as well as she thought she had. Shielding her eyes against the mid-afternoon glare, she looked across the street at the aforementioned tattoo shop called Color Your World.

She nibbled on her lip. Tattoos weren't her thing. The one she sported now was something she would've never picked out for herself. Maybe she could have the work altered.

Cypress Point traffic was nonexistent, even on Main Street, and it seemed that Saturday afternoon was a dead time. Barely looking both ways, Ruby crossed the street, heading for the tattoo parlor.

Wedged between an old-world pharmacy and a lingerie boutique with amazingly racy clothing, the tattoo shop looked at home among the other stores. It had the same graceful, traditional front with dark orange stucco while the stores on either side had pink and red. The large picture windows were covered in artwork from urban graffiti to Celtic crosses.

Ruby opened the door and stepped into the coolness of the lobby, which was covered from floor to ceiling in flash and pictures. The interior wasn't what she expected from a tattoo parlor.

The walls were painted a caramel color that complimented dark hardwood floors that were, surprisingly, polished to a high shine. There was a light beige curtain at the back of the room that swayed when she entered, so she guessed the work was done back there. End tables and coffee tables in blonde oak, sporting magazines, dotted the room. Stylish scarlet sofas added funkiness to the lobby and offered a place where customers could sit to wait their turn.

Walking around the lobby, Ruby saw most of the pre-designed work was of dragons, hearts, fairies, and things like that. What really blew her mind were the pictures of the hand-drawn tattoos that were artfully displayed.

The one picture she kept going back to was of a woman's arm where the depiction of Anubis had been tattooed in glorious detail from her shoulder past her elbow. The drawing was so lifelike Ruby almost expected Anubis to turn his head and snarl. She shivered.

"May I help you?" a very deep voice said from behind her.

The drag queen standing in front of her was the last kind of person she had expected when she stepped foot in Cypress Point. Ruby's mouth fell open. She couldn't help it.

Kali was her name, and Ruby only knew that because she wore an elegant platinum nameplate necklace with pearls dangling ever so sweetly from the feet of the K and I. Kali was easily six foot seven in her bare feet, and the five inch stilettos she wore put her at seven feet tall. Her white, artsy baby T-shirt showed off bulging biceps and a beautifully sculpted stomach. Her nonexistent hips were encased in a tasteful leather A-line skirt that resembled something a chic schoolteacher would wear.

For being the first real drag queen Ruby had ever seen up close, Kali was beautiful. Deep brown hair with bright red highlights fell to her shoulders in silky waves. Skin the color of cream-laced coffee was stretched taut over an exotically sculpted face. Kali looked as though she'd stepped right off the cover of a magazine. Her face was so perfectly proportionate, with wide cheekbones, a straight nose with flaring nostrils, and beautiful, full lips that she would've made Naomi Campbell jealous. If Ruby hadn't seen Kali's Adam's apple, she would've thought Kali was just a large female.

"Cat got your tongue?" Kali asked challengingly.

"Um, no," Ruby said, gathering her thoughts. "Stella told me I should check out your shop."

A gleam of interest appeared in Kali's deep brown eyes as an elegantly shaped eyebrow rose. "Really," she purred. She tapped one long fingernail against her chin as she looked over Ruby. "Well, let's wipe that god-awful concealer off and take a look at what's on your face. Come with me."

Kali led her through the curtain and they entered the room where the real work was done. As far as Ruby could tell, the setup wasn't much different from any other tattoo shop she'd seen on television except it was very open and the only art was the photographs of the tattoos Kali had done.

The building was long and narrow. The far end of the room contained a small sitting area Kali had obviously set up to consult with clients. The small round table was set for tea for two. Instead of chairs there were a couple of very large, comfortable looking pillows on either side of the table.

"Take off those boots and have a seat," Kali said and gestured to the left side of the table before removing her own shoes, folding her legs in one easy movement Ruby knew she wouldn't be able to replicate.

Instead, she sat on the pillow, grunting when she took her boots off and crossed her legs. Kali poured tea for both of them, and Ruby pretended interest in it. She really wasn't a tea drinker. She preferred coffee or cold water, but it just didn't seem right to refuse.

"So, Ruby, you want to know about your tattoos and if you can alter them," Kali began after she added liberal amounts of cream and sugar to her tea.

Ruby let out a harsh bark of laughter. She wasn't terribly surprised Kali knew who she was. For all she knew, Kali was an elf or something and could read her mind.

"Oh, honey, please. Does this body look like it belongs to an elf?" Kali sounded insulted as she passed a hand over her chest. "Elves have no fashion sense besides being overly concerned with modesty. They wouldn't know a Savio design if it bit them on the ass. No, sugar, I'm an Oracle, which means, yes, I can read your mind. I've also been waiting for you for"—she paused to consult the leaves at the bottom of the teapot—"three days. What took you so long?"

Fury and disbelief caused words to stick in her throat. She just sat there staring at Kali, an apparent Oracle, for several long minutes.

"Pissed off, huh? Well, welcome to the Veil. Everyone's pissed off at someone. The vampires are pissed off at the weres because the weres keep stalking their best donors for sex partners. The succubae are pissed at the nymphs because of an incident with a hat that happened in the 1600s, and the elves are still pissed at the dwarves over some mining issues that happened a millennia ago. The demons and angels have been fighting for so long no one knows what they have left to fight about, and there are so many factions that the Guardian Guild is barely able to keep the Veil from exposing itself to humans. So welcome to the petty, wonderful world of Veilerians. On the other side of the coin is The Eturi. They don't give a damn if humans find out if we exist or not. They just want power, fame, and fortune, whatever. Amazingly enough, though, they don't fight amongst themselves. They don't squabble over petty differences, because they all have the same goal-to take over the human world," she said, her hands swishing the tea around before placing the pot down with a decisive click.

"Now, you're a Chieftain. Everyone is gonna want to get their grubby paws on you because you hold the entire hierarchy of two communities quite literally in the palm of your hands. You've met members of both factions already. You've already met Malachi. He's so nummy." Kali sighed deeply and closed her eyes. "He formed the Eturi. He's one of their highest ranking generals, and he wants you."

"But, why?" Ruby asked, flabbergasted. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing! I don't know who these people are or what I can do for them, other than see where their lives are taking them and have taken them." Which one had been Malachi, she wondered desperately.

"That's because you haven't come across a leader. The purpose of the Chieftain is to touch hands with many to weed out the ones who will not benefit their line and race," Kali answered calmly. "You'll have an important decision to make, Ruby Blue."

Ruby looked up from where she'd been contemplating her hands. Kali's eyes were opaque. A strange, warm breeze wafted towards Kali's body from nowhere, causing her hair to flow about her face in eerie ripples. Ruby edged away from the table slightly, but Kali grabbed her wrists, turning her palms upwards.

"You will have to decide where your new life is headed, Ruby Blue of the Elkfire Line," Kali said, her long fingers shackling Ruby's wrists.

Ruby squirmed, trying to break Kali's hold, but the Oracle held her as easily as an adult with an ill-mannered child. Pain pierced her right shoulder and, for a moment, Ruby thought she'd pulled the joint out of socket. The pain came repeatedly, but it was a stinging pain, quick and fleeting, attacking and retreating with every word that spilled from Kali's mouth.

"Your past is shadowing your every move. You have met the man who can change your destiny, but you have to decide which is more important, being your own woman, or being his. Whatever you decide will be as a stone rippling through a puddle, for everyone will be touched by it."

When Kali released her wrists, Ruby fell on her back and scrambled away from her. She grabbed her shoulder, panting with pain and fear. What man, she thought somewhat frantically. The smiling man or the growling man?

Kali took a sip of tea. She hummed with satisfaction. "So, now that you know what's going on, are you planning to take off again or try to find out more about the Veil?" Ruby swallowed a few times, trying to slow her heartbeat. This had not been a good week for her blood pressure, she decided. "Where do you fit in all of this?"

"First off, you're sorta immortal. You're not gonna have a heart attack." Kali said with a roll of her eyes and an elegant flip of her hands. "Secondly, I'm an Oracle. I'm neutral territory, sweetie. Everyone needs us because, whether they admit it or not, everyone loses their way sometimes. So, if you want, you can come back later tonight and meet with some of the local Veilerians. We're having a potluck supper before we go to a charity auction in Houma after. You're more than welcome to join us."

"Are you insane?"

"No. You really should get out more. Running all over the place isn't good for you and, honey, you look awful," Kali leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "I didn't want to say anything because we just met, and I have a feeling we're gonna be great friends, but you seriously have to do something with your hair. You look like a sheep after the shearing, and you definitely need some new clothes." A light came to her eyes that would've scared Ruby if she hadn't already had a rough week. "I know! Let's do a makeover!"

Before Ruby could say yea or nay, she was deposited back on her pillow and Kali was on the other side of the room calling people all over town. Ruby shook her head with her face in her hands. "This it is a dream, right? People just don't go into tattoo shops and fall into the hands of a fairy drag queen who tell them the future and then take them shopping."

"They do if they come to Cypress Point," a new voice said from the back of the building.

Chapter Eight

The newcomer was a young man carrying garment bags. With skin the color of teak, he couldn't have been more than twenty years old, and he was dressed from head to toes in ice blue. His linen shirt was loose fitting as were his trousers. The color was striking with his coal black hair and eyes. He smiled at her brightly.

"I am Savio," he said, bowing to her before hanging the garment bags on a few hooks. "Kali calls and says you need clothes for the auction tonight, and she says you are a tall girl. I tell her I specialize in tall girls, yes?" He walked forward and hustled Ruby towards the bathroom.

"You will take your clothes off so I can measure you," he informed her. "I must make sure I do not have to alter the dress too much. My assistant will come later with shoes." He pushed her in the bathroom.

"I'm not taking my clothes off," Ruby sputtered once she was in the bathroom. She glared at the door. These were the pushiest damn people she'd ever met in her life. Maybe this was all a trick, she thought with a shiver. Maybe they were going to lock her in the bathroom and leave her in here until one of those men showed up.

Panic crept in and she studied her surroundings carefully. It was a bathroom. There was nothing in it she could use as a weapon unless she wrapped them in toilet paper. There was no window. There was only the sink, the mirror above it, and the toilet. Her shoes were in the other room, so she couldn't even throw one of the heavy steel-toes at the mirror to shatter it for a sharp weapon.

"Hurry up and get out of those clothes so Savio can measure you, Ruby," Kali's voice said from the other side of the door. Then there was a muffled squeal. "Girl, you should see these shoes! Watch out, Jimmy Choo! Savio, for a fairy, you're a genius." Kali's excited chatter faded away as she moved away from the door.

Biting her lip, Ruby couldn't make up her mind what to do. Since she'd stepped foot in Kali's shop, her internal alarm hadn't gone off once, not even when Kali had gone all Oracle on her. Leaning forward on her hands, Ruby looked into the mirror, studying her blacked out eyes.

"Who are you, Ruby Blue?" she whispered. The person staring at her in the mirror was nowhere near the same person she'd been before she opened that shed door.

So many things had happened she didn't feel equipped to process it all. She wanted to know who those men fighting in the alley were and which one was Malachi and which one of them was going to change her life. Considering how much her life had changed already, Ruby wasn't too keen on the idea of more things to come.

Heaving a deep sigh, she pulled her shirt off and saw a design on her right shoulder. It was in the spot that had begun to hurt during the foretelling. So Kali had tattooed her. It just hadn't been the traditional way. Ruby made a face at herself and studied her new ink.

On her right shoulder blade was a lotus flower. It wasn't very large, though the pain had seemed massive at the time. Nestled as it was in the joint, when she moved her arm, it almost looked like the flower was rippling in a breeze. The pinks and greens of the tattoo were startling against her pale skin, and Ruby couldn't help but stare at it. It was completely different from what she was sporting on her face and hands. It was delicate. Sweet and innocent looking. Sexy, even. She loved it.

Ruby stripped down to her underwear. There was no way she was going out there with nothing on. Opening the door, she peered out and saw only Savio and Kali. "Finally!" Savio said, throwing his hands up. "If you do not hurry, I will not have the time to get the dress back here before dinner."

He pulled her out of the bathroom and into the middle of the room where he immediately made free with her body. Not like he thought she was a female, but like she was a dress form.

Kali stood off to the side and just smiled at her. "Don't mind Savio, hon. Fairies are notoriously bitchy when their reputations are at stake."

"Bah, my reputation is not at stake. She will be a masterpiece. I can promise you that," he muttered under his breath.

"You're a fairy?" Ruby asked, looking at Savio curiously. He didn't have wings as far as she could tell, but maybe they were under his suit.

"Sì," he said, his measuring tape draped over his neck as he wrote down her measurements. "My mother, she say I should become an actor. I did not want to act. I wanted to design."

"He's fabulous," Kali said cheerfully, pouring a glass of wine. "Everyone uses him, from the Veil to Hollywood, though most of the human actors can never figure out why he won't work with them."

"They lose too much weight!" he shouted, his eyes glowing with passion. "I tell them if they want to wear a Savio Design, they must gain weight. I tell them, if I want to dress skeletons, I go to graveyard, but no, they refuse to eat." He swore in Italian and Ruby grinned.

"See why we all love him?" Kali asked, sharing the grin with Ruby.

"If I can find a job on this side, I'm going to get all of my clothes with him," Ruby vowed as Savio moved away to sort through his garment bags.

Kali looked uneasy. "Oh. About that. I guess I should tell you. When Julius made you his heir, he left you his belongings as well."

Ruby's forehead furrowed. "All he had on him was his robe, which is in my hotel room."

Choking on her wine, Kali put down her glass and placed a hand on her chest. "You need to sit down in that case," she told Ruby once she caught her breath. Taking Ruby's hand in hers, she patted it gently. "Honey, Julius was a multimillionaire."

"But he was hiding in my shed," Ruby said in confusion. "Couldn't he have, I don't know, jumped a plane and gone to some deserted island somewhere to get away from everyone? Why did he end up in *my* shed?" she nearly wailed, fear and confusion finally catching up with her.

Kali sighed. "Sometimes Fate guides us, just like she led you here. Whether you want it or not, you were meant to be the next Chieftain, Ruby. What you do with it now is up to you," she said, patting Ruby's hand in a maternal gesture so at odds with her appearance. "Now, I strongly suggest you spend a good bit of Julius' money on a new wardrobe."

Ruby let out a watery laugh.

* * * *

Lucian wanted to growl in frustration. He'd spent the entire day waiting for word from their scouts. So far, no one knew where the Chieftain was, except all of them agreed she'd left town at dawn.

Five hours after waking up, he was dressed and headed to the garage attached to The Pit. Jackson was already waiting for him, leaning against Pagan's 1970 Chevelle SS.

"You're not going out," Jackson informed him, crossing his arms and looking like he meant it.

Lucian snorted and put his duster on. "Don't get in my way, Jackie. I have a job to do and only so much time to do it in."

Jackson growled, his brown eyes bright with determination. "I can't let you go out there, Luc. It's hotter than hell and the sun won't go down for another two and a half hours. If you get fried on my watch, I'll never hear the end of it from Grayson and then I'll owe the

Council *again*," he said referring to the Guardian Elite Chief, Grayson Snow.

"I have to find her, Jackie," Lucian said quietly and with great dignity. He looked around even though his senses told him no one else was around. "I'm going to tell you something that, I swear, if it gets out, I will find you and make you pixie bait." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I think she might be my friggin' life-mate."

There, he'd dropped the L bomb. The garage was silent. Outside, afternoon traffic roared and tourists chatted as they walked the Quarter, but inside it was quiet as a church.

"You're shitting me," Jackson breathed, his eyes wide. His gaze flicked over Lucian as though trying to see if there was a difference in him.

"No, I'm not shitting you. I felt something different when I first saw her. I have to get to her before Malachi finds her again. I can't wait for sundown, Jackie," Lucian said firmly.

Jackson nodded with a thoughtful face. "Okay. You're not going alone, though, and we're not taking Pagan's baby. She'd castrate both of us, and then where would the future Mrs. Oculum be?"

Lucian winced. He shouldn't have told Jackson. The bastard was going to ride his ass for the next hundred years or so. Especially if the woman didn't turn out to be his life-mate after all.

* * * *

"This was your bright idea?" Lucian asked Jackson and cursed as they were slammed into each other for the fifth time. "We'll be lucky if we make it out of the city in one piece."

Jackson had arranged for them to ride in the back of a hearse sans coffin since both of them thought that was too much of a cliché. The paneled-in back of the car wasn't comfortable, but there wasn't any light either, so they were protected from the sun. However, they probably weren't going to survive Marie's driving. "Where are we going again?" Jackson grunted as he slammed against the front panel of the vehicle.

Lucian waited until they seemed to be in steadier traffic before he answered. "Going back to talk with Kali. She's neutral, but sometimes she'll let information slip."

Jackson shuddered. "Kali freaks me out. Hell, Oracles freak me out, period. All that knowing but not knowing bullshit."

Lucian agreed but didn't tell Jackson that. The last time he'd gone through Cypress Point, Kali had said he would see a woman who would change the world. She'd neglected to mention the woman might also change his mating status. Oh, and that she'd be the Lineage Chieftain. Fucking Oracles.

"How does it feel?" Jackson asked about ten minutes later.

Lucian nearly groaned. He'd known this conversation was coming. Most male vampires went their entire lives without meeting their life-mates. Those males settled with arranged marriages and procreated. However, every vampire knew life-mates were priceless.

"Remember those blondes who were eyeing me last night at the club?"

Jackson nodded and smiled, his face showing pure male appreciation. "Becky and Jenna. They were lonesome after you left."

Lucian snorted. "Well, I lusted after them, but I'm obsessed with the Chieftain." Lucian smirked at himself. "Just seeing her in that alley with Malachi made me go crazy. I wanted to fuck her right then and there and it wouldn't have mattered if Malachi and the gang stayed around to watch."

"It sounds crazy, man. No wonder none of the old guys talk about finding their life-mates in front of their females. Could you imagine my mother hearing my dad felt obsessed with her?"

The two men looked at each other and guffawed at the image. Francois and Yvette St. Marie had the coldest marriage of their race. Thinking of the two of them in a heated embrace was like imagining the sun rising from the west. An hour later, the hearse came to a sharp stop and then began to back up. Lucian and Jackson tensed, unsure if this was their final destination or another one of Marie's shortcuts. She was a wily werewolf, but she was the craziest driver Lucian had ever ridden with before.

"How long has she been driving?" he asked Jackson for the fifteenth time.

"Since 1934," Jackson said as he glanced at his watch. "It's only six fifteen, so hopefully she found us a good spot to get out. I'd really hate to disappoint the ladies by turning to dust before I can get back to the club."

Rolling his eyes at his companion's inflated opinion of himself, Lucian got ready to dart for shadows when the hearse gate opened.

Marie knocked on the door. "We're in a garage, guys. You're good to go." She opened the hatch to let them out. Beaming at them, she said, "Sweet ride, by the way. A few guys challenged us through Paradis and we totally kicked ass. You should've seen it!"

"That's okay, we felt it," Lucian informed her wryly as he and Jackson got out of the vehicle.

They were rumpled from flying all over the hearse and Marie's eyes widened. She bowed her head. "Oculum-se, my apologies!"

He waved his hand and chuckled. "Kid, that ride was better than The Zephyr at Pontchartrain Beach used to be." He chucked her under the chin and headed for the deeper recess of the garage.

Marie gaped at him, and Lucian heard Jackson whisper, "He's in lo–ove" before following. Lucian frowned. He wasn't in love with the Chieftain. He hadn't even talked to her yet. He had no idea what kind of woman she was other than a resourceful one who knew how to hide well. He also knew he wouldn't mind setting the bed on fire with her for a little while at least. Would he like her conversation? Would he feel the same for the rest of his immortal life? Was she his life-mate? He wasn't sure. She had that dog, and he didn't care for dogs. What if he found out she preferred Malachi to him? A slow burn infused his body, starting in his heart. He wouldn't allow that to happen, he vowed. If he had to, he'd keep her confined at his estate before he'd let her fall in Malachi's hands. And he wasn't even thinking as the Oculum-se.

He waited for his companions to catch up with him at the end of the seven car garage. He recognized their destination now. The garage ran the length of Kali's building, so they walked through with no risk of being caught in the dwindling sunlight.

"Looks like they're having one of their dinners," Lucian said idly as the passed Mortimer's Jaguar, which had illegally blackened windows, but since he was one of *the* Fairchilds, the cops left him alone. Mortimer was also Pagan's twin brother, and he did not approve of his sister's lifestyle. "I hoped to avoid running into a lot of people this afternoon," he said wearily.

Once the Veilerian society in South Louisiana had grown to the point that races intermingled more, Kali had come up with the bright idea to host potluck dinners once a week. For the most part, it was the same group of people each time, but every once in a while, folks from out of town were invited to meet the locals. The potlucks were Kali's way of making everyone welcome in her corner of the world while at the same time keeping abreast of all the latest gossip.

Kali's security system would've registered their presence the moment they hit town and noted their allegiance, race, and background. Since they were in her garage, she was allowing them entrance, which meant they were very welcome guests. Reaching the back door of her shop, they knocked once and entered.

The room was packed with Veilerians. As suspected, Mortimer was there looking as suave as usual, his pale face a masculine version of Pagan's. His black hair brushed back from a widow's peak, and he was wearing some designer suit that apparently fit him well, if Marie's reaction was anything to go by. Savio, the hottest designer in the Veil, fluttered around the table piling food on his plate, proving that though fairies were more fragile than other Veilerians, they will eat you out of house and home. Savio was chatting with Ethan Mir, a vampire-weretiger Halfling, and Akorn and Weth, twin third level demons in supermodel persona and wearing Savio's creations.

Stella and Henri Beauchamp, warmages who owned The Hourglass, were chatting with Father Ignacio, the resident angel. Persephone Foxgrove strode across the room towards him with a predatory smile, her succubus pheromones reaching out like a calling card.

"Lucian, *cher*," she purred and kissed his cheek. "Have you heard the latest news?" she asked, her scarlet lips curving into a secret smile as she assessed Jackson from beneath her thick eyelashes.

Normally, no man, mortal or immortal, could ignore Persephone, but Lucian was at first distracted by the scent of jasmine in the air and then he spotted the Chieftain. Not only had he seen her, but she looked different and she was talking with another man. Namely Mortimer Fairchild.

He growled and Persephone blinked slowly. "Oh, my." She looked between Lucian and the Chieftain. "Well," she linked arms with Marie and Jackson. "Let's get something to eat, my dears. I have a feeling it's going to be a long evening."

Chapter Nine

Lucian stalked over to Mortimer and the woman, who weren't even paying any attention to him. She'd looked wonderful in jeans and a tank top. She looked stunning in a dress. They'd done something to her hair. It was shorter and smoother. It was also redder. He liked it because it showed off her long neck. A neck that displayed her tattoos and, in particular, one little circlet of wreath beckoning his mouth to taste her jugular.

Lucian's incisors elongated and his mouth watered. The dress she wore was nice, though he didn't like her wearing it in public. The ivory color only made her skin look silkier, and the material barely clung to her curves. It had two little straps holding it up and a deep V in the front that Mortimer was trying to look down. Her hands were encased in a pair of sexy scarlet silk fingerless gloves, probably to keep her from accidentally setting off her abilities.

She was also wearing a pair of heels that made her already long legs look like they went up to her neck. Her toes had been painted dark pink, which matched her lips and made him think of other things that might match and got him on a whole other track of thinking. But what flooded his body with desire was the lotus flower tattooed on her right shoulder.

Someone snapped their fingers in his face, and Lucian blinked, realizing Mortimer had been talking to him. "Are you okay?" his former friend asked him with a look of concern.

Lucian glared at Mortimer, someone he used to consider a friend. "As if you care," he snarled and snagged the woman's wrist, unable to resist getting her alone. He was behaving like a barbarian, but he couldn't help it. Across the room, he could see Jackson ogling the Chieftain and that pissed him off royally as well. She was displaying herself for every man to stare at, and he didn't even know her name.

"Stop right now, you ass," she hissed with a good solid punch to his stomach that made him catch his breath. "Who in the hell do you think you are?"

"Your name," he demanded when he caught his breath, dragging her into the garage. He was about to go insane. Since the moment he'd seen her, he'd needed to know her name, needed to feel her against him, needed her to understand she was going to be his.

Stopping on the other side of the door, he shut it, pulling her against him, and purred in instant relief. Just feeling her curves against his body was a balm to his soul. She fit him perfectly, her heels putting her face almost on level with his.

"Your name," he demanded again, softer this time, breathing in her scent. She attempted to push him away, but vampire strength was still more powerful than a Chieftain's strength any day. He set his tongue against the curl of the tattoo that had teased him in the other room.

She gasped. "Ruby! My name's Ruby Fontenot-Blue, Ruby Blue of the Elkfire Line," she whispered, her eyes falling closed, her neck turned to the side.

Ruby. It suited her, Lucian decided, and set his teeth to her delicate skin, not biting, but teasing. Her body tensed, her nipples hardened and pushed into his chest through the thin material of her dress and his T-shirt. He responded by growling in approval and slipping a large thigh between hers. He wanted her and he wanted her now.

"Lucian," a voice said from far away. He ignored it. It wasn't as important as imprinting his scent and touch upon this female. Instinct told him he needed to leave his mark on her now or she'd try to rebuff him later. Even if he couldn't have her forever, nothing said he couldn't have her for a little while. "Lucian, you have to let her go. The others are getting restless thinking you're mauling her," Kali said as she moved closer.

Ruby stiffened as the sensual haze he'd managed to cocoon her in began to unravel. She wedged her arms between them to give herself some distance. "You're Lucian Ravenswaay," she said hoarsely. "You're the Oculum-se."

Lucian nodded, his eyes heavy with desire as he studied her face up close. The symbols of her new lineage fit her bone structure as if they'd been tailor-made for her. Her lips were puffy from desire. Her tongue swept out and left a slight sheen on them. He growled.

"You were the one sent to capture me for Council?" she asked him, fear in her eyes.

For a moment, Lucian had no idea what she was talking about and then he remembered. The Councilors had decreed the only way to preserve the existence of the Lineage Chieftain was to lock away the last one. At the time, Lucian had just shrugged and done as he was told. But since this wasn't so far from the plot he'd had concerning imprisoning Ruby on his estate, Lucian could see now how it had merit. He could keep her safe at his place and enjoy her body as long as he desired.

"I did not vote on that issue, Ruby," he assured her, his thumb caressing her cheekbone. He was pleased by the approving light in her eyes. "I will insist upon keeping you on my estate instead. For your safety," he added quickly when she looked upset.

* * * *

Ruby found the power to push Lucian away. She might've allowed him a few liberties because he was a sexy bastard, but no one was locking her up whether it was for her safety or not.

"I don't think so, bubba," she said with more authority than she felt. She straightened her dress and tried to ignore her hormones, which were urging her to crawl all over him. Those urges were against her nature, which made her trust them even less.

Damn, he was hot. He was wearing a black V-neck cashmere Tshirt that caressed every inch of his impressive torso, stretching with everything it had to cover him. The black cargos he was wearing did something for his backside that should've been illegal. For being dressed down, he still managed to look elegant. His hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail and a few strands had fallen to frame either side of his face.

It took all of her considerable will not to fan herself right then and there. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest because the girls were still excited to see him and his eyes were glued on them, which made it very hard to have a serious conversation.

"I'm not going to be locked up anywhere. I have several perfectly safe homes left to me by my predecessor. I'll stay at one of them," she said firmly.

He smiled at her, his eyes soft and kind. He was surely about to piss her off. "Not even Julius stayed at any of his homes because they weren't secure. You're much better off on my estate, Ruby," he said gently, stepping up and touching her hair, then tracing his callused hand over the tattoo on her face. "You will want for nothing with me," he assured her, his eyelids heavy with sexual need and, oh boy, was her body responding.

If Kali hadn't been watching, Ruby was afraid she might've lost her spine and caved in. Warmth pulsed from the mark on her shoulder. She had to choose wisely, she reminded herself. The weight of more than just her love life sat on her shoulders.

"No," Ruby said firmly, turning her face away from his hand.

She saw the flare of anger in his green eyes. Oh, boy. She'd seen this guy in action, and he was a complete beast. In her heart, she knew he wouldn't hurt her, but she also didn't think he would let her just leave either. In the last hours she'd spend with Kali and Savio, Ruby had learned a lot about this world. She'd learned that vampires have almost as much pride as the angels do. She'd learned that the nymphs were jealous of the succubi because they could have more sexual partners. Demons from the lower ranks were childlike in their thought processes and could be easily swayed by either side, so they were rarely let out without a guardian. But there were still so many things for her to learn, and she didn't want to get bogged down with rules her first week in.

Kali had warned her that was something she most likely wouldn't be able to avoid. "They're going to want to watch you like a hawk. You're the last of your kind until you can begin to apprentice more Chieftains. That takes centuries, Ruby."

"I'm sure we can come up with a compromise," Ruby had said confidently as she'd had her hair cut and colored.

Kali had looked skeptical but hadn't said anything else. Ruby was beginning to realize maybe she shouldn't have been so arrogant to think she could come in and change hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years of tradition overnight.

Ruby watched Lucian's face and saw he was plotting something, but he stepped away from her. Strangely enough, she felt the immediate loss of his warmth. *Pull yourself together, woman,* she told herself sternly.

"As you wish," he said curtly, bowing to her as she walked back to the shop.

He kept pace with her and she knew he watched her. The sensation made her stomach clench and the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up. When they entered the room again, the two people Lucian had arrived with looked entirely too interested in them.

One was the blonde woman whom she'd followed to the hotel and the other was a man Ruby had never seen before. He was handsome in a craggy way with his fair hair and dark eyes. He winked at her, which caused Lucian to growl for some reason. Really, he was one of the most unfriendly men she'd ever met. Well, unfriendly to everyone but her, she amended. He stuck close to her as she returned to Mortimer's side.

"Is everything okay?" Mortimer asked her, his gaze flicking to her neck.

Ruby frowned darkly. Had Lucian given her a hickey? She shot him a fierce look, which he countered with a smug expression. She growled at Lucian, which in turn made Mortimer choke on his gin and tonic.

Smiling sweetly at the handsome vampire, she cooed, "Everything is just fine. Now, what was it you were saying about tonight's charity?" Ruby might've even fluttered her eyelashes, but she wasn't certain. She was feeling a little insane at this point.

Lucian looked sour and gulped down the scotch his friend pressed into his hand while standing guard over her. The succubus, Persephone, came by a few times to talk with him although all he did was snarl at her, which seemed to cause her endless amusement.

"The charity is to benefit the Guardian Elite Widow's fund," Mortimer answered her, his charming smile like candy for the soul. Really, these guys were so handsome a girl could lose her head. She only admired him as one would a pretty picture, but if it tweaked Lucian's nose at the same time, so be it. "The fund was set up by my family when the first Guardian fell in the line of duty, leaving his mate and family with no means to support them. We auction paintings, designer gowns made by our very own Savio, and dates with some of the Veil's most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes."

"What is the Guardian Elite?" Ruby asked, intrigued. It sounded like a police force.

All conversation in the room stopped abruptly as everyone stared at her. With the exception of Kali, who knew her origins, everyone had assumed she was one of them.

Akorn, one of the supermodel demons, sidled closer, looking intrigued, scandalized, and confused. "How come you've never heard of the Guardian Elite? I mean, like, everyone's heard of them," she said in her high, breathy voice.

Weth nodded her agreement, her eyes glued to Ruby as though watching a soap opera.

Ruby nibbled on her bottom lip, ignoring Lucian's tortured groan. Kali looked impassive, as though she were urging Ruby to make her own decision on how to handle the situation. Stella was watching her carefully, seeming to weigh just how much she should trust her.

Deciding that truth was stranger than fiction, Ruby decided to go with that. "Up until the day I met Julius Blue, I was a hermit," she said quietly. Everyone went "aah," as though that explained everything. "A human hermit," she added.

The silence was so profound Ruby could hear the blood rushing through her arteries and she was certain the vampires were hearing the same thing. She had to hand it to the Veilerians, they played their cards close to their chest. There were no sudden exclamations of shock, no grunts, and no sudden flares of temper, nothing to show that anyone was surprised. If anything, Lucian looked like a kid who'd missed out on Christmas and his friend, Jackson, looked amused.

"Well, this is a refreshing change," Persephone declared from the other side of the room. She came forward, her allure preceding her. "I knew Julius for—well, I'd rather not say how long I knew him—but, I always thought the Chieftains would have been better off with new traditions." She stopped in front of Ruby, looking up at her from her even five foot height. "I think you are a wonderful addition to our world, Ruby Blue."

With that said, Persephone raised two fingers to her mouth and then her forehead in what appeared to be a formal salute. Ruby looked at Kali in confusion. Kali imitated Persephone, so Ruby did the same. Persephone beamed, opening her arms wide.

When Ruby leaned over to hug the succubus, Persephone whispered in her ear, "You must come to my home and meet my daughters. They would love to meet the next Chieftain, especially if she was once human."

"Yes, ma'am," Ruby whispered back.

"Please! Call me Persephone, or Mama Seph. I always wanted an even six daughters," she said impishly and brushed the hair out of Ruby's eyes. "Now, show these people you mean business."

Her heart warmed by the support, Ruby stood tall and proud. Through Kali, Persephone, and yes, even Julius, she was coming out of her shell and becoming the strong woman she'd always wanted to be.

"This is spectacular," Mortimer said, his eyes roaming over Ruby. "Would you have dinner with me?" he asked earnestly.

She eyed him warily. "Um."

He looked abashed. "I have to know what happened during the transference of power." He stepped forward, eager and far more animated than he was before. There was a light in his eyes that hadn't been there when they discussed other topics. Having those passionate violet eyes trained on her did strange things to her stomach.

"Tell her the truth, Mortie. You're a nerd," Jackson said as he came up next to them. He, too, was looking Ruby over curiously.

Never having been the target of so much male attention at once, Ruby could feel a blush creep up her body starting at her toes. Naturally, all the men studying her so carefully would be vampires and could tell by smell that the blood was traveling up her body. Lucian, Mortimer, and Jackson all watched her with rapt attention and she cursed her tendency to blush.

"Fascinating,"

"Utterly."

"Mine," Lucian growled.

"Shut up, Luc," the men said in unison.

"So, anyway, most mortals who become immortal do so through blood transfusion, spells, or bites. Your case is different, I just know it, and I'd like to discuss it with you," Mortimer said, his violet eyes almost begging her for the dinner. "I can promise you that I won't do anything but ask you delicate questions and maybe, if you were comfortable with it, take a blood sample."

Lucian clubbed him on the back of the head with his fist. "She's not going to dinner with you or giving you a blood sample. She's not going to a pleasure house with Persephone, and she isn't going to be moving into Julius' houses. She's going with me!" Lucian roared at the top of his lungs, his eyes bleeding to red, and his fangs elongating.

"Holy shit, he's going native," Father Ignacio whispered to Henri and Stella, who both nodded.

Ruby planted her hands on her hips. It was about time this vampire realized she wasn't scared of him and she sure as hell didn't belong to him. "Look here, Lucian. You're cute." He smiled. "But you're not going to tell me where I can go, what I can do, and whom I can do it with." He stopped smiling and glared. "I might be new at this whole Chieftain thing, but I am not an idiot. I know I need to be careful, and I promise I will be." He grunted. "Next, this whole thing about me belonging to you? What friggin' cave did you crawl out of? Kali assured me all the prehistoric vampires are dead already, and here you are proving her wrong." His eyes were getting redder by the moment, and she would've been scared if she hadn't been so furious.

"You're hot. I'm pretty sure if you wouldn't act like you're about to piss on me to mark your territory, I might even go so far as to let you ask me on a date, but as it stands, you're not even getting my digits." With that said, she turned around and headed for the bathroom. She needed to cool down and figure out how she was going to apologize to everyone for making a scene like this.

She had absolutely no warning when she was lifted off her feet and hoisted over a rock hard shoulder. Dangling like a sack of potatoes, Ruby had an excellent view of a rock hard ass encased in cargo pants. But even before that view, she'd known it was Lucian by the touch of his hands on her body.

"Dammit, put me down!"

"I'm going to show you what cave I crawled out of," he growled at her as he walked out the back door of the shop with her.

"You can't just leave with me, you know."

"I'm the Oculum-se. Once I'm outside Kali's security perimeter, I can do whatever the hell I want," he replied coolly and kept walking through the garage.

"Hey!" Ruby shouted at the others who were crowding the doorway watching them move away. "Someone help me!" she hollered at them.

She watched Jackson move into the middle of the crowd and read his lips. It looked like he said "live bait" and everyone went "aah" again. Kali looked surprised but pleased, and Persephone looked delighted.

Stella shouted, "I'll watch your doggy for you, Ruby! Have fun!"

"What the fuck?" Ruby shouted in fury when she realized no one was coming to her aid and fought in earnest on her own. "What's wrong with you people? You're all insane!"

She tried to use her feet, but he had her legs pinned tight against his chest. She wiggled like a fish. She used her fists and elbows on his back, aiming for his kidneys and anything else she could hit. Ruby punched one of his butt cheeks and only hurt her hand.

"Calm down," Lucian suggested with a sharp slap to her ass. As though to make it feel better, he rubbed the sting gently, but he never broke stride. "We're just going somewhere private to talk. There are some things you need to know that will make everything much less difficult."

Reaching behind her, Ruby grabbed a hank of his beautiful hair and pulled as hard as she could. He shouted but wouldn't let her go. Instead, he spanked her again. It stung and she lost her grip on his hair. Before she could blink, he had her cradled in his arms and was using the string he'd had in his hair to tie her wrists together.

"You'd better hope I don't get out of this, Lucian Ravenswaay," she promised him, feeling a fury lit within her unlike any she'd known before. "You'd better pray I don't find a way out of this because, if I do, I'm going to make you regret doing this."

He seemed to hesitate, but instead of letting her hands go free, he tied them tighter and hoisted her over his shoulder again before disappearing into the night.

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Chapter Ten

Malachi sat in his throne room, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. He was irritated beyond belief. The night they had Lucian pinned down, he should've ordered his enforcers to finish him off and continued after the Chieftain, but he hadn't been able to. He would've thought after all this time getting rid of Lucian would've been his main concern, but seeing the Oculum-se on the ground and helpless had touched a part of him he hadn't come in contact with in ages.

"You're troubled," Pet said tonelessly.

Malachi snorted and rolled his eyes to get a good look at his companion. Pet wore its mandatory veil and shapeless robes. It tilted its head to the side in an alien movement demons couldn't have managed.

"Why wouldn't I be troubled?" he asked. "I let my rival go without ending it between us once and for all." *And I don't know why I didn't*, he added silently.

"You know why you did it. You just haven't admitted it to yourself yet," Pet said, echoing his thoughts in that same toneless voice.

Malachi repressed a shiver. It was damned eerie how easily Pet could read his mind. He wasn't even sure what Pet was other than something he'd found as an infant and taken under his wing as a tool to be used in his campaign against the Veil. What he did know was that Pet was a dangerous asset in his fight.

He let out a frustrated growl. The Veil was full of purists who believed Halflings like himself were abominations, not deserving of the smallest of dignities or freedoms. He was living proof Halflings were second class citizens, and his purpose was to prove they were wrong. He could care less about humans. He just wanted rights.

Pet's foretelling abilities had come in handy too many times to count. His associate's numerous sneak attacks against the Veilerians left Malachi distinctly uncomfortable, and Pet's predictions made him feel safer. There really was no honor among thieves, he thought with a snort. Or at least that's what he kept telling himself.

"It doesn't mean anything," he said, snapping out of his reverie with a start, eyes glowing red in warning at his pet.

The bland expression in the blue eyes that met his through the gauzy veil showed Pet had no fear of him. Most of the time Pet's lack of fear made him proud, but today it just pissed him off. Malachi decided when the Chieftain joined his cause, he would put her to use immediately by having her find a replacement for Pet.

"Master!" One of his werewolf generals ran in, panting heavily as he fell to his knees in front of Malachi's throne.

Pissed at having his peace disturbed, Malachi roared at the werewolf. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Master, forgive me." The werewolf cowered, lowering his head submissively. "We just learned that Harrity's gang jumped the Veilerian group we fought last night, killing two."

"Dammit!" Malachi hissed, running a hand through his hair.

His associate's goons were making a mess of his carefully thought-out plans. He'd have to talk with them before he made any further attempts to get the Chieftain out of Lucian's hands. He wasn't opposed to violence, but his colleague's reckless fights and bloody nature were going to cause Malachi more trouble than he'd anticipated. This wasn't the kind of fight he'd intended when he began this venture. "Leave and keep me updated on what else that bunch of idiots is doing."

The werewolf galloped in his rush to leave the throne room, nearly knocking over the little female imp hovering at the entrance.

"Master," she whimpered from the doorway.

Malachi waved the imp forward, trying to ignore his growing headache. Imps were notoriously flighty, but they were useful when his squadron leaders were in the field and couldn't come in person for reports. The female imp scampered forward, her impressive rack bouncing with her every step until she stood before him. Her silvery skin was marked with Celtic tattoos announcing her station and name.

Standing with her hands folded in front of her, which just so happened to push her breasts together, forming a most impressive cleavage, the imp recited from memory, "Master wants to inform His Highness that the Oculum-se has abducted the Chieftain from Oracle Kali's sanctuary. Master believes the Oculum-se is bringing the Chieftain to one of his estates but is unable to say which of the estates that is at this time. Master will keep His Highness informed of the Oculum-se's movements and would like His Highness to enjoy the services of his favorite imp, Vanca." She finished with a giggle and flutter of her eyelashes.

Malachi stroked his chin. So Lucian had abducted the woman from a place of sanctuary. Either he was working on his own, or the Council was pushing for her immediate placement in protective custody. Malachi was inclined to believe Lucian was working on his own. It was just the type of cowboy thing he would do. He'd have to send a message to his contact and find out what the next move should be.

Vanca licked her lips, catching Malachi's eye. Parts of his body stirred to life, which in turn caught her eye. Except it wasn't his way to take advantage of his lesser soldiers, even though his generals kept throwing them in his path.

"You may leave," he told the imp, ignoring her disappointed expression.

It wasn't easy being the bane of the Veil, he thought as she shuffled out of the room, dragging her feet like a reluctant child.

From its cage, not five feet away, Pet looked on impassively.

* * * *

Lucian didn't remember much of the trip between Kali's shop and his estate just north of Cypress Point. He was almost certain he stole a car and stuffed Ruby in the passenger seat. From the minute he harnessed her in the seat so she couldn't escape, she'd cursed him and his entire bloodline from the first Ravenswaay all the way to their very last descendant.

She'd screamed and railed at him until she was hoarse. Even then, she hadn't given up, kicking the dashboard, beating against the windows, clubbing him with her tied fists. Finally, he'd had to put her in the trunk of the car. That hadn't been pretty.

The hate in her eyes had threatened to neuter him before he even closed the lid, and he deeply regretted having to go to such lengths to protect her. However, he wasn't about to leave her life to chance. His primal instincts demanded he keep her safe, even if he couldn't have her.

Damn, why did she have to begun life as a human? There was no way she'd agree to being a quick toss. He wasn't quite ready to relinquish his freedom, and he sure as hell wasn't going to retire from Council before he even got to it.

When he pulled in the gates of his home along the bayou, he had never seen anything so welcoming. Not technically an estate by other people's standards, his home had once been part of a working sugarcane farm. At the turn of the century, he'd released the land to the family who'd taken care of the house for him and they worked the land now. He just lived in the cottage at the back of the property line.

The stolen car rolled along the dark farm lane, the only sounds Ruby's constant hoarse cursing from the trunk and the crickets in the fields. Surrounded on all sides by massive oak trees, which provided extensive shading during all hours of the day, the house was almost fully obscured by those who didn't know what they were looking for. If by chance someone did see it, they didn't dare approach as it looked completely dilapidated. The farmhands thought the house was abandoned, but the warding he'd spent a fortune on held fast and kept it from being broken into.

He'd call his sentinel caretakers in the morning to let them know he was home, he decided. Getting out of the car, Lucian went around to the trunk and grimaced. She sounded so pissed, he thought. He grinned. He liked a woman with fire, and Ruby seemed to radiate it.

He opened the trunk and the full sound of her shouts escalated, piercing the night sky. The crickets went silent. She was so furious she wasn't even making sense. Lucian hefted her out of the trunk and only caught some words here and there. The general gist was he was a bastard and she was going to cut off his balls, hate him forever, his mother would be disappointed in him, she hoped his favorite body part fell off, she hated him, he was never touching her ever again, she hated him, she was going to kill him, rinse and repeat.

Carrying his burden into the house, Lucian pressed the alarm panel next to the door, which effectively locked down the entire house. It would alert him if anyone opened or even breathed on any of the exterior windows and doors. The alarm, coupled with the wards, would keep Ruby safe from the outside world and herself, and he could finally breathe easier.

Without turning on a single light, he carried Ruby through the first floor, up the narrow stairs, to the guest bedroom. He dumped her on the bed and stepped back.

She came at him with claws bared.

"Ruby," he said calmly, holding her wrists. "Ruby, calm down."

She was insensible. Lucian could feel her fear and ached for having caused it. Unsure of how to snap her out of it, he did something he swore he'd never do to a woman. Ever. He gave her a sharp, yet gentle, slap on the cheek.

Her screeching stopped like he'd hit a power button. She stared up at him, her eyes cold.

"Ruby. Please listen to me. I will explain everything if you calm down for me, I promise," Lucian said soothingly, pressing a gentle kiss to the cheek he'd slapped.

Ruby flinched away from him, turning her face to the side.

Feeling an ache in the vicinity of his heart, Lucian released her and untied her hands. "There's a bathroom through there," he said with a nod to the doorway behind her. "There's nothing in there for you to use as a weapon. No window, no mirrors, no razors, or anything. I thought you might want to freshen up and calm down so we could talk like civilized adults."

The coldness in her expression froze his heart. "Civilized adults?" she hissed, a sneer on her face. "Civilized adults don't act possessive for no apparent fucking reason. Civilized adults don't abduct each other, and they don't throw them in trunks. Don't talk to me about being civilized, Lucian Ravenswaay." With that said, she turned on her heel and stalked to the bathroom, closing the door behind her with a soft snick.

Lucian had to hand it to her. She hadn't been in the Veil for long, but she'd definitely learned names have power and using someone's full name compelled them to listen to you.

He dragged a hand through his hair, forcing out a deep breath. He'd fucked this entire thing up royally, he thought in disgust. Instead of going all Alpha on her, he should've done what he usually did with women and wined and dined her.

But the mating instinct had taken over, making him desperate for her. Now, she wanted nothing to do with him while he didn't think he could survive if he didn't have her right this minute.

Lucian let out a harsh bark of laughter. With the way he'd handled things, he was lucky if she even looked at him in the next three hundred years. He rubbed a hand over his face. Still, he couldn't deny that he felt immense relief having her here under his roof. Seating himself on the edge of the queen size bed, he heard the water running in the bathroom and wondered what was going through her mind.

* * * *

Ruby ran the water in the sink and sat on the edge of the tub with her legs crossed. Her raised leg bounced like mad. She was on the verge of spontaneous combustion. The fury burning in the pit of her stomach was so great that if she didn't squelch it soon, it was going to consume her.

How could he do that to her, she asked herself angrily, wiping at the infuriated tears falling from her eyes. She barely knew the guy and he hauled off and not only kidnapped her, but publicly humiliated her and declared her as *his*. His! She snorted, blowing her nose on some bunched up toilet paper. The bastard. Arrogant vampire scum, she screamed silently in her head.

Ruby might not have been the most sexually savvy woman in the world, but even she could tell when a man was interested in her and Lucian wanted her. She'd felt the erection pressed against her body and seen the flush on his cheeks when he'd inhaled her scent. She was scared he would seduce her and then turn her over to the rest of council for her own protection. Yeah right. They were planning to keep her where they could use her for their own purposes.

A little sob tore out of her throat, and she covered her face with both hands. Ruby hated to be out of control. This tearfest constituted being out of control, and Lucian was going to pay.

A tentative knock sounded at the door. A masculine throat cleared. "Are you okay?"

"Go away," Ruby said with as much dignity as she could, considering she was talking through her nose.

"I don't want you to make yourself sick," he said, his voice sounding oh so nice.

Lying bastard, she thought. "My health is none of your concern, Lucian."

"Yes, it is."

Ruby stood up and threw open the bathroom door. "I don't care if I'm on my death bed and the only thing that stands between me and a cold grave is one touch of your finger."

She slammed the door again and washed her face. Enough of this feeling sorry for herself.

* * * *

Lucian stared at the closed door in stunned disbelief. Okay, that was a bit harsh, he thought, but then she was pissed. Women said things when they were pissed off. If she understood his concern and her possible place in his life, she'd calm down and see reason, he told himself.

He retreated to the other side of the room to wait for her. Minutes, hours, years later the bathroom door opened again and Ruby emerged, face washed, eyes cold. The makeup that had turned her from pretty to stunning was gone, the sparkle and confidence that had begun to meld to her aura had leeched away, leaving her looking washed-out and pale.

"Ruby," he started, his voice caught in his throat.

She raised her hand, refusing to meet his eyes. "I'm only going to say this once," she said, all trace of fire gone from her eyes. Even her vibrant tattoos seemed somehow drained of color. "I don't care why you did it, Lucian. I'm a person, not baggage for you to haul around and claim everywhere you go. You and Council can stuff your reasons and your excuses up your collective asses for all I care." The cold snap of her voice gave testimony to just how furious she still was.

"I think you might be my life-mate," he blurted and then felt like an idiot. Ruby made a rude buzzing sound like something out of a game show. "Aw, good answer, but no prize, Lucian." She scoffed. "Kali explained mates to me. Life-mates to vampires, pack mates to weres, bond mates to the rest of the Veil. Her words were, and I'm quoting here," she said, face and voice softening just enough to illustrate how much he'd screwed up. "'Mates are what make the lives of immortals bearable, Ruby. Most Veilerians spend their entire lives searching for that perfect one and when they find them, that person clicks with them so perfectly, so beautifully, it's like they're two halves of a whole." The softness melted away like wax. "Funny, she didn't mention kidnappings, threats, and other things when she talked about them." She made a bitter sound and flicked a harsh glance at him. "Now, that's out of the way. Is this my room, or do you have a cell you want to put me in?"

Lucian boiled with anger again. "You're not a prisoner, dammit."

"Is this my room, or is there a cell you want to put me in?" she repeated coldly, refusing to look at him again.

The muscles in his jaw bunching with the effort to hold back a growl, he ground out, "This is your room, and you're my guest."

"In that case, I'd like some privacy."

Lucian counted to ten, staring at the woman who seemed determined to drive him insane. Something shimmered in her eyes, buried beneath her obvious anger, and he recognized it as humiliation. Regret ate at him like acid. She was a newly made immortal, and he'd shredded her dignity like tissue in front of some of the most prominent members of their community. She may not have known they were so important, but Ruby instinctively knew her first foray into Veilerian society wouldn't be easy, especially after having admitted she was a human.

Biting back his need to express how sorry he was, Lucian nodded shortly and left the room. In the hallway, he stood on the other side of the door, feeling the vibrations of her energy calling out to him, beckoning him to attempt the bond. He began to sweat. He needed her like nothing in the world, and he'd ruined what could've been a special night for them.

Turning on his heel, he slammed his fist through the solid oak door opposite Ruby's room and went downstairs to work out his frustrations in the gym.

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Chapter Eleven

Ruby glared at the closed door. There was no way she was staying here with him even if he was the first person she'd felt no shyness or hesitancy about. Stunned at the revelation, she sank onto the bed. What did that mean? Could she really be his life-mate? Could her soul have recognized him as its other half even though she was so pissed at him?

Ruby remembered the instant attraction she'd felt for him, the intensity of his eyes in the alley and the possessiveness he'd displayed at the dinner. All of it called to some primal part of her that shouted, "Yes, this man is mine!" She didn't repulse him. In fact, he seemed unable to keep his hands off of her, and for a woman who'd spent her whole life believing she was abhorrent to the opposite sex, it was a heady feeling indeed.

Excitement and longing caused her heart to race and the room to fade from view. Since the death of her father, she'd denied herself the bliss of physical touch. She'd longed to be hugged, patted, her hand held, any number of simple touches other people took for granted. Now finding someone who seemed to find her attractive enough to willingly touch her made her feel like a kid in a candy store. Feeling as though her heart had wings, Ruby almost rushed out the room to follow Lucian and make him touch her again. At this point, she'd be content with a steely grip on her arm leading her back to her prison.

Ruby flopped back on the bed with a groan as she finally remembered she was a prisoner. She was craving the very man who was holding her against her will. She flung an arm over her eyes, glaring at the inside of her eye lids. Jumping up from the bed, she walked around the room.

It was simple, but lovely. The walls were a soft yellow, so light Ruby knew it was only her newly enhanced vision that registered the yellow undertones. The furnishings, a small dresser, a vanity with a large oval mirror, matching straight backed chair, and headboard, were all in dark oak. Gold and bronze silk covered the seat of the chair and the comforter on the bed. Ruby sauntered to the window, drawing back the deep brown curtains to peer through the tinted glass.

She could see there were no trees next to the house on her side. There was a thirty foot drop from her window to the ground and a flat stretch of land with no cover. Part of her brain took in the lay of the yard, noting if she could cross about a hundred feet of wide open ground and get to the fields of sugarcane, she could probably escape.

The other, less practical part of her brain, noticed how beautiful the long stalks looked under the cool moonlight, their leaves swaying gently in the light breeze. The light from the room she was in splashed in a small pool of warm gold on the grass and Ruby imagined the house looked like a lighthouse in a sea of vegetation.

Shaking her head, Ruby scrutinized the window. It looked like plain glass except for the slight tint on the panes, but she could feel some kind of pulse of energy from it. She pressed her hand against the energy, noticing it repelled her approach with a warning buzz, like a rattlesnake about to strike. The harder she pushed, the louder the buzzing got as well as the slight shock of electricity that pulsed from the energy.

The door to the bedroom flew open and banged against the wall, and there he was. Lucian, her ultimate temptation.

* * * *

Lucian's heart pounded, not just from the run he'd taken from one side of the house to the other, but also from the fear Ruby might have escaped. When he saw her standing at the window with a cross expression on her face, he relaxed, feeling like a fool. Sure, she was his responsibility until he turned her over to Council and she might possibly be his mate, but he was acting like a mother hen with one chick. Flicking his gaze over her stance, he suspected she wasn't as upset as he thought she'd be.

"You ass, there's some kind of alarm on this window!" she shouted at him, those attractive black eyes lit by unholy flames. If Lucian wasn't mistaken, which he so frequently was with her, she enjoyed their confrontations.

"Of course there's an alarm on the window," he responded, leaning against the doorjamb with a casualness he didn't feel. If anything, he wanted to cross the room, catch her in his arms, and toss her on the bed. He shifted slightly, aware that he needed to keep away from her at least until he and the rest of the Council could figure out the best course of action. "It's warded."

When she cocked an eyebrow at him and mimicked his stance against the wall next to the window, Lucian felt desire simmer through his veins. He wanted her like nothing he'd ever known before. It was an obsession he fully intended to immerse himself in when things were a little calmer. Right now wasn't the time to jump her bones and explain the mating heat to her—the urge he felt to pound into her and take her blood. She was already wary of him because he'd kidnapped her. He didn't need to add assault to the growing list against him.

"I hired a witch to ward the house against intruders and my reluctant guests," he answered her unspoken question.

He was answered with a loud snort that made his mouth twitch. "You get a lot of those then? Reluctant guests?" she asked, her eyes still sparking. Lucian told himself it was with mischief, not desire.

"Not all that many. Most of my guests are quite happy to be here."

"I'll just bet they are," she murmured, her eyes sweeping over him, the gaze like a flame licking over his skin.

Suddenly, Lucian knew he had to get out of the room. If he stayed, he'd jump her, and that was the least helpful thing for the Veil. Thinking about the people who were counting on him to keep the Chieftain safe, Lucian backed out of the room.

"You're welcome to explore the house. Just don't try to escape, please. I'd hate to have to summon the rest of the Council so early."

The smoldering black look she sent him was affirmation that she'd adhere to his rules, and Lucian stalked from the room with as much nonchalance as he could summon. Before he knew it, he was in the gym, the stereo pumped up as loud as it would go in the soundproof room, and as The Used screamed from every corner, he began to work out in the vain hope he'd wear the lust out of his system.

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Deciding to take Lucian at his word and do some exploring, Ruby changed into some sweats she'd found in the dresser. They were too big for her and not attractive at all, as they were faded from black to a charcoal grey, but they were comfortable. She put the stunning gown in the closet and hoped she could return it to the Oracle one day. She padded from the room in her bare feet.

The second floor consisted of three bedrooms, one of which she barely peeked in because just opening the door gave her a whiff of Lucian's scent. His mouthwatering essence was so strong and potent she nearly collapsed on the floor. The quick scan she'd made showed heavy furniture, shades of green, and a massive four-poster bed that looked way too comfortable. She'd slammed the door closed, leaning against the heavy oak. Lucian had an effect on her when he wasn't anywhere near. That was just wrong. The unoccupied room was plainer than the one she was using with sky blue colored walls and simple furnishings in white. Shuddering at the colors, Ruby was glad she'd gotten the yellow room.

She crept down the stairs, noticing there were no pictures on the walls upstairs or along the staircase. The foyer had beautifully polished hardwood floors the color of coffee. The walls of the foyer and the living room were the same cream color and here, there were a few pictures. Paintings graced the walls as though whoever had decorated tried to make up for the lack of personal effects upstairs. The living room was decorated in carefully matching pieces, conveying both money and calm. Ruby hated the room. There wasn't even a television.

The dining room was opposite the living room and, considering her host was a vampire, was probably the least used room in the house. Through a swinging door, Ruby entered a modern kitchen with shiny stainless steel appliances. The candy apple red walls were offset by blinding white cabinets and counters. It was a thoroughly modern room and Ruby loved it. The small island in the middle of the room had a couple of tall stools in front of it as though this was a more comfortable place to gather than the living room.

Through yet another doorway that led to the short hall next to the stairs, Ruby found the den. With a soft sigh, she sank into the soft leather of the sofa, easing into its overstuffed depths gratefully. This room, unlike the two front rooms, was comfortable. The furnishings were expensive, of course, but more relaxed. Deep, overstuffed sofas, an amazing entertainment center stacked with DVDs and CDs, and the biggest flat screen television she'd ever seen. Ruby heaved herself out of the deep sofa and peeked behind the cabinet doors, not surprised to find an Xbox 360 as well as a full complement of games. Her hands itched for a little video game action, but her attention was pulled away from the entertainment in the cabinet to a door on the far end of the den.

On her way to the door, she noted with approval the beautiful billiard table with its impeccable scarlet red felt top. There was a bar along the wall next to the door where Ruby paused. There was no pulse of electricity or energy telling her this was an exterior door. Curious as to the throbbing making the floors vibrate, Ruby took a breath and opened it a crack.

Raucous guitars and screaming lyrics came at her like a battering ram, making her jump a bit. The aggressive music matched the rhythmic pounding coming from further in the room.

She stepped in to peek and gasped loudly. Lucian, wearing nothing more than a pair of sweat pants that had been cut into shorts, was working with a speed bag, his arms moving so fast they were impossible to see. Sweat glistened on his back as he worked out, swaying in deadly rhythm.

Ruby didn't consider herself a very passionate woman, nor did she consider herself a woman who looked at men as objects. For too many years, she'd avoided people and men had never been her favorite species, but in that moment, she felt completely apart from the woman she'd been before.

He was magnificent. His broad shoulders flexed and bunched with his every move, bands of muscle coiling down his back with each flex of his body. His hair was pulled into a ponytail that would've looked feminine if it hadn't bared the strong column of his throat. His tight backside bunched as he moved his feet in time with his punches.

He was graceful and powerful, and something deep within her wanted to take this man. Feeling herself softening towards him, she blinked, closing the door before he noticed her watching him. Once on the other side of the oak, Ruby pressed her back to the door, and her chest rose and fell with a combination of shock and desire. She couldn't allow herself to soften towards the Oculum-se. He'd keep her as a prisoner of the Council forever, and after having a small taste of her new life, she suddenly craved so much more. She craved the freedom to explore the Veil and find her own way, not something Council had mapped out for her.

Determined, she stalked away from the door that led to temptation and vowed to learn more about the world she now inhabited.

Chapter Twelve

Lucian knew it the minute Ruby came into the gym but refused to acknowledge her. If he did, the fire that had ignited in him upstairs would engulf both of them. Instead, he concentrated on matching his punches to the pounding rhythm of Slipknot. He felt the energy arching between him and Ruby fade slightly as she closed the door again.

Hunching his shoulders a bit, he punched the bag one last time, not surprised to see it break off from its anchor to sail across the room. He had to figure out what he was going to do with Ruby. His body tensed as his soul demanded he take her to slake this burning lust and find out if she truly was his mate, while logic demanded he notify the other Councilors to inform them the Chieftain had been found.

He sighed and leaned against the wall. His body hummed for the kind of action only Ruby could give him, but his duties as the Oculum-se meant he had to see past his physical needs. There was more at stake here than a little lust and mating instinct.

Lucian rubbed a hand across his chest, trying to massage the pain out of his heart. Ruby would hate him, but it was for the best that she go into Council's protective custody. None of the other Chieftains had been under their close protection before, which was why she was the last one. Lucian had no doubt that, between him and his colleagues, they could keep Ruby safe forever and right now forever sounded good, even if it meant she'd never be his.

Lucian grabbed a T-shirt after drying himself with a small towel, shrugging into the soft material before he entered the den. He expected to find Ruby waiting for him on the other side of the door watching a movie or waiting with bated breath for his appearance. He knew she was attracted to him. He had smelled her arousal at the dinner party and again upstairs. What he hadn't expected was to see her engrossed in a book she must've brought from the parlor.

"I see you made yourself at home," he said quietly, hoping to keep her relaxed. She looked up at him with dazed eyes before going back to the book.

Thinking perhaps she was shy because she'd seen him in such a primal light, Lucian stepped to the bar and poured a scotch before turning back to her. She looked engrossed and it was then he realized she wasn't embarrassed by him. She was completely immersed in the book. Disgruntled because she should've been just as tied up in knots as he was, Lucian plopped on the sofa next to her, bumping into her.

She huffed, shot him a glare, and went right back to reading.

"What are you reading?" he asked idly, reaching for the remote. He was pretty sure there was a football game on. He began flipping through the channels with a speed that would've made humans vomit.

"Hmm," she hummed, her brow furrowed. It was a distracted sound designed to thoroughly irritate Lucian, making him grit his teeth.

He'd come out here expecting to see a flustered Ruby. Hell, he would've even made do with an aroused Ruby, but not the woman who acted like he was no more desirable than a trip to the dentist. Annoyed with himself, Lucian took it out on her. He grabbed the book out of her hands and flipped it closed to see the title. "Min's Guide to the Veil—an Eturian and Veilerian Society Overview. What the hell is this?" he asked irritably.

Ruby snatched the book out of his hands again, glaring at him with so much heat Lucian was surprised his body didn't burst into flames. "I found it in the sitting room, and since Kali told me I should learn about this world, that's what I'm doing," she grit out, opening the book to find her place. "Why? You only have to ask someone and get all the answers you want," he scoffed, reaching for the book again.

He was determined to have her undivided attention. Since he'd seen her the night before, she was constantly in his thoughts and even if he couldn't keep her until the danger had passed, it didn't mean he couldn't get to know her.

"I don't want to ask questions until I've at least understood what kind of world I've stepped into."

"Ask me."

"You won't give me an unbiased opinion," she held onto the book, holding it to her chest protectively.

That didn't stop Lucian from making a grab at it. He kept his face impassive because he didn't want her to realize how much he enjoyed having the backs of his knuckles pressed against her soft breast.

"I'm unbiased," he hissed between his teeth, trying to tug the book from her clutches. She was holding onto it like it was her only protection from evil. Lucian huffed out a laugh, surprised that she was so strong.

They grappled for several long minutes before Lucian was able to tear the book out of her arms and fling it across the room. "Now," he said with no small satisfaction and exaggerated calm. "Ask me."

"Who are the Eturi?"

Lucian nearly spat on his floor in disgust. "They're the worst group of individuals on Earth. About two hundred years ago, there were no factions. Things were either mundane—the human world—or Veilerian—our world. Then Malachi, you saw him in the alley, forswore his oath as a Guardian and began gathering allies. Before any of us knew it, he'd amassed a following of thousands. Their whole purpose is to rip the Veil apart and bring humankind to its knees. There is no mercy in them, for their leader has none. There is no compassion, no love, no fear, for Malachi feels none of these things."

Ruby said nothing, her black eyes watching him carefully.

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Lucian had to make her understand. "They don't care how they get what they want as long as they get it. If it means killing or torturing, they'll do it. If it means lying and charming others, they do it. Nothing is sacred to them. No one's pain is more important than their agenda. They're monsters with no moral code."

"So, they'd kidnap someone and hold them against their will?" Lucian nodded. Ruby tapped her chin softly, her eyes studying him. "They'd promise no harm would come to their captive and guarantee safe passage?" Lucian nodded again, though he was starting to get a bad feeling about her questions. "They'd humiliate and shame anyone who didn't share their sentiments?"

Lucian knew where this was going and was determined to put a stop to it. "I am not like the Eturi," he swore viciously. "The Veilerian Council follows a very strict code of conduct that won't allow us to harm—"

"Which you did anyway!" she retaliated, jumping to her feet. Standing in front of him with her feet braced apart and hands on her hips, she reminded Lucian of a warrior woman. "You don't follow any code other than one you make up in your mind, Lucian. I would have listened to your side of the argument and decided whether or not to come with you, but you gave me no choice! I am a neutral party. I have no stake in either the Veil or the Eturi, but you seem to think only the Veil should use my skills."

She walked away from him in disgust, picking up the book that had fallen on the floor. "Do you know what this book says about Chieftains?" she asked softly. She carried the book over to the sofa and sat back down. Opening the pages, she flipped through them before finding her spot.

"Neither good nor evil, the Chieftains' main concern is the survival of all. They were gifted with the powers to choose kings, queens, alphas, and masters, yet no other gift has been abused more than theirs. Instead of being revered by the community, they were hounded, tortured, killed, all for the sake of family tradition. Because of the mass persecution Chieftains suffered through the centuries, there are very few left and, even now, their powers grow stronger, for the strength of all ten Chieftain Lines condensed into the remaining few. The power of their magic, combined with the numerous losses they have faced over the years, has ensured that the new generations of Chieftains are stronger than ever, though they are also more pursued than ever.

Traditionally, Chieftains seek no shelter from anyone barring Oracles, for they too are neutral. The neutrality of the Chieftain is the most important key to their powers. To shift that balance would begin a shift in the entire community, whether it be Veilerian or Eturian. It has been long theorized that a Chieftain who sways to the good or evil will bring about the end of the world for pure good cannot survive without pure evil..."

Ruby looked back up at him. "By holding me here, you're upsetting the balance."

Lucian frowned into space, ignoring the pleading look in her eyes. Logically, he knew what she was saying was true. Chieftains weren't meant to belong to any particular group. They were traditionally nomads, traveling from region to region, dispensing their expertise. The loss of so many Chieftains through the centuries meant they were needed more than ever, and Ruby was the last one.

She was asking the impossible, he thought. Even if he hadn't wanted her so damn much, he would never leave a newly transitioned Veilerian to the greedy, grasping general populous of the Veil. If she were left unguarded in the world, the Eturi, Malachi, would find her and use her for their purposes. He ignored the twinge of conscience reminding him that he and the Council were doing the same thing, though they called it for the greater good.

"You have to let me go, or there will be consequences that no one will want to suffer," Ruby said with eerie composure.

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Ruby waited in vain for Lucian to concede her point. Without another word to her, he got up, mumbled something about needing to get some rest and asked her to follow him upstairs.

Knowing that arguing with him would be useless, Ruby went to her room and stared at the ceiling for hours. If she could just make him see her need to be independent and free was as strong as his need to fulfill his duties as the Oculum-se, then they could work with a strong foundation of respect. As it was Lucian saw her only as a female, a former human female he wanted to bed, who also happened to be the Chieftain.

She sighed and curled under the covers. Her first full day on the job hadn't turned out as well as she would've hoped. She'd managed to get herself kidnapped by a sexy, overprotective vampire, but she could cope. She'd just have to work on him.

Ruby instinctively knew having Lucian on her side would help her more than pushing him away. And since he hadn't any indication of when he would let her go, she had time to work with. She needed to use that time to learn more about her new world and try to convince Lucian her new position was not something she would be taking for granted.

Chapter Thirteen

Ruby had been certain she wouldn't get a bit of sleep, but surprisingly, she slept the entire night through for the first time since this whole mess began. She woke up the next evening and lay there staring at the ceiling.

How had it come to this? She'd actually slept in a vampire's house and hadn't feared being eaten. She let out a muffled laugh. Not that she would've minded. Lucian was hot with a capital H.

A knock sounded at the door. "You up?"

Speak of the vampire, she thought with a snicker. "Yeah," she called back.

There was a short silence. "I'll pick up something to eat. Please don't leave the house, Chieftain."

Ruby snorted to herself. "Sure, sure." Not like she had anywhere to go anyway, she thought. Lucian had sounded so desperately worried she was going to hightail it out of here it'd almost made her heart melt.

Of course he's worried you're going to run, she told herself as she jumped out of bed, heading to the bathroom. He wants to be sure he can turn you over to Council, and he can't do that if you run again.

Her good mood dissipating like morning fog, Ruby grumbled her way through her ablutions, making a face at the wall where the mirror should be. Glad he hadn't taken the soaps and shampoos from the bathroom, she had a quick shower, hurrying through her scrubbing in case he came back early.

She went downstairs, determined to get back to the books Lucian was just as determined to steer her away from. Poking around in the closet beneath the stairs, she found a box of old textbooks with Lucian's name in them. Wondering exactly where he'd gone to school, Ruby dragged the box to the den, and settled in for a good long read.

She had no idea how much time passed, but she heard Lucian come in, his voice calling for her. Ruby rolled her eyes as he let out another semi-frantic bellow.

"What?" she shouted back at him, refusing to get up. The vampire had no manners, she thought with a huff.

He appeared in the doorway, his eyes going from half-wild to calm. Uh huh, she thought with a smirk. He thought she'd run anyway. Teach him to jump to conclusions about her.

"I brought some food back," he said as though he hadn't just torn through the house like a whirlwind.

"Are you eating?" Ruby asked him, wondering if vampires ate at all or if they were strictly liquid diet beings.

His luscious lips curved into a smirk, drawing Ruby's gaze to them. "Yeah, I'm eating."

Ruby shrugged as though she could care less and fought her way out of the sofa. It was so comfortable it just sucked you in, and getting out was nearly impossible. Once out of the cushions, she trailed Lucian to the kitchen.

She'd guessed right, she thought as they took seats at the island. This was where most of the meals were taken and she was glad for that. The dining room was intimidating.

Lucian pulled out a couple of Styrofoam containers of steaming food that smelled so good Ruby's stomach rumbled with the first whiff. He shot her an almost shy grin, but said nothing about her stomach's announcement.

"I hope you like lasagna," he said, pushing a plate in front of her and tearing a bottle of water off a plastic ring. "I don't cook much, so while I was out hunting, I thought I'd pick up Gino's." "Hunting?" Ruby asked as she dug into her lasagna. It was good. She inhaled it, not caring if her manners seemed poor to him. She hadn't realized how hungry she was!

Lucian didn't appear to notice as he was consuming his food just as fast. "Yeah."

"So vampires do drink blood?" she asked once she came up for air. Deciding maybe she should show she wasn't totally lacking in manners, she patted her lips with a napkin, turning to watch Lucian eat.

He nodded, his mouth full. He waited until he'd swallowed before answering. "Vampires do feed on blood, but it isn't our sole means of nutrition. We need blood, but mostly we need the natural chemicals in blood to survive."

"What natural chemicals?"

He shrugged. "Endorphins, adrenaline, the rest of the gang. We don't produce enough of our own, so taking it from our human donors enable us to stay on an even keel."

"An even keel?" Ruby asked, feeling like a parrot.

Lucian flushed a bit. "Well, without the blood and the chemicals, we become weaker, more emotionally unstable."

Ruby thought about that for a long moment. She tried to imagine an emotionally unstable vampire and shuddered at the idea. They were very strong and fast. If they weren't on the straight and narrow...

Lucian nodded as though reading her mind. "Most vampires regulate their feeding carefully. We don't need to feed every night, but if we want to stay in top form, we do."

"What about sunlight? Is that a myth?"

He pierced her with an appraising glance. "Why?"

Ruby rolled her eyes, sitting back in her stool to glare at him. "You told me I could ask you anything I wanted," she complained.

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"Fine, fine," he mumbled. "No, it isn't a myth. We don't burst into flames right away or anything, but the longer we're in the sun, the weaker we become until finally we die."

Ruby studied him skeptically, taking in his sun kissed skin.

He grinned at her. "Okay, here's the deal. Every race has two stepping stones until they reach full strength. The first is their immortality. Each race physically matures anywhere between their late teens to mid-thirties," he explained, leaning forward on the island. "The second transition is different for each race and can range anywhere between their forties or hundreds of years in some cases. Before that age, everyone is almost identical. No magic, no special abilities or drawbacks, except for heightened senses, which is a survival skill."

She frowned at him, trying to figure it out. "There are two ages of maturity?" she asked, puzzled.

Connor shrugged. "Think of it like humans consider eighteen year olds to be adults, but they still have to wait until they're twenty-one to do any of the good stuff. It's only after the second transition they come into their powers. Vampires are called fledglings before the transition. We don't drink blood, and we aren't allergic to the sun. We're also helpless. Most parents hire Sentinels for their children until they reach transition."

"Wow," she mumbled, trying to imagine being helpless one day and a predator the next. "When do vampires reach transition?"

Lucian shrugged his wide shoulders, scooping up his last bite of lasagna. "It depends. Most vampires reach their first transition by twenty-five. Some transition a lot earlier, others a lot later. The second transition is closer to a hundred years before it kicks in. We don't know what causes it. We just know it happens."

"When did you reach your transition?" she asked, suddenly curious about him.

He sat back, thinking. "The first was at thirty-two, the second was at ninety-three."

"And how old are you now?"

"Two hundred and eighty-five," he answered with a grin.

Ruby gaped at him. She figured vampires lived long lives, but nearly three hundred years? "How old do vampires get?"

He laughed. "I'm a baby compared to some of them. My parents are over five hundred years old." He sobered.

Ruby nodded, unsure how to keep the conversation going. She felt comfortable talking with him. He laughed a lot, and that was something she could appreciate.

Lucian hopped to his feet to clear the island. He threw their containers away and wiped down the cabinets. It was such a domestic thing for someone as dangerous as him to do that she stared a bit. It'd also been so long since she'd been in the presence of a man for such an extended amount of time, she felt tongue-tied.

"Can I ask you something?" he suddenly said, leaning over the island towards her.

"Sure," she answered a bit uncertain. It wasn't like she'd led an exciting life. There had been no Sentinels to keep her safe, no transition to look forward to.

"Why did you become a hermit?" he asked, his eyes intent on her face.

Ruby could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks. He would ask *that* question, she thought sourly even while she knew it was an honest inquiry. Better to just yank the Band-Aid off instead of pick at it, she told herself.

"As you can see, I'm not exactly a small woman. When I was a teenager, I was bigger and stronger than most everyone in my class. I trusted the wrong boy, gave him my virginity, and nearly killed him when he hurt me," she answered him in an even tone as her finger traced a pattern on the granite top of the island. "His parents sued my dad, and things went from bad to worse. Every time I even looked at someone wrong, their parents would threaten to sue, and eventually Dad had nothing left to sue for. I decided I wouldn't humiliate him

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anymore and dropped out of school. I haven't left my land since then. Well, until Julius did this," she said, waving a hand at her face.

Ruby dared to peek at Lucian and saw he was studying her closely, as though trying to see through her. His eyes weren't hard, but compassionate. She stiffened.

"Don't pity me," she grit out.

"I don't pity you," he assured her as he stood up again. "I'm just trying to picture you as a teenager. I'd have been all over you like white on rice."

"Yeah, right," she snorted, getting off her stool to head back to the den.

She didn't get far because he grabbed the hem of her sweatshirt, towing her back towards him. Ruby's breath caught in her throat as her body came flush against his. With one soft touch against her jaw, he tilted her face up to look at him. His green eyes were hot, yet tender.

"I think you're a beautiful woman, Ruby. You were probably a beautiful girl, and that boy didn't know what to do with you when you became passionate." His finger stroked her cheek gently. "Did he hurt you?" he asked with concern.

Ruby felt her cheeks go beet red. "I was a virgin, for crying out loud. I wasn't really expecting it to hurt. I didn't have anyone to ask about stuff like that. It was just me and my dad since I was little and he wasn't going to sit me down and tell me it hurts the first time. Dan sure as hell wasn't going to tell me either, so I was surprised. When I get surprised, I fight."

Lucian's face softened again, a grin pulling at his mouth. "What did you do to him?"

Ruby tried to concentrate on his words, but the back and forth motion of his finger on her skin distracted her. "Uh, broken ribs, jaw, and fractured arm."

"Is that all?" he asked, his voice tinged with amusement.

She blushed harder. "I pulled out a big patch of his hair."

He laughed heartily, bussing her cheek. "Priceless. I bet he never touched another girl again."

Ruby frowned. "I don't know. When I was still going to school, he was awful to me."

Lucian gave her a quick squeeze before letting her go. They wandered back to the den, nestling into the sofa. It was so relaxing, Ruby thought, to sit next to him and just be quiet. She was so used to her own company, she didn't feel the need to fill the air with conversation, and apparently Lucian shared her sentiment.

They watched a couple of episodes of *Dirty Jobs* with Ruby making gagging noises when something grossed her out. Lucian just laughed.

"Are Veilerians immortal?" she asked during a commercial break.

Lucian paused in the act of sweeping his hair into a ponytail. Those green eyes flicked over to her before being veiled by his eyelashes. "No one is truly immortal. Some races live longer than others, but in the end everyone dies."

She nodded, thinking about Julius. He'd seemed to be in good shape until he passed his power over to her. Maybe he'd known his time was up.

"Did you know Julius?" Ruby posed the question softly.

"I was on his trail for the last twenty-five years. Before that, I'd met him once or twice. He was the last of his line. The last of all Chieftains."

"How did they all, you know," Ruby began not wanting to sound mercenary, but needing to know what happened to them. "How did they die?"

Lucian shrugged. "No one's entirely sure. All we know is that over the last hundred and fifty years, they began dying off. Some of the councilors believe many of the radical leaders are trying to do away with all Chieftains because they worry their positions will be usurped."

"What do you think?"

Lucian sat back, lacing his hands behind his head as he stared at the television. "I don't know what to think, but I have a feeling Malachi has something to do with their deaths. The Chieftains began dwindling shortly after the Eturi were set up, so there has to be a connection."

Ruby didn't say anything, just stared into space. Since her transition, she'd felt like she was missing something. Her Instinct hadn't let out a peep lately, but there was something demanding her attention. She felt a slight pressure in her mind, but the vague memory was shoved away by her conscious mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucian pretended to watch television although he studied Ruby out the corner of his eye. She looked adorably rumpled in the sweats she'd found in her room. He liked knowing she was wearing his clothing. The primitive male inside him beat his chest and wanted to roar. Stupid Alpha male tendencies.

He had a feeling Ruby was becoming more relaxed with him and he relished it. He'd worried she would run while he was out hunting, but she proved to be a woman of her word, something he admired even though it had never mattered to him before. She touched a part of his psyche he'd never bothered to care about.

Ruby's hands fiddled with the tassels on one of the massive throw pillows he had on the sofa, twirling the tassels clockwise, then counterclockwise. He wondered if she was aware she couldn't keep still.

"What did you do for fun on your land?" he asked unexpectedly, almost surprised to hear his own voice.

The tassels stopped twirling as she turned to him. Her black eyes reflected the television screen. "I played RPGs and hunted a lot. Took care of my garden, things like that."

Lucian was surprised. "You role-play?" He knew that meant video games, but somehow the idea of her role-playing in the bedroom presented itself and wouldn't shake loose.

She grinned impishly. "I'm damned good at it."

He bet she was. "You also hunt?" It wasn't unheard of for females to be great hunters in the Veil, but the modern world didn't require such a skill as much as it had in the past. She nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Pulling her knees to her chest, she said, "After we lost everything, my dad took to trapping and hunting in the swamps around our house. He taught me everything he knew, and when he died"—she swallowed hard as though trying to compose herself—"when he died, I kept up the tradition."

Unable to help himself, Lucian extended one hand and touched her shoulder, offering her comfort. He knew what it was like to lose someone so close to you and have it torment you endlessly. "I'm sorry."

Ruby shrugged, letting out a soundless laugh. "He wouldn't have liked that I still get weepy over it. He believed life was for living."

"How about your mother?"

"I don't remember her. Dad said she was his greatest love and when he talked about her, I could see it was true. After she died, he never tried to meet other women. It was just the two of us." Her eyes were vacant as though she were thinking about her parents and their love.

Something about Ruby touched his heart, and Lucian wasn't sure he liked it. She was his responsibility, not really a prospective mate, but his body and soul weren't in sync with his mind. They wanted to comfort her, brand her with his touch.

He shook himself out of his reverie. His duty to Council and his family were more important to him than anything else. He just had to keep reminding himself of that.

"What is the Oculum-se?" she asked out of the blue, startling Lucian into realizing they'd been sitting in silence for several minutes. His hand was still on her shoulder and he removed it before answering.

"I'm apprenticed to the Oculum," he said unnecessarily. He was sure Kali had already told her that. "I made my intentions to join Council clear before I went into the Guardians Academy. Once I graduated, I petitioned for the position and, after about fifty years, I was accepted as Bianca's apprentice. I have a feeling she pressed for me to be accepted since I didn't have much experience."

"Bianca is the Oculum?" Ruby asked almost absently.

Lucian nodded. "She hands out assignments for me to fulfill, one of which was to track down the last Chieftain. She's ready to retire from Council, so it won't be much longer until I'm promoted," he told her with satisfaction.

Ruby was back to twirling the tassels on the pillow, her attention seemingly concentrated on the task, but Lucian had a feeling she was thinking about his words. "So your Council seat is important to you," she said as a statement, not a question.

"The seat is what I live for, Ruby. I know you don't understand, but a councilor is the true Guardian of the Veil. There are so many problems that need to be addressed, laws that need to be put in place, so many things to change, and I want to be a part of it." For a second, his thoughts touched on his brother, Bernard. If only he'd been Oculum before Bernard died, he thought mournfully.

She didn't say anything, just nodded. "I think I'm going to grab a book and go upstairs," she said sending him a quick, empty smile. "Thanks for supper and the chat."

Lucian watched her walk out of the den, wondering if he'd gotten through to her. She had to realize the lives of many outweighed the life and freedom of one.

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Ruby spent the next two nights reading as much as she could about the Veil. Since her conversation with Lucian, she had to agree with him that things needed to change. Most of the laws she'd come across in her reading were archaic to say the least.

One law in particular was downright barbaric. It stated that any vampire without the backing of a house, the term used for a family group, was considered a hazard to the Veil and mundane society and

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would be destroyed. The reasoning behind this law was that vampires needed to have their feedings regulated by someone and family groups were considered best able to handle it. Ruby suspected if you had problems within the house, vampires had nowhere else to go. There was nothing in the law saying vampires cast out of their houses weren't able to group together to form their own house. It just seemed wrong, as though they were slaves to their families.

She sank back into the overstuffed sofa. Ruby had come to the den after another delicious meal while Lucian went out to hunt. Tonight, she'd made a pot of gumbo instead of having Lucian pick something up. Since there was nothing left, Ruby knew Lucian heartily approved of her cooking.

Absently twirling the tassel of the pillow she was lounging on, she smiled. Lucian was a very entertaining host. He was always solicitous of her needs, making sure she didn't skip meals even though she'd laughingly told him it had never been a problem before. When they finished eating, they adjourned to the den where they either watched television or played one of the millions of video games he seemed to own.

The day before, she'd woken up before Lucian, feeling a compulsive need to go to the gym. Since she'd never once considered working out in a structured manner, she found her desire to push her body to its limit very strange. When she entered the gym, she immediately moved to a punching bag. Without even knowing she knew such things, she'd begun a series of kicks and punches, progressing to combination moves that set the bag swinging.

At some point, Ruby became aware of Lucian standing in the doorway, watching her with silent intensity. Feeling like a fool in front of such an athletic male, she'd stopped.

Lucian had sauntered in, his scent filling the room.

"Those were some impressive moves," he'd said as he went to a small fridge in the corner and threw her a bottle of water. Glad to have something to do other than stand there looking like an idiot, Ruby gulped the water. "I don't know what came over me," she finally admitted when he just stood. "I've never studied martial arts or anything, but when I woke up, I had to get some of this energy out."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully for several seconds. "There's a theory in the Veil, that when a Chieftain dies and passes his powers on to his successor, he also passes all the knowledge and skills he gained throughout his life as well as the life of his predecessors. I'm guessing you picked up the combat skills from your line."

Ruby gaped at him. "So you're telling me everything every Elk Fire Chieftain knew, I know?" She laughed, grabbing her sides as she doubled over. This was impossible. Stuff like this didn't happen in the real world. There's no way she could know everything the people before her knew just because she'd inherited Julius' powers. Of course, being able to inherit someone's powers through throttling didn't happen in the real world either, she thought ruefully, sobering.

Lucian just smiled at her indulgently. "It'll be okay, you know. You're new to this, but it'll become second nature to you soon. The Chieftains were some of the most powerful beings in the Veil. Those combat skills might come in handy," he told her with a shrug as though he didn't really believe that.

When she'd woken up this afternoon, she'd gone back to the gym, unable to help herself. She was amazed at the things she could do. Flying kicks, roundhouse kicks, rapid punch kick combinations that left the punching bag wobbling erratically.

It was a heady feeling, she thought as she stretched out on the sofa. She felt lethal, powerful. Her muscles ached, but it was a pleasant sensation.

She closed her eyes, letting herself relax completely. Her mind took off like a shot, causing panic to tighten her body but she fought off the fear and forced herself to see what her subconscious wanted to show her. Again, she saw the Chieftains who'd come before her like a roll call. Each of them were fighting, their movements so graceful it almost seemed like dancing. They whirled, they kicked out, and grappled with unknown opponents. Every stance was imprinted in her brain, her muscles memorizing the movements.

They spoke to her about her responsibilities, telling her it was her destiny to make herself available to anyone who needed her powers. They told her about her potential.

Ruby soaked it all in, her eyes moving rapidly behind closed lids. She thirsted for knowledge and knew in this moment, she was finally getting in touch with her powers as a Chieftain. She might not be quite ready for the big test, but she was preparing herself for it.

"Hey, you okay?" Lucian's voice brought her out of the light trance she'd fallen into.

Ruby's eyes popped open and she blinked at him blearily. For a moment, he appeared surrounded by a nimbus of golden light, but it soon dissipated.

"I'm fine, just resting my eyes," she mumbled as she sat up.

He looked at her curiously. "You're sweating. Were you working out?"

Ruby nibbled on her lip, nodding. She didn't want to tell him she'd just experienced her first full immersion into her powers. It seemed like a very private thing, so she kept it to herself. The Chieftains had shown her how to move her body with lethal precision. It would come in very handy if she had to fight against Council, or against Lucian. "I'm good. I'll go take a shower. Maybe tonight I'll kick your ass in Guitar Hero," she told him with forced lightness, quickly exiting the den.

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Lucian watched Ruby leave, his eyebrows lowering in thought. She'd looked as though she were sleeping when he walked in, except she didn't look rested. He wanted to follow her and find out exactly what was going on, but had a feeling she wouldn't welcome his questions.

He sat back, turning the television on. Tonight's hunt had been successful as usual, but he felt on edge. Two days with Ruby had him hanging onto his control by a thread. She was an interesting woman. She was quick with a challenge and never backed down from any he issued. They hadn't progressed far beyond playing video games, but he had a feeling her natural aggression would translate very well to the bedroom.

Lucian blew out a loud breath. He didn't need to think about Ruby and a bedroom. She was temptation incarnate. Sharing his home with her gave him a different view of her than if they'd met up and had sex somewhere. She was a very deep thinker, asking questions about the Veil while they dined, her mind never seeming to rest.

When he'd come downstairs the day before to find her working on the punching bag like a whirling dervish, he'd come close to losing his composure. Seeing her kick and punch, weaving in an intricate pattern around the bag, had nearly laid him out with lust. Sweat had clung to her body, dampening yet another one of his sweatshirts, making it cling to her full breasts. Watching her fight an invisible foe, his body had tightened to the point of pain. He wanted her like nothing else. Not even his forays into his regular hunting ground could make him forget her.

Since the moment he'd seen her back at the hotel, he wanted no other. His prey frequently begged him to make love to them, but he just gave them their orgasm through his bite and left, not wanting them to touch him. If it weren't for his need for blood, he wouldn't have left his house. He refused to feed from Ruby since she was his unwilling guest. The urge to do so was strong, stronger than he could believe, but he wouldn't abuse his powers as a host in such a way.

He hadn't realized how long he was contemplating his attraction for Ruby and what it meant until he heard her come into the den again. She stepped into the room, bringing the exotic scent of jasmine with her. His nostrils flared though he fought the urge to look at her. He could smell the mint of her toothpaste, could feel the heat of her skin. If he looked at her, he might lose his control.

"So, Guitar Hero tonight?" she asked as though her strange behavior from before had never existed.

Lucian gave himself a mental shake. He could do this. He had to fight the overwhelming urge to attempt a bonding and remember that she was meant for Council, not him. "Sure," he said just as lightly, setting up the game.

Chapter Fifteen

The days rapidly progressed in the same manner. They would dine together, Lucian would leave to hunt, and Ruby would either work out or devour books about the Veil. When he returned to the house, they'd watch television or play a game.

Ruby loved the time she spent with him even while she worried that growing closer to Lucian was a bad idea. Even while her mind knew this, her heart found he was a wonderful man even if he'd kidnapped her. If he asked her to help him kidnap someone else, she might've even helped. Can anyone say Stockholm syndrome, she griped to herself on the eighth night of her capture.

She'd quickly grown comfortable with him, learning about his work as the Oculum-se, seeing how passionate he was about his goals. Ruby admired his determination to do the best he could for everyone in the Veil, not just his own race. He was a font of knowledge when it came to the various laws in the Veil, explaining them to her in a way she found informative and endearing.

Ruby wandered around the house after he left. Every night he asked her not to leave. It'd become something of a habit with them. He'd ask her not to leave while he was out, and she'd tell him she wasn't going anywhere. She didn't think he believed she would run off so much as he just wanted to make sure she was aware she held his trust.

Ruby flipped open one of the many texts she'd already studied from cover to cover. She'd learned so much about the Veil and its inhabitants she almost felt prepared for a life within it. She'd learned nymphs were generally very shy beings who were born under one of four elements: earth, air, water, or fire. She'd learned they were at odds with the succubi, both groups establishing that the other was the cause of The Great Fire of 1666.

The sheer number of magical and mythical beings on record was staggering, and Ruby sometimes felt as though she'd fallen down a rabbit hole. She was supposed to believe there were dwarves and centaurs running around and not worry? When she'd told Lucian about her disbelief, he'd comforted her by explaining the more exotic of the races tended to stay as far from civilization as possible to protect themselves, but as the world was becoming more populated, they were having to relocate to other dimensions.

Knowing there were other worlds other than the one she lived in almost made Ruby hyperventilate, but she figured if she'd come this far, she could take it. She wasn't quite ready to delve into how travel was possible between them, or where the worlds were, or even which of the races had moved beyond, but she was willing to accept the idea in a very abstract way.

Ruby knew the time was coming when she had to make an escape, no matter how comfortable she'd grown with Lucian. Their time together just gave him a better chance of wiggling his way into her heart. He's already there, her brain told her. You let him in and he'll own you soon.

Ruby shook her head to banish the thought. Not once had he given her any indication he wanted to own her or have anything but a purely platonic relationship with her. They'd become fast friends because of their love of video games and their competitive natures. It felt nice, she thought with a sigh.

He never mentioned a woman in his life, so Ruby imagined he either had too many women in his life, or he wasn't as sexually interested in her as she'd thought he was. Sometimes she'd see a darkness in his eyes that hinted at passion, but when he saw her looking, the fires banked and he was back to being the charming vampire who had become her friend. Ruby grumbled and put the latest tome away. She hated feeling out of control, but her feelings for Lucian were growing whether she wanted them to or not.

Leaning back against the stuffed sofa, she stared at the ceiling. Thunderstorms had threatened all day, and the promise was fulfilled at dusk. Rain beat against the roof while thunder rolled ominously. The energy in the air was palpable. Lucian was out hunting, but wouldn't be long. He seemed to find it difficult to leave, and even when Ruby promised she wouldn't do anything so he could have some fun, he rejected the promise and stated he had more fun with her than he would out and about.

Trying not to think he might be enjoying her company as much as she enjoyed his, Ruby got up to wander the room, feeling strangely restless. Something was pulling at her mind and she hadn't been able to concentrate on the books all evening. Her workout had been especially hard and she should've felt drained, but instead felt charged with energy.

Without being aware of moving, Ruby realized she was upstairs, prowling her room. She scoffed lightly, feeling a flame of anger light within her. It wasn't her room, a calm voice told her. It was her cage, and she'd let herself become content with it. She'd allowed herself to be held as a pampered prisoner.

The flame began to burn brighter until she had to escape her prison, which wasn't big enough to contain the movements of her fury. What had caused this sudden change in emotions, she wondered as though from far away. She watched herself stalk back and forth down the hallway, her face a study of anger. Her fury was like a living thing, clawing to get out of her body. It was as though she'd crossed some invisible barrier and all the rage and uncertainty she'd pushed to the side since she'd come to Lucian's home was back, howling for vengeance.

Spinning on her heel, she stomped into Lucian's room. She felt violent and nosy. Not necessarily a good combination, her rational mind cautioned. She ignored the voice of reason and slammed the door behind her. His essence was in this room, permeating every inch of it. It oozed into her pores, seeping into her bloodstream, setting the blaze inside her even higher. With a sweeping glance, she took in the dark comforter, the plush pillows, and a set of picture frames across from the bed.

Shaking her head at her own reaction to his scent, Ruby peeked out the door to make sure he hadn't returned. The room was without a doubt masculine. A massive four-poster king-size bed dominated the room. Made of rich mahogany wood, it had beautiful carvings etched onto every post. The wood furnishings would've appeared too heavy and oppressive in the room if it hadn't been for the use of jade and emerald green accents.

The bed was a masterpiece of sea green silk sheets and emerald duvet. Ruby tried not to imagine Lucian on it, but could all too easily see his dark red and black hair on the sheets and how his skin would look against the green. Her already excited body went into overload.

"Think of something else. Find a weakness," she told herself sharply, going through the nightstand next to the bed.

She thought she'd find condoms and maybe a little black book with phone numbers, but what she found was a huge bag of jellybeans. He apparently had a sweet tooth. Between the nightstand and the bed was a stack of books that revealed his reading tastes leaned toward biographies. Ruby winced. She personally hated them herself. Strike one.

Across from the bed was a huge flat screen television connected to a complex DVD system. The entire wall was an entertainment system housing nothing but movies and CDs. Giving the wall a cursory glance, she saw his musical style was Southern Fried Rock meets Techno, and he had a thing for Jackie Chan and Jet Li movies. The only thing she did agree with him on was the Vin Diesel movies. Nearly strike two, she thought. Ruby rifled through a small drawer in the entertainment center, coming across a photo album. She flipped it open and decided right then and there she and Lucian were never having sex. The album was filled with gorgeous women. Women who'd probably slept in the massive bed with him, and she hated every single one of them. Not that she cared, she reminded herself.

Three pictures were of a blonde with precious blue eyes and a doll face. She looked so sweet and adorable Ruby wanted to punch her. In each picture, the blonde smiled at the camera as though the photographer was the world to her. There was something a little strange about her ears, but for the most part, she was pretty.

The second group of pictures Ruby noticed was of a woman with flaming red hair who seemed to pulse with sex even through the photo. Her sparkling green eyes were almond shaped and surrounded by thick black eyelashes. She didn't look innocent or sweet. She looked like she had secrets, lots of them. In fact, if she hadn't decided to hate the woman on principle, she was the kind of woman Ruby might have liked to be friends with.

The final pictures were of a serious looking woman with black hair cut extremely short and two delicate pink horns peaking out. The style suited her no-nonsense face. Dark brown eyes looked at the world with cold determination and seriousness. She looked like she would kick serious ass and not even bother taking names after.

"Three of the councilors," Lucian said from the doorway. "I told them I really didn't need to be reminded of what they looked like, but they insisted. The only ones missing are Fields, because he's camera shy, and Bianca, the Oculum."

Ruby froze, her head still bowed as she looked into the cold brown eyes of the brunette. *Oh crap*. She'd been so focused on looking at women she didn't want to think of as rivals, she hadn't heard the front door close or heard him enter the room.

She closed her eyes, trying to pretend she wasn't there.

Lucian walked into the room, pulling his soaking wet shirt off, his scent growing stronger, hotter. Ruby could smell it from where she sat and her entire body flushed. If he came near her, she was doomed.

He paused by the nightstand to take the bag of jellybeans out of the drawer. "Want some?" he asked her, still casual.

Ruby shook her head, too afraid to speak because, God help her, even with the evidence of the number of attractive women in his life, she still wanted him. She peeked at him from the corner of her eye.

Lucian seemed calm, even relaxed. His skin was flushed from what looked like a well-ended hunt, but that only enhanced his attractiveness to her. He chomped on a handful of jellybeans and studied her as though she were something interesting.

"The blonde is Tawny, or the Nidurm, the red-head is Bree, also known as the Aristus, and the brunette is Nila, or the Manu," he stopped to pop in a few more jellybeans and chewed thoughtfully.

"Fields is the Linguar, and Bianca is the Oculum, as you remember. She thinks the other women are silly," Lucian continued slowly, wiping his hands on his discarded shirt before tossing it in the corner of his room. He stretched, causing all the muscles in his arms, shoulders and stomach to flex at once. Ruby's mouth watered.

She barely repressed the urge to jump him. She couldn't tell if he was playing her or not. He was so casual and at ease. She couldn't even feel sexual tension from him, while she seemed awash in it. Pinpricks of heat caressed the side of her neck, making her shiver. Okay, so he was feeling it, too, but he was just a little more controlled.

For some reason, that didn't sit well with Ruby at all. Lucian drifted closer to her, showing too much skin and smelling too much like hot, sexy vampire for her peace of mind.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucian eyed Ruby lazily. The last few days had been hell. Sitting next to her each evening before the hunt, he would smell the spicy flowery scent of her and feel the heat of her skin, knowing he couldn't do anything about it. He'd increased his workout routine and had more than one conversation with his hand just to keep his urges under control. The nights he spent hunting were torture when he wanted nothing more than to take her vein.

He knew she hadn't forgotten she was a captive in his home. No matter how much freedom he gave her within the house and no matter how pleased she seemed to be learning from her books and him, he could see her spirit crying to be completely free. He'd thought of letting her go once or twice, but imagining her out in the world with Malachi dogging her heels, not to mention the duty he had to keep her confined, kept him from being foolish. Lucian had even toyed with not letting the Council know he had her, but he knew how futile that would be. Nila and Tawny were close friends with Pagan, and Pagan would have found out from Marie and Jackie about his kidnapping of the Chieftain. In the Veil, it was next to impossible to keep secrets.

In fact, the only sensible thing he'd done this entire week was to contact Bianca and let her know the Council should convene at his home in the morning. This was his last night with Ruby and, God help him, he didn't know if he could keep his hands off of her.

Seeing her in his bedroom had taken him from half-mast to full hard-on and seeing the blood rush to her cheeks nearly sent him over the edge. He considered it an honor she would seek out his room to learn about him. Lucian wasn't fool enough to think she did it because she wanted to know his favorite color. But her reaction to the photo album of the councilors pleased him.

He stepped up behind her, not touching her but letting the heat from his body reach out to her. Lucian breathed in her sweet jasmine scent and felt the lust come back on full throttle.

"Did you learn anything interesting about me?" he asked, leaning forward so his breath washed over her ear.

Ruby kept her head bowed, the vulnerable nape of her neck bared to him by her short hair. Lucian watched the goose bumps travel up her neck.

"You have terrible taste in books and candy," she said softly, her hands flipping through the pages in the photo album.

Lucian chuckled, moving his mouth to the other side of her ear. "Anything else?"

He heard her breath catch. His nostrils flared. He caught the scent of her arousal. He fought a growl.

"You watch too much television," she responded on a shuddering sigh. Lucian could see her eyes were half closed and a light blush crested her cheeks.

"It gets lonely sometimes," Lucian whispered against her ear, pressing a soft kiss at the top of it.

She shivered and he applauded her body's response. Lucian knew success was at hand, until her spine stiffened.

"You could always call one of your fellow councilors to join you," Ruby shot back with fire. She moved away from him, tossing the album on one of the shelves of the entertainment center.

Lucian could just about kill Tawny for sending the stupid album. It had been her idea of a Christmas gag gift, as if he'd want to look at their mugs for the holidays. He wouldn't have the damn thing at his house if it hadn't been for one of the Junior Guardians mistaking the breathtaking women as part of a harem. Lucian grimaced.

"Ruby, those would be the last women I'd bed," he said in all honesty. He'd only slept with Bianca, and she wasn't in the album. Ruby still didn't look convinced. "I've worked with them for the last forty years. The last thing I want to do is take them home with me."

She stood in front of one of the massive windows, looking outside. Her chin was tucked into her chest as she looked at the backyard. Lucian knew she could see Deer Trail Bayou through the tangle of oak trees surrounding the property. He always found the view calming. He wondered what it would be like to pull up one of the overstuffed chairs and sit with her in his lap looking out the window just like she was doing now.

"I don't know what you want from me," she said in a soft voice. "I'm not who you think I am. I'm not tough or brave like the other women seem to be in this world." She chuckled and threw a glance his way. Her eyes darted around the room. "Would you mind getting dressed?"

Lucian did mind as a matter of fact, but had a feeling this stunning moment of intimacy might come to an end if he didn't offer her a little distance. As a skilled tracker, he knew when to give his prey some room.

He shrugged as though it didn't make any difference to him one way or the other. He pulled out an old T-shirt from his chest of drawers, all the while very conscious of her watching his every move. With his back to her, Lucian grinned to himself and made a show out of snapping the shirt out of its fold, causing her to flinch.

He felt the muscles in his shoulders and arms flex as he bunched the shirt with his fingers. His sensitive ears picked up the sound of light, rapid breathing and Lucian knew she wasn't unaffected. He lifted the shirt over his head, tilting his head back and letting his hair fan over his shoulders. He glanced over at her.

Ruby had a crazed look in her eyes that sent a zing of desire through Lucian. Her mouth was getting redder by the minute and her arousal scented the air again. Teasing her, he stretched his torso, pulling the shirt to cover his chest, one hand smoothing it while the other led the way. When his leading hand reached the waistband of

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his jeans, her eyes went to half-mast and a wild flush bloomed in her face.

Lucian wasn't exactly immune to his play either. He had a screaming erection begging for release. When Ruby's tongue swept out of her mouth to wet her bottom lip, Lucian growled deep in his chest. It was an instinctive reaction to her bodily fluids and he wanted a taste.

So he stepped forward and left Lucian Ravenswaay behind, while the predatory beast stalked its mate.

* * * *

Ruby was on fire. The minute Lucian began to tease her with his body, she'd been lost. Hell, she admitted to herself, she'd been lost from the minute he growled at her in the hotel lobby.

Something in him called to her. At the moment, she didn't care if it was vampire pheromones, if it was her own hormones ready to mate, or even if it was just the way the planets were aligned. She wanted him, and she wasn't going to fight it.

So when Lucian began to stalk her, instead of backing away like she would have before, she met him in the middle of the room. They reached for each other at the same time, their mouths meeting in a kiss that could only be described as earthshaking. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't sweet, and it sure as hell wasn't adoring.

It was hot, slick, and erotic. Lips and tongues tangled as each of them delved and tasted as much as they could. Ruby had never kissed, or been kissed, with such intensity, and she savored every stroke. The friction of his tongue sliding into her mouth, flicking against hers, infusing her with his taste, sealed it for her. She was done for. She was going down for the count with a blissful smile on her face.

Lucian's shirt was shredded at some point, falling to the ground like a flag of surrender. Ruby wasn't sure who did that, and she didn't particularly care. She finally had all of his glorious skin under her hands, and she didn't even fight her moan of pleasure touching his skin gave her. Warm, firm, and slightly rough to the touch, his skin was something she could've stroked all day. It was then, while she was touching him with her hands, she realized that she wasn't wearing her gloves and she wasn't reading anything from him. She'd gotten into the habit of leaving off the gloves as they weren't necessary when she didn't plan to touch him. At least she hadn't planned to touch him until today.

She pulled away. Lucian grabbed for her with a fierce expression on his face. "No, my powers. I can't feel your lineage," she said worriedly.

Lucian smiled in fierce satisfaction, his fangs glinting in the light and that sexy red glow taking over his eyes.

"Chieftains can't read their mates, Ruby," he growled, his voice more gravelly than usual. He set his teeth against the tendon that connected her neck and shoulder. "Fate wouldn't be so cruel as to make a Chieftain see their bloodline's possible decline."

"This doesn't..."she gasped and rubbed up against him, unable to help herself. She struggled to remember what she had been saying. "We're not mated."

"But the possibility exists," he rasped against her skin.

He bit into her neck just a little as he finished his whispered explanation, and Ruby forgot everything else. Fate had apparently chosen this vampire as her mate. That was fine. He lapped at the place where he'd bitten her, growling.

Having very little in the way of seductive clothing, Ruby was wearing yet another pair of sweats, but those were nothing before Lucian's determination. Underneath the sweats was the flesh colored lingerie Kali had talked her into. When Lucian saw her in the lingerie, she was glad she'd taken the advice from the drag queen Oracle because he went insane.

Swept into his arms, Ruby was carried to his bed and tossed into the middle of it. His jeans went the way of the floor and he was gloriously naked. He was gorgeous. Having ogled that sexy chest for the past several days, Ruby had been anxious to see the rest and she was so not disappointed.

His narrow hips led to full, muscled thighs she yearned to sink her teeth into. She wanted to sink her mouth on the glorious erection that was pointed her way a lot more, though. Heavy veined, thick, and straight as an arrow, it was huge, and her body quivered in anticipation.

Unable to help herself, Ruby growled, pushing to her hands and knees to crawl across the bed towards him. The logical part of her brain suspected Lucian's insanity was catching because Ruby Fontenot had never imagined taking the initiative in sex. But Ruby Blue was no shrinking virgin. Here she was, growling and stalking a vampire like she was just as powerful as he was.

They met in the center of the bed like wrestlers. Ruby's mouth was back on his, her hands pouring over his body like honey while he struggled with her underwear. They were growling and moaning at each other. Lucian gave up trying to be delicate with her bra and just ripped it off, causing her breasts to bounce out of their confinement.

"Oh, yeah," he growled, filling his hands with her flesh, holding her immobile so he could taste each nipple.

Ruby arched her back, rubbing her belly against his erection, her hands digging into his shoulders so she wouldn't fall backwards. Not that Lucian would've let that happen. He held her by the waist, his clever tongue flicking over each nipple back and forth. Lost in a haze, Ruby almost screamed when he scraped her nipple with his teeth.

"Luc!" she cried out, her nails bringing up blood. She felt a moment's worry that he wouldn't like pain, but the pleasure on his face brought the thought to an abrupt end. He purred around her nipple and gave her an approving lick.

He anchored his arm more firmly around her waist and pulled her closer to suckle as much of her breast in his mouth as he could. Ruby cried out and swung her body so her legs could wrap around his waist. She reveled in Lucian's strength, in knowing that even with her body hanging off of him, he remained immovable at her breast. He supported her full weight with no trouble. The unbearable, empty ache at the center of her body demanded Lucian's presence, and Ruby was helpless against its commands.

Lucian acted like he could spend all night at her breasts lapping, suckling, and nipping, and Ruby would've let him because the pleasure was more than any she could've ever imagined. But one of his hands eased up her thigh, ripping away her panties before slipping through moist curls, finding her drenched center. With the deft sweep of a finger over her clit, Ruby splintered. She flew apart, a scream of release rising from her throat and echoing throughout the room.

Lucian still wasn't done with her. He tossed her flat on her back, stole down her body, and planted his wide chest between her thighs. Ruby felt a blush work its way up her torso, a mingling of arousal and embarrassment. She'd never been so exposed before, but Lucian wouldn't let her put space between them.

"To a vampire," he said, breathing against her inner thigh, "the most erotic place on his lover's body is the inner thigh." He gently bit into her skin.

Ruby gasped, forgetting her embarrassment as his fangs sank into her femoral artery. Twin pinpricks of ecstasy burned through her body, and she was floating on a bubble of pure pleasure. Her already arousal-soaked body became even wetter and more swollen with every draw of his mouth on her. Ruby's stomach clenched, her inner muscles beginning to tense as she prepared to orgasm once more.

Lucian lifted his mouth from her thigh, his pupils dilated, leaving only a rim of red around the black. "Not yet," he snarled, and before she could take a breath, Lucian was cupping her behind her knees, spreading her legs even wider, his shaft poised at her entrance.

"Ruby Blue, you're mine," he vowed, his eyes locked on hers, a droplet of her blood beaded on his bottom lip. With that said, he began feeding his massive cock into her engorged flesh. The friction of his shaft pressing into her, stretching her swollen folds and tightened muscles, drove her insane. Ruby wanted to move, to squirm and wiggle, but Lucian kept strict control over the depth of his penetration with the firm grip on the back of her knees. He eased inside slowly, working himself into her hot depths inch by inch, but purposely not filling her before pulling out and repeating the process.

"God, you're so tight." He gritted his teeth as he gave his hips a little swivel on the inward stroke.

"Luc," Ruby moaned, her eyes squeezed shut, her arms moving restlessly on the duvet, bunching the material in her fists. "Please, please, oh, please," she begged, her body beginning to glisten with perspiration.

Lucian's body also began to sweat, but he remained true to his slow rhythm, filling her body with his, never giving her his full length until her body was so slick with arousal he glided in and out more easily. Then, he began to plunge into her, faster, harder.

Ruby moaned loudly, running her hands down her breasts which bounced with Lucian's every thrust. She coasted her hands down her body until she could touch his hips, where she dug her nails in, encouraging him to ride her harder, moaning "more" with every stab of his cock.

Lucian leaned forward, planting his fists on either side of Ruby's shoulders, towering over her, forcing her hips into a higher position, changing the angle of his thrusts. His cock glided over just the right spot and Ruby's round eyes met his in shock, pleasure, and mindnumbing need.

When Ruby came, it was with a scream that nearly broke glass, her inner muscles clamping around Lucian's shaft as he continued fucking her mindless. He pounded into her, their bodies sliding together with their sweat, his balls slapping against her ass. His eyes were aglow with a red so bright Ruby felt as though she was being scorched by the sun from the inside out.

"Ruby," he panted, his hips churning against hers faster and faster, deeper and deeper until he was touching her womb. "You're mine," he growled in her ear right before he bit her neck. "Say it, Ruby," he demanded harshly, partnering his words with a particularly deep thrust that had her thrashing her head as another wave of ecstasy rose in her.

Ruby bit her lip, holding the words back. If she said them, he'd hold her to it. He was already saying her inability to get a read on him was because her own powers were sure he was her mate. If she caved because he was good in bed, she'd belong to him completely.

He slid home and circled his hips, using the tip of his erection at her womb to make her eyes cross. "Say it, Ruby," he panted, his body slick with sweat as he denied his own climax for her vow.

His chest abraded her sensitive nipples, his hair trailed over her sensitized flesh, she was spread out for him like a Thanksgiving dinner and she was trying to pretend she didn't belong to him? He moved his hips in a very slow counterclockwise circle, making her eyes roll back in her head.

"I'm yours, dammit. Oh, God, I'm yours!" she shouted. *For now*, her soul added.

He growled, pulled out and slammed inside again. Almost instantly, his orgasm rippled through his body like fire as he came with a roar. When she felt the first pulse of his seed splash inside her, he plunged his teeth in her neck again. His hips kept pumping, hard and fast with no finesse, no smooth seduction. Ruby lost her grip on reality, joining him in climax once more.

Chapter Seventeen

Lucian wasn't conscious of anything but the feel of Ruby in his arms. She was technically squashed between him and the mattress with his arms flopped over her, but he was touching her and that was all that mattered. His breathing was choppy, but Lucian took great pride in hearing the sobbing, shuddering breaths of his woman beneath him.

He nuzzled the skin behind her ear, purring. "Mmm," he moaned, throwing himself off Ruby, pulling her into the crook of his arm.

With his eyes closed and the sounds of their breathing slowly returning to normal, Lucian could see the possibility of her being his mate become more of a *when* than an *if*. She was an amazing bed partner, she had fire, and their children would be powerful. It would be a good match, he thought with a grunt. He just needed to attempt the bond. Attempting a bond was only possible if the female accepted the male's blood during sex. If the mating was true, they would connect both spiritually and physically.

"We shouldn't have done that," Ruby said, bursting his bubble.

Lucian had known she wouldn't give in without a fight, but damn, she hadn't even waited for the afterglow to fade, he thought grouchily. "Yes, we should," he instantly contradicted her, his face bunching into a frown.

She punched him in the ribs. Damn, she packed a good wallop. "We haven't resolved anything, Lucian! We just had sex, and now you think everything's all better. Well, it isn't!"

Lucian kept his eyes closed and his arm clamped around her. She was squirming and pressing her breasts against his side. Those pretty, bright pink nipples were still hard and rubbed his ribs just right. Lucian's eyebrow quirked and a smile crossed his face. Gods, she'd felt like Heaven. Wet, hot, and so tight he'd almost come the instant his cock breached her entrance.

Just thinking about how good they fit together made him hard again and he could tell Ruby noticed because her breath was getting all ragged again.

"Lucian," she said pleadingly, drawing his name out. "We have to talk about our problems."

"Don't want to talk anymore," he grumbled, one of his hands slipping down her silky back to the curve of her round ass. He filled his hand with one cheek, squeezing gently. "Mmm," he purred. "I like." He gave her ass a little sharp spank, wondering how she'd react.

Her face screwed up in an uncertain frown, as though unsure if she liked it or not. He spanked her other cheek, another sharp slap. Her eyes closed and she bit her lip.

As though in retaliation, she reached down and grabbed his growing cock. Lucian felt his eyes widen and his cock go from halfmast to hard as a rock in an instant. She began stroking him, her eyes challenging him.

He smiled wickedly. "Oh, baby, you just don't know what you're doing," Lucian boasted, slapping her ass again.

Ruby's breath caught in her throat and she squeezed his cock gently, making his breath catch. "We'll see," she said.

Lucian got to his knees, sitting back on his heels. He felt pretty confident he could make her come before he did. He'd had two orgasms in the last hour. She, however, was already on the edge. The scent of her arousal perfumed the air again.

"Kneel," Lucian commanded, his cock thrust at her.

Ruby rolled to her hands and knees, crawling towards him. She came up, giving him a sweet, hot kiss before kissing her way down his torso.

Lucian swallowed hard when she lapped at his nipples. She swirled her tongue and used her teeth like she couldn't wait to get her mouth on his body. When her lips began sliding down his stomach and he felt her breath on the head of his cock, Lucian was beginning to think he'd been overconfident. She stopped at the bird-shaped birthmark on his hip, the one all men of his mother's line carried somewhere on their bodies, her tongue laving the strawberry colored skin.

Her new position put her ass in the air and he reached over to give her right cheek a stinging slap. She jumped, looking up. "Move to my side, so I can play with you," Lucian said, his fingers ready to dive into her wetness.

Ruby moved her body so she was perpendicular to him. Now Lucian had a perfect view of her hovering over his cock and access to her slit. He was so turned on he was already beaded up with pre-cum.

Ruby's hand grabbed him at the base and slid up, squeezing gently. Her tongue swiped at the pearl of seed and Lucian almost jumped out of his skin. "Not nice," he said, reaching over to slip his fingers through her drenched curls.

Ruby reacted as though she'd been struck by lightning. Her hips bucked up and her hand tightened on him. Lucian felt pretty smug, his fingers finding and flicking over her clit, but that was before she slipped the head of his cock in her mouth.

"Yes," he hissed, his hips thrusting upwards.

Her mouth was just as hot and wet as her drenched folds. He found her entrance and probed it with one finger, feeling how swollen she was, dripping with arousal and his seed. Lucian wanted to be in her mouth and core at once. He wanted to fill her up with his seed.

"Suck me," he commanded, thrusting one finger in her in a slow, pumping motion.

Ruby's lips wrapped around just the head of his cock and she suckled, her tongue swirling over the tip while her hand stroked up and down. Lucian's eyes crossed. "More," he growled. "Take all of it." She did, her mouth gliding down his length until he touched the back of her throat. Lucian's eyes rolled to the back of his head at the sensation of her mouth encasing him so well.

She paused, taking time to lap at the head like a cat with cream. He continued thrusting one finger into her wetness. Lucian nearly came when she began rubbing her tongue along the underside of his shaft.

Ruby must've felt his body tense because she released him from her mouth, her hand moving to his balls, rolling them around her palm. Lucian threw his head back, his chest heaving for air.

"No," she breathed as her hand moved back to the base of his cock. She rubbed her cheek against the length, making him look at her.

Seeing her strong face rubbing against his cock like a cat and, more importantly, knowing she was excited by giving him pleasure turned Lucian on like nothing else. Doing his best to appear unaffected, which was difficult considering he was seeping pre-cum, he quirked an eyebrow at Ruby.

"I want this inside me," she rasped, her tongue working the tip and threw her hips back so his finger slid deeper in her slippery heat.

Lucian grinned so broadly his face hurt. Before she could blink, he switched positions. With her ass pointed skyward, he gripped her hips firmly and plunged into her slick channel.

Ruby screamed, her hips bucking back against him. "Oh, Luc," she sobbed. "It feels so good."

Lucian growled in agreement and proceeded to pound into her, giving them the rough ride they both craved. Her body was so tight and slick he was on the verge of coming before he was ready. He slammed into her all the way to the hilt, slow and hard, his hands gripping her hips strongly.

His eyesight was starting to darken with his impending orgasm, and he hadn't even driven Ruby as crazy as he wanted to. Lucian

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needed to slow them down a bit, show his life companion he was capable of more than just animalistic couplings.

He sat back on his heels, tugging Ruby into a seated position so her back was supported by his chest with her knees on either side of his. He slid even deeper and her cries became higher pitched. She wrapped her warms around his neck, arching her back.

Lucian growled rocking into her, nudging her cervix. He used one hand to gently pluck at her nipples, which were so flushed and hard they felt like velvet diamonds, and slid his other hand between her legs to stroke her clit.

"No," she moaned, the back of her head resting against his shoulder. She tried to squirm away from his fingers, which rubbed over her engorged clit in time with their gliding lovemaking. "No." She shook her head. "It's too much," she panted, turning her head to the side, her teeth grazing his neck. "Lucian. Oh, God, oh!"

Lucian felt her teeth at his throat and went mindless, thrusting his hips up while pulling her down with his hand. She bit his neck again and didn't let go, her hoarse cries smothered against his skin. The mating instinct took over.

Lucian grabbed the arm wrapped around his neck, guiding her wrist to his mouth, biting into it just as his orgasm crashed over him. Ruby was a split second behind him, her inner muscles squeezing him like a fist, milking the seed from his cock as she fed him with her blood. He continued stroking her clit, feeling another climax about to roll through her and was rewarded with her sharp inhale against his neck and the dull pain of her flat, human teeth piercing his skin.

The first spill of his blood into her mouth mated them. When she drew on him while he drew on her, it bound them forever. Lucian felt the mating connection take on a different personality as he could feel his own cock inside her and knew she could sense how good she felt around it.

They were irrevocably bound and Lucian was content because it meant she was his forever. Everything else could be sorted out.

Chapter Eighteen

When Ruby woke up the next morning, she was sore, yet felt so renewed, it should've been illegal. She frowned at the picture windows across the room. If she remembered right, most of the stuff they'd done last night was illegal by obscure Louisiana laws. If they were in the wrong, though, she'd happily go to prison. She'd been just as insatiable as Lucian after she decided their talk could wait.

Ruby wasn't sure how many times they joined throughout the night. She'd never felt such an encompassing need for anything or anyone in her entire life and it both scared and intrigued her. Would this feeling last throughout eternity? It was definitely something they need to explore before either of them made a firm commitment, she decided.

The room was shadowy. Some sort of tint on the windows blocked out the sunlight while still allowing the room a view of outside. Lucian's arm was draped over her waist, and he had her plastered to his side like a favorite stuffed animal.

Ruby grinned to herself. Lucian wasn't an insecure man by any stretch of the imagination. The things he must've experienced in his lifetime had shaped him into a hard vampire, though he was damned good at pleasure. Thinking about how he probably got his practice caused jealousy to rear its head and Ruby forced herself to think of something else.

There were so many things they needed to discuss. She couldn't let him distract her. He would wake up and want loving. Ruby bit her lip. She wouldn't mind a little morning loving herself, but they needed to talk before they went any further. She wasn't going to be anyone's property.

"You're growling," a husky voice said just above her ear.

Ruby shot him a dark look, trying not to be distracted by the shadowy beard on his jaw or his heavy-lidded green eyes. His hair was tousled, draping over his shoulder like an exotic pet. There was a new expression on his face this morning.

He looked at her with lust, yes, but she saw the beginnings of affection in the depths. An answering warmth blossomed in her chest and she could've kicked herself. She doubted most women of the Veil fell in love with the first Veilerian they had sex with, but she seemed to be on the verge of doing so.

Lucian pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, his hair sweeping forward to drape over their faces like a curtain. He rested his forehead against hers, their eyes meeting. Ruby wanted to look away, but couldn't. His eyes were glowing, a vibrant green that stole her breath.

"We can't change what happened last night, and I wouldn't even if I could," he said, his eyes delving into hers, piercing her soul. "You are my mate. Last night proved I am yours by Chieftain Lore."

Ruby held her breath, waiting for the words. If he told her he cared for her, then they could work something out.

Lucian smiled, his eyes filled with devilry as he touched the side of his neck, drawing her gaze to the perfect outline of teeth in the skin. Ruby gasped in shock. "I did that?" she asked hoarsely.

Lucian nodded proudly. "We are mated, my little Chieftain, and furthermore, you completed the bond by drinking from me. Our lives are intertwined forever," he informed her, brushing his mouth over hers.

"What do you mean intertwined forever?" she asked suspiciously, avoiding his mouth.

He pouted at her refusal to kiss him and Ruby refrained from sighing over how adorable he looked. "It means from now on we belong to each other. We're connected. We'll be able to feel each other no matter how far apart we are. Not that we'll ever be apart. Once things are settled with Council, you'll move in here." He smiled at her charmingly and all she wanted to do was punch him in the face.

Ruby gaped at him, feeling as if she'd plunged into a frigid lake. The cold feeling traveled from the top of her head to the soles of her feet before traveling back up again like a current. He was happy he'd let her complete a bond without explaining it to her first? Ruby wasn't sure if she was angry at him or herself.

She forced herself to be calm and rational, which wasn't difficult because for the first time around him, she was thinking with the hard, cold logic of a warrior. He'd done it on purpose, she realized. He'd used her own attraction against him to tie her to him for *eternity*. That one word echoed around her head, bouncing around like a pinball. She didn't know a damn thing about him, nor did he know anything about her, and they were now bound together forever.

"Ruby?" he asked her, leaning back slightly to get a better look at her face. Something must've shown because his happiness was replaced by wariness. "You're not about to go off again, are you?"

She glared at him, for once not feeling the heat of anger. Instead, she was deep in a cold fury. Before, she'd had to force herself to act cold towards him. Now, she wasn't sure she'd ever allow him another intimacy.

They stared at each other. Ruby was determined she wasn't going to be Lucian's little woman, even if part of her yearned to be with him forever. He was overbearing, arrogant, and equally determined to do his part to see her in Council's hands.

Voices intruded on Ruby's thoughts. Since Lucian didn't respond, she figured it was another one of Julius' flashbacks. Two voices spoke, and one she recognized as Julius' even though it was stronger than when she had seen him last.

"Your duty is to aid this Council, Chieftain," a woman's voice warned.

"My duty is to the Veil as a whole, not just to you, Councilor," Julius said menacingly.

"Don't you think you're being a little obtuse, my dear?" she coaxed. "You can play a huge part in the shaping of our world. Just think about it. Council can be a powerful ally, you know."

Julius snorted. "I want no part in your plans, Councilor. My entire line has fought to be just and fair. What you're asking of me would make me little more than your puppet."

"Better a puppet than a corpse, Julius Blue," her voice was dripping with ice now. Obviously, she had expected Julius to fall in with her plans.

"I will die before I let the honor of my line become your toy!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"Then you've made your decision."

Ruby blinked and saw not much time had passed since she let herself become lost in the conversation. Lucian was still watching her expectantly.

"You are my mate, Ruby. I'll never let you go," he told her, his voice warm and husky, though there was a trace of warning in his words.

Pushing him away, Ruby rolled out of the bed, coming to her feet so she could retain some dignity, which was totally lost when she realized she was naked and Lucian was looking at her like a hungry lion watching a gazelle.

"You want to turn me into a Council toy, Lucian," she said coolly, picking up her sweats off the floor. She jerked on her rumpled clothing, raging all the while. "You want me, but you also want your precious position to be secured." He looked surprised at her knowledge. She laughed bitterly. "Yes, Lucian, I know you need to complete all assignments presented to you by your mentor and that's what I am, isn't it? Well, guess what? You won't get both, bub. You either get me or you get the Council position because damned if I'm going to let you screw me and give me away!" Anger masking his face, Lucian prowled out of bed, his eyes glowing red. "You're mine! My duties to Council have nothing to do with us," he snarled as he stalked ever closer.

"They don't? You want to give me to your precious Council so they can lock me away and take me out when it suits them or you! Do you honestly think I can live like that, Lucian?" her voice shook, but she kept going, knowing that she had to say something that he'd understand. "I've just now returned to the world, Lucian. I don't want to hide anymore. I want to be the person I was meant to be. I want to be a Chieftain who lives up to her line's expectations. If you can't leave me with that dignity, then we don't have anything left to say."

He was silent, glaring at her. Ruby felt a hollow pang in her chest, but refused to let Lucian know just how much this was actually hurting her. She'd come to trust him as a friend and now that they'd been intimate, she ached for him to be so much more, but not at the cost of her freedom.

The Instinct clamored out of nowhere, and Ruby nearly gasped at the strength of its warning. Just when she was about to plead with him to hide her or let her go, she heard a voice calling from downstairs.

"Luc?" a woman asked, her voice warm and inviting. "Luc, I came as soon as you called. Where are you?"

Betrayal pierced Ruby's heart like a bullet. Pain and fear ripped through her as she watched the guilt enter Lucian's eyes. "You called them to come to get me," she whispered in a hoarse voice. When he didn't admit or deny her accusations, Ruby's hand flashed out faster than the eye could see.

Lucian's head whipped to the side as her blow caused blood to rush to his cheek. He didn't say anything, just turned his head and met her eyes.

"You bastard," she whispered in agony. "You trapped me."

"My, my, what do we have here?" the woman said from the doorway, her eyebrows rising in curiosity and anger. "Lucian, have you been naughty again?" she asked with a sly chuckle. Ruby glanced at the newcomer, noticing that she was petite. Maybe five foot three, but even though she was short, her body made up for it with knockout curves displayed in crisp white linen. Her platinum hair was cut in a flattering bob around a face designed for the runway. She had large blue eyes that seemed to gleam with innocence, but which looked Ruby over shrewdly. She pursed her coral lips just so to show Ruby she wasn't impressed by what she saw.

The Instinct trilled even louder as the woman entered the room. Not sure if the threat was from the woman or whoever she'd brought with her, Ruby took a few steps back from Lucian.

"Darling," she purred and walked over to the still nude and stockstill Lucian. Her long-nailed fingers slid into the crook of his arm which he reflexively bent for her.

They should've looked ridiculous, Lucian naked as the day he was born and the woman dressed to the nines in an outfit Ruby was sure cost more than she'd ever spent on a car, but they didn't. If anything, Lucian's blatant masculinity was a perfect foil for the woman's petite femininity. His dark hair waved around his face, tangling a bit with her platinum strands as though they couldn't wait to be entwined on a pillow.

"You must be the new Chieftain," she said, her eyes flicking over Ruby with barely concealed disgust. "You've led us a merry chase, my dear. But I knew Lucian could find you." She smiled up a Lucian, her eyes caressing his face with an intimacy Ruby resented the hell out of.

"Who are you?" Ruby asked rudely, drawing herself up to her full six feet two inches, taking satisfaction in the glint of surprise in the other woman's face.

But Ruby had underestimated her because the woman slapped Lucian's arm with a playful laugh. "Lucian, shame on you! You didn't tell her about me?" she rolled her eyes and inclined her head at Ruby. "I'm Bianca Bridges, the Oculum. Lucian is my...apprentice," she said with a quirk of her lips that suggested they were much, much more.

Lucian still didn't look at Bianca, his eyes drilling into Ruby like diamond tipped bits. "How wonderful," Ruby said flatly. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go to my room now." She walked to the door, stepping around the couple.

"Oh, let me join you! I have so much I want to talk with you about," Bianca trilled, pulling Lucian down to her so she could kiss his cheek. "I'll be back and we can...talk."

Lucian nodded, his eyes meeting Bianca's. Something passed between them that caused Ruby's heart to clench. "I'll shower and be waiting for you, Oculum," he replied calmly, no emotion in his voice. His eyes met Ruby's again. "Chieftain, I *will* see you later."

Ruby didn't answer, just stomped out of his room and into hers. The click of heels behind her told her Bianca was right behind her. She didn't acknowledge the other woman, just went straight to the dresser, pulled out the gray sweats, and entered the bathroom. She'd just stepped into the shower and was doing her best not to cry under the water when she heard the bathroom door open.

"I hope you don't mind if I sit in here to chat with you, my dear. There are so many things we have to do and so little time in which to do them," Bianca's voice came from the other side of the shower curtain.

Ruby heard things on the cabinet top being rearranged and then a slight heft as Bianca settled herself on it. She closed her eyes, not saying a word. Maybe Bianca would go away if she refused to talk.

No such luck.

"Lucian is so noble," Bianca sighed over the pounding water. "When I handed him this assignment, we only expected it to take him a week at the most to bring Julius in. We never expected the dratted little man to evade us for twenty-five years! It's been so hard on our relationship." She paused as though expecting Ruby to ask why it was so hard on them. Ruby clenched her teeth and scrubbed her skin with a vengeance. The woman was flat-out stating she and Lucian had something going on. Lucian had never mentioned his relationship with the woman other than to say he was her apprentice, but Ruby couldn't dismiss the easy intimacy between them. Lucian hadn't been the least bit uneasy at being seen in the buff by Bianca. There was something there, but how much Ruby didn't know.

"He's such a wonderful man. We grew up together, and when his mother told me Lucian was interested in joining Council, I couldn't believe my luck. I had a crush on him for so very long, you know," Bianca said in a voice meant to show Ruby just how little she knew about Lucian's private life. "When this assignment came up, I never thought we'd be separated for such long periods. But, that's our job I'm afraid. Now that we've found you, Lucian and I can go back to our plans."

Ruby refused to say anything. She'd seen the silent communication between them, the kind of communication that came from years of familiarity. It doesn't matter, she told herself as she cleaned Lucian's scent from her body. He was welcome to the witch. They were a match made in Hell. Bianca with her sly smiles and friendship with his mother, and Lucian with his arrogant assumptions that Ruby would drop everything to become his little woman and do whatever he said.

Bianca would do that, Ruby suspected. She'd be a perfect hostess for him when he was Oculum, having been in the position herself. She'd know all of his friends and be completely at ease with his family and the Veil. Not to mention, she wouldn't be locked up, unlike Ruby. Bianca was perfect for him.

A tear slipped down Ruby's face before she could stop it. She wasn't meant to be with him. Her life was meant to serve the Veil and the Eturi, not the Council. She would hold true to Julius's beliefs.

The Instinct reared its head again, so strongly this time Ruby couldn't stop the gasp from escaping. Her skin crawled with fear and panic.

"You're the final piece to the puzzle, Chieftain," Bianca's voice was almost hushed. "Lucian and I can finally live the life we were meant to."

Ruby threw back the shower curtain, grabbing a towel and drying off roughly. Bianca was arranged on the countertop like a kitten, her legs tucked under her. She tilted her head to the side and watched Ruby dress. Doing her best not to let the Oculum know she was embarrassed by her nudity, Ruby remained as stoic as possible, not meeting her eyes.

"He's a very smart man, my Lucian is," Bianca murmured, her eyes drifting over Ruby's tattoos and lush curves. "Of course I don't expect him to be faithful until after we're married, but I'm surprised he would sleep with you. You're not his usual type.

"In fact, you're no one's type I know of," she continued in a thoughtful tone, though spite dripped from her voice. "Those tattoos are quite horrible, aren't they? Julius was horrid for giving such a shy, homely girl those marks."

Ruby had had enough. She finished dressing and stood tall, staring Bianca in the eye. "Say whatever you want, Oculum," she said stingingly. "I am a Chieftain, and though Lucian tried convincing me to stay with the Council, I won't."

Bianca laughed, her blue eyes hard as stones. "Dearest, you have no choice in the matter. This was decided long before you ever arrived on the scene, and just because you slept with my apprentice doesn't mean you'll be let free. Did he lead you to believe you're a couple now?" She laughed again when Ruby flinched. "Really, my dear, that was part of our plan when we realized you were female. We've never had to catch a woman before. Lucian didn't want to do it because he's so noble, but I assured him you wouldn't believe it. But you did, didn't you?"

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Ruby felt her face pale and knew her embarrassment and humiliation were apparent in her expression. Even though she couldn't be Lucian's mate, knowing he'd used her emotions against her, just like Dan had when she was a teenager, was a powerful blow. Something shattered inside Ruby in that moment. Trust, or hope, or maybe a combination of the two died a slow, painful death.

Bianca hopped off the cabinet and dusted off her hands. "It'll be okay, dear. I'm sure you had a lovely night with him, but you must've known it couldn't last." She made her way to the bathroom door with a swaying gait. Before she left the room, she turned back. "I promise you that you'll never come to regret it."

Standing alone in the bathroom with Bianca's hateful words echoing around her, Ruby felt as though she'd just bathed in ice. Dully, she stared at her toes. The words beat at her, pelting her like barbs. They were getting married and Lucian had used the mate card on her to ensure she'd trust him.

Beating herself up for being such a gullible twit, Ruby drifted into the bedroom to sit on the bed. There was no anger this time and the Instinct, though it still beat at her to flee, was a distant call. Below all the anger and pain, beneath the Instinct, was a primitive cry for freedom. Lucian had caused her pain from the moment she met him. Physical, mental, emotional, he touched her on every level and left behind bittersweet agony.

Ruby lifted her eyes to the window. The morning had slipped away along with every ounce of happiness she'd felt the night before.

Her eyes narrowed on the world outside the window. Freedom lurked on the other side of that pane of glass.

Chapter Nineteen

Lucian washed and dressed, trying to ignore the anger and hurt niggling at him. Ruby wasn't thinking clearly, he assured himself. She was scared and unsure of her feelings for him, but Lucian wasn't going to let that stand in the way of their bonding.

Ripples of remembered pleasure threatened to drag Lucian away from his duty. Duty, he thought with unexpected resentment, was the bane of his existence. He was a slave to it, putting it before everything. The Council needed to protect the Chieftain and his duty was to see she was brought in. He understood Ruby's fear of being wrapped in the gentle chains of Council protection, but it was for her own good and safety. He just never thought he'd resent his own part in Council's decrees before.

Bianca called up to him again, her voice warm and friendly. He sighed. He had so much trouble staring him in the face right now he almost wished Malachi would make an appearance. The situation with Bianca and his family was complicated. Throw in the fact she was his mentor and the only way to a Council seat and he had a problem of mass proportions on his hands.

Giving Ruby's closed door a longing glance, Lucian went downstairs to find Bianca standing at his stove putting the kettle to boil. Some things never change, he thought as he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. Lucian would put her in an awkward position and Bianca would make tea.

"Darling," she said happily, clasping the cheek Ruby had slapped. She frowned. "You're bruised." He grinned with sheepish pride. "Ruby has a powerful right hook," he said, shrugging off her concern and sitting at the table.

She huffed and began setting out cups. Lucian ignored her ire and studied his childhood friend. Bianca would've made the perfect partner and, at one time, Lucian wouldn't have cared if his family expected them to marry. Hell, at one time, he'd been okay with it. Bianca was a beautiful witch and very talented in bed. That had seemed like enough for him until he met Ruby.

No matter how skilled Bianca was, he'd never felt fulfilled with her, which is why he had spent so many years prowling. After last night with Ruby, Lucian couldn't even imagine touching another woman. They all seemed to pale in comparison to the passion she'd unleashed on and in him.

"So you finally caught the Chieftain," Bianca said, sounding pleased. "I've already called the rest of Council. I have a feeling we'll need everyone's powers to control her." She turned to face him, her lips upturned in a Mona Lisa smile.

Lucian frowned. "I thought I was supposed to bring her in alone?"

"Oh, no, darling, after all the trouble you've gone to this week, we all agreed you needed our assistance," she assured him, coming to stand before him. She tilted her head to the side, a charming movement he'd once found endearing. "You just have one more assignment to complete before you're fully sanctioned by Council. That must feel wonderful." Bianca tittered.

He shrugged. He felt like shit, actually. His mate was pissed at him and Council was coming to take her away at his prodding. He sat up. "She's my mate," he told Bianca, his voice lowering to a growl.

She looked surprised, blinking slowly. "But that's impossible, Luc. You and I have an agreement to marry!"

"Looks like we showed up just in time," an amused voice said from the doorway as Tawny, Nila, Fields, and Bree entered the room.

"Nice house, Lucian. Who's your decorator?" Bree asked as she looked over the kitchen with appreciation.

"Do you realize how long it took us to find this hellhole?" Nila demanded as she fanned herself. "This place is uncivilized!"

"So who are you mated to?" Tawny asked as she and Fields ignored the other two, nodding to Bianca respectfully.

"Oh, he's not mated to anyone," Bianca answered, her voice sharp as a whip. "He tricked the little Chieftain into bed by saying they were mates." She let out a brittle laugh.

The other councilors' eyes swung around and stared at Lucian with varying degrees of disgust, horror, and interest. Lucian sat up with a jerk. "That isn't how it happened!"

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Having sat staring at the window for several long minutes, Ruby finally faced some hard truths. Lucian wasn't ever going to give up trying to put her in Council hands. Not really. Even now, she could hear them talking downstairs. They were no doubt planning her removal.

He expected her to stick around and calmly concede to Council "protection." There was no way she would allow herself to be kept in a gilded cage. Ruby had spent most of her life trying to find her niche in the world and now, with the powers she possessed, she found she didn't resent them as much as she would've expected. It was a heady thing to realize that by brushing her hand against someone, even if she still cringed at the idea of being touched by strangers, she could see everything in their past, present, and future.

She'd tried brushing her fingers against Lucian a few times, but she got no readings from him, so maybe his theory about being her destined mate was true, not that it mattered now.

She had a purpose in the world, Ruby thought in satisfaction. The Eturi might be clamoring for her capture, but she wasn't without her own skills. You couldn't go twenty-some odd years trapping in the swamps without being stealthy. Ruby didn't fool herself into thinking she would avoid detection completely, but her freedom was at stake, and she wasn't about to let it be curtailed because of some drop-dead gorgeous vampire.

The decision made, she stood and took a deep breath to steady her nerves. With her back against the wall opposite her gate to freedom, she ran at full speed. She launched herself at the windows, feeling the wards Lucian had on them snap at the same time the alarms went off.

She broke through the glass, shredding her skin but not caring. She had a duty to her line to get away, even if it was away from the man she'd unsuspectingly bound herself to. Ruby flew through the air, landing on her side with a grunt. Her shoulder popped and a few of her ribs snapped. She couldn't stop though.

Ruby got to her feet as fast as she could and began running, holding her ribs. She could hear the councilors shouting back and forth, trying to figure out which way she'd gone.

Lucian wouldn't be out because he was confined by the sunlight, but the others would be after her in full force. Ruby darted through the tangled oak trees. The Instinct spurred her body onward once more. She loped through the sugarcane field beyond Lucian's house, heading for the thick woods and swamp. She peered behind her only once and it was to see three distinct movements in the field. She was glad she was as tall as she was because it enabled her to keep one step ahead of them.

Reaching the woods, her bare feet found every sharp stick and sticker plant, but she kept going. She needed to put a lot of distance between her and the group before nightfall. More importantly, before Lucian could come after her. She felt the bond stretch between them like an invisible rope and in her heart she wanted nothing more than to return to the shelter of his arms. She couldn't do it though. She wouldn't do it.

Ruby paused, listening intently. Someone was catching up with her, moving with great stealth, heading straight for her. She looked around. She was in the middle of a clearing of very old cypress and oak trees. She tucked herself into the trunk of an oak, waiting for her pursuer.

She forced herself to calm, forced her breathing to slow. When she heard the snap of a stick to her left, she held her breath. Ruby had never purposely set a trap for anyone, but she was desperate to get away.

It was the blonde. Tawny, she thought. The woman was walking with her eyes focused on the ground in front of her, her nostrils quivering. She was just as pretty in person as she'd looked in her photo, but that was the last thing Ruby wanted to think about. Just as Tawny lifted her head as though sensing danger, Ruby was on the smaller woman, putting her in a chokehold.

How Ruby knew it was a chokehold, she wasn't entirely sure. She just knew the woman struggled hard, her tiny hands beating at Ruby, but Ruby was relentless. Within twenty seconds, the woman was out and Ruby put her on the ground.

She needed to keep the tracker from coming after her, Ruby thought frantically. The woman had a set of handcuffs on her belt, which made Ruby growl. They'd been planning to restrain her? The irony of using Tawny's own handcuffs on her was too much for Ruby to resist.

She dragged the smaller woman to a slender pine tree, looping her arms around it, handcuffing them together. Taking the key out of the woman's belt, Ruby threw it several yards away. She found a wad of cash in Tawny's jeans and a pocketknife. Ruby felt some guilt about stealing from her, but this was war, and she had to be tough.

The woman's head lolled to the side, her hair sliding away from her face. "Cool," Ruby said, noticing that Tawny's ears were just slightly pointed at the tip. "My first elf." Crashes in the woods caused her to jump. Unable to be completely mean, Ruby pushed the woman's head forward so it rested on the trunk of the tree. "You shouldn't get a crick in your neck that way," she whispered before taking off again. Ruby wasn't sure how long she ran. Daylight laced the ground as she sped through the swampy woods. Sometimes she ran on dry land, but sometimes she splashed through water so murky she didn't want to think about what was in it. Her feet had started bleeding hours ago, but she sucked it up. She was running and she wasn't winded.

The experience was so foreign and exhilarating, Ruby didn't want to stop. She just charged ahead, startling birds, deer, and other animals as she seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

Ruby paused in a small clearing, her ears attuned to the sounds of the swamp. Her face, arms, and hands were streaked with blood, but the cuts from the glass had long healed. Peering through the canopy, she figured it was close to dusk. She'd have less than an hour before Lucian was able to come after her. Not fooling herself for a minute into thinking he'd let this go or the Council didn't already have people on her trail, Ruby tried to decide the best route to take.

Not having a clear destination in mind wasn't exactly helpful, but she decided heading southwest was for the best. If she cut directly across the swamps and managed not to be eaten by an alligator or cougar, she'd be closer to her own neck of the woods. With that thought in mind, she moved out, jogging this time so she could keep her ears open for any unexpected sounds.

It was nearly dark when she heard muffled footsteps twenty yards to her left. They sounded very human and in very much a rush. Instinctively ducking, Ruby wasn't surprised when a woman flew out of the brush and landed in a crouch in beside her.

At that same moment, crashes sounded from the opposite direction before four large manlike beings burst through the trees. Ruby staggered back in surprise, moving closer to the other woman.

They were massive. The shortest of the bunch was still a foot taller than Ruby. Scarlet-skinned and bulging with muscle, they each had horns sprouting from the sides of their heads. Demons. They had to be demons of some kind. They were speaking to each other as they edged closer to Ruby and the stranger. "You take the two on the left, I'll get the right," the other woman said as she launched herself at two of the demons.

Flabbergasted and unsure of what she was supposed to do, Ruby watched in stunned disbelief as the other woman fought them. Her distraction allowed the other two demons to flank her, flipping the switch on her Chieftain defenses.

Forgetting about the other woman for the moment, Ruby swung out at the demon closest to her with a powerful right hook. His head whipped to the side, but she didn't pause to enjoy the shock on his face. She was already moving to the other demon, sweeping his legs out from under him, sending him crashing to the swamp floor with a loud thud.

The first demon recovered, coming at her with claws bared.

"No! The mistress wants her alive!" the fallen demon grunted as he tried to get back to his feet.

Not caring what they wanted or why, Ruby flung herself at the first demon, taking him by surprise yet again. He hadn't expected a front attack, so Ruby was able to get several licks in before he reacted.

When he attacked, though, he did so with a vengeance. Using his massive arms, he wrapped Ruby in a bear hug, making her vertebrae crack. Spots danced before her eyes as he squeezed the air out of her lungs.

In a last ditch effort to save herself, Ruby slammed her head into his face with a satisfying crunch. She was dropped like a sack of potatoes as the demon grabbed his bloody, mangled nose. Rolling to her feet in one smooth motion, Ruby spun her leg in a roundhouse kick that connected with the demon's temple, knocking him out and nicking her foot on the prong of his horn.

A rustle to her left sent Ruby ducking, just missing a giant fist aimed at her head. The other demon had put his entire weight behind the punch, so when he missed, his momentum caused him to lose his balance. Ruby used that to her advantage, aiming a vicious kick at his knee. The sickening snap of bone and the demon's bloodcurdling scream pierced the clearing as he fell to the ground.

Winded, but not about to let her defenses down, Ruby whirled around to see that the other woman had taken care of her two demons and was sitting on a log cleaning her fingernails. She raised an arrogant eyebrow when she saw Ruby looking at her.

"You're not going to finish them?" she asked indicating the two fallen demons with a jerk of her chin.

"Kill them?" Ruby asked shocked at the idea. "No!"

The woman sighed, getting to her feet with lethal grace. "You're gonna need lots of work," she said in a deep, authoritative voice as she walked over to the demons. Before Ruby could blink, the woman had jerked a knife from the sheath at her side and stabbed both demons in the heart. She flicked her heavy braid back over her shoulder. "Your mama wouldn't have let that other demon get the drop on her."

Terrified and disgusted, Ruby took a step back. "Who are you?"

Now that she wasn't being attacked, Ruby could get a better look at her homicidal assistant. Dark brown hair pulled into a simple ponytail. A face that looked eerily familiar but for the wicked scar that wound down her cheek from her hairline.

"You know who I am, Lost Child," the woman said as she stood up, sauntering over to Ruby with confidence. She offered her hand. "Touch my hand."

The authority in that voice spoke to something in Ruby and she reached out without thinking, gripping the other woman's hand. Her sight spiraled down to the life of the woman before her. Bretina. Her grandmother.

Ruby saw a child running around the encampment. A little girl who greatly resembled the school pictures her father had plastered all over the walls of their home. The girl darted between other women until she reached an older woman seated on a throne. "Ma-maw! Tell Tante 'Breda I don't have to take a bath!" the little girl cried as she threw herself at her grandmother.

The woman laughed and stroked back the thick brown hair so similar to her own. "Now, Ruby. You know you must listen to your aunts no matter what. They only want what's best for you." She placed a kiss on the child's forehead. "Besides, you smell like a little boy!"

The child gasped in outrage, much to the hilarity of the other women. "I do not, Ma-maw!" the little girl giggled, placing a smacking kiss on her grandmother's cheek. "But I'll take a bath anyway."

The girl's beleaguered aunt finally showed up, panting a little. "The little monster runs fast!"

"She's going to be faster than her mother one day," an old woman said from the corner.

Murmurs of agreement came from the others. "Mama was the fastest, wasn't she?" the child asked her grandmother.

A pained smile entered her grandmother's face. "Yes, little gem, your mother was the fastest there was, and you will be even faster."

"Great!" the child said with enthusiasm and extracted herself from her grandmother's lap. "C'mon, Tante 'Breda! I'll race you to the river!"

Albreda groaned as the little girl darted away again, making the women laugh.

Less than an hour later, Albreda ran to the camp, her face pale and strained. "Mother! Ruby's gone!"

Screeches and yelps followed the announcement as the Blood Maiden camp rallied around their queen in search of the child. There was no trace of the little princess. No trail to follow. Only a small indention of the child's hand on the river bank remained of the queen's granddaughter.

The scene switched, flipping backwards even further and faster than before.

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Ruby saw a montage of women of all shapes and colors who lived together, raised their children together, and fought off invaders. Bretina had been the oldest daughter of the tribe queen. Everyone had known she would be the next leader, for none surpassed her in combative and strategic prowess.

Ruby saw Bretina lead a war party from their camp, hidden somewhere in a steeply wooded area, to a beach. Longboats pulled ashore and massive men disembarked, armed to the teeth. The women swarmed the beach, and their war shrieks intermingled with grunts of pain and the surprised chatter of the invaders.

Once the battled died down, the beach was strewn with heavily muscled bodies and a few smaller shapes of Bretina's warriors. A group of men had been captured and were rounded up and returned to camp. As tribal leader, Bretina was given first choice of men. Knowing as well as the other women that they needed children desperately, Bretina chose the most bloody of the men.

His name had been Ingvar, and he and his brethren who'd been spared on that day remained with the tribe, fathering a new generation of warrior women. After the first hundred years of barrenness, Ingvar finally gave Bretina four daughters in a short amount of time, the youngest of which was Zoe. During a raid against the tribe, Ingvar was killed while protecting his daughters, leaving Bretina to raise them.

The pride and joy of the entire tribe was young Zoe, who was more fierce and larger than all of her sisters and cousins. She was just as skilled at tracking and war strategy as her mother and made no secret of her hate of all men. It was well-known Zoe was destined to be the next leader of the tribe as her mother had been. Several years after she reached maturity, Zoe disappeared for her spirit journey. She returned after five years, speaking of a man she'd married whom she was going to live with.

Bretina's hurt and disbelief were expressed in the many battles she pitched after Zoe's departure. Battling with a ferociousness never before seen by a single tribe in the history of their people, many feared they would have to physically remove her from the throne.

When Zoe arrived back at camp with a very young daughter, Bretina knew no greater happiness. Her beloved daughter was back, and she now had a granddaughter to teach and love. Her life was full again.

The happiness lasted two years before Zoe died in battle and shortly after, young Ruby disappeared. They'd all believed she had been swept down river and drowned. With the death of her youngest daughter and her only grandchild weighing on her, Bretina lost her heart for battle and leading the tribe, stepping aside to let a new queen take the throne.

Ruby let Bretina go, staggering back, her eyes not seeing anything. This was her grandmother. She'd been able to piece the pictures Bretina had of Zoe with the images of her mom, and they were one and the same.

"My father never wanted to talk about mama's family," Ruby murmured, her vision blurry. "I thought I was all alone." She snapped out of her trance, focusing her eyes on Bretina hating the wave of suspicion she felt. "How did you find me?"

"We knew you were alive. We felt your transition start when you were a teenager and again when you inherited your Chieftain powers. We had no idea you were so close until last week," she continued, her eyes travelling the scrolling tattoo on Ruby's face and the band around her throat. "Did you kill that boy?"

"What?" Ruby asked, startled out of her stupor. "How did you know?"

Bretina's eyes skimmed over Ruby calculatingly. "You don't seem to understand me, girl," she shot back. "Because you didn't know who and what you are, you were a danger to everyone around you, especially men. If you didn't kill the boy who took your virginity, you were lucky. Your father robbed you of your true heritage!" Bretina roared the last, pain dripping from every word. Stunned, Ruby stared at Bretina, weighing her words. She *had* almost killed Dan and her father hadn't been surprised so much as resigned. He hadn't wanted Ruby mingling with society because he had known what Ruby was and feared for her safety. All this time she thought she was a freak because she hadn't known who—what she was.

She blinked. Julius had said it, but she'd thought he was crazy at the time. Now she knew, she just needed confirmation.

"Vikings?" she asked in stunned voice.

Bretina visibly calmed, her face melting into a cocky grin. "Not quite. Ingvar was a Berserker. He was a good fighter," she shrugged with a smile. "Just not as good as me."

"How old are you?"

"Hmm. I am four hundred and fifty-two years old."

"Holy crap." A pause. "How did you know about what happened when I lost my virginity? What are you? What am I?" The words shot out like rapid gunfire.

Bretina leaned forward and whispered back. "Losing your virginity was the first step in your transition, the Chieftain power transference was the last. You—we're Amazons."

* * * *

She knew it when her minions lost the battle against the Chieftain. The plan had been thrown together at the last minute, perhaps too hastily thrown together. The Chieftain was proving to be more trouble than she'd originally thought.

She sneered at the Veilerians organizing search parties. She knew she'd have just one more chance to take care of the Chieftain. Her associate was getting restless, not liking the direction her vision was taking them. But he wasn't her only ally in the war they fought.

Her lips curled as she thought of the other Eturian generals. They were men and women who were weary of being hidden from the humans. As much as she wanted Malachi to believe she was the founder of their force, she answered only to her leader. Her master sat behind the scenes, moving them into place like chess pieces and never letting sentiment cloud his judgment. He'd wanted Malachi in on the fun, but recently he'd let it be known that her most precious recruit was skating too close to the edge of honor for further use. The order to kill would come from him eventually, but for now she was given the chance to handle Malachi herself.

He'd have to be dealt with, but first she had to get the Chieftain alone and away from the others. As for the Chieftain, she was a stepping stone to bigger, better things. Once Ruby was in her grasp, the Veilerians wouldn't stand a chance. Lucian was the key, she knew. He'd be the one to force the Chieftain into seclusion. Just how should she do it?

A sly smile crossed her face. She knew the perfect way, and she could kill two birds with one stone.

Chapter Twenty

"Where is she?" he demanded as he stomped into the kitchen breathing fire.

Tawny confronted him, her blue eyes spitting fire right back. "She knocked me out and handcuffed me to a pine tree. I had her and she got the drop on me," she hissed, her anger making her shine with power. "When I came to and Bree found me, I couldn't pick up her trail again."

Lucian was astonished. There was no better tracker than Tawny. If she had been available at the beginning of this entire fiasco, Ruby would've been in protective custody the very second she'd been made.

"I thought you said she was human before her transition," Nila said coldly. The demon executioner wasn't happy about this turn of events, but she could take a hike. Lucian knew she'd been the one to rush their arrival this morning and put all of this into motion.

Lucian corrected himself. He'd begun the mess by not telling his mate the truth before sealing their bond. Bianca and Nila hadn't helped by bringing the reinforcements in before he was ready.

"She is," Lucian said, sitting at his kitchen table to think. "She was a hermit, she said."

Bree shared a look with Fields. "Did she say what made her a hermit?"

Lucian shook his head, not wanting to tell them Ruby's private business.

Fields tapped one blue tinged finger against his mouth, his gaze turned inward. He turned to Nila. "Call Breed Affairs and Records.

Tell them we need a file on all females born—" he paused, looking at Lucian.

"She's about thirty," Lucian answered, his mind swirling with the idea that she might've lied to him about her species. Why would she do that?

"—thirty years ago. She's stealthy and aggressive, so I'm recommending he check it against the records of Amazon, Demon, and wereanimal half-breed births. She's not entirely human," Fields said with his eyes locked on Lucian.

"How wouldn't she know?" Lucian demanded. "She'd have realized something."

Fields shrugged, seating himself across from Lucian. Nila left the room with her cell phone to her ear while Bree and Tawny made themselves comfortable. "It's possible she doesn't know she's a halfbreed. Sometimes the powers lie dormant until a traumatic event, which, in the Chieftain's case would've been the transference of power."

Nila came back in the room, her eyes serious when they landed on Lucian. "Daughter born thirty years ago to an Amazon named Zoe, who died in the Battle of Ari'och. The human father was never identified, but the child disappeared from our records. There are no other records for that time period matching this one."

Tawny nodded. "Even if she were a half-breed elf or fairy, she'd be smaller and still look about fifteen years old," she said, her own youthful face not giving away her true age.

Bree groaned. "Fantastic. She's an Amazon with Chieftain abilities. She's just gonna love it when we lock her up. We'll need lots of trangs," she plopped her head on her hands.

"We're not locking her up," Lucian announced. Four pairs of eyes zeroed in on him. The range of expression ranged from bland to downright shock. "I bonded her. I'm keeping her with me."

"Aw, hell," Bree muttered to the table top. "I so don't need this right now." She lifted her head and glared at him. Lucian could've

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kicked himself. Having the interrogator at his table wasn't a good way to keep a secret. "You didn't tell her about any of this."

Tawny looked even more shocked. "Lucian! You claimed your mate and didn't *tell* her you called us down here? Oh, you're in so much trouble!" She looked gleeful of the impending clash.

Nila, who was about as feminine as a two-by-four, looked disgusted with him. She sneered. "Now we know why she ran," she muttered. "Asshole."

Bianca sailed in the room at that very moment, looking like a spring morning. "Ah, everyone's back, lovely." She patted Lucian on the cheek with affection and took no notice of the other women. "Well, we should really continue looking for the beast. She's put us through so much trouble as it is."

Fields cleared his throat, his mouth twitching. The air elemental's blue skin whirled with air currents no one could feel. Lucian never saw much of Fields since they usually worked on different assignments, so it was always a shock to remember he was working with one of the Earth's strongest powers. Fields's silvery hair floated around his body in the breeze that never left him.

"Fields, if you even look like you're going to laugh, I'll light a match," Lucian threatened.

"Oh, sure, take it out on Fields when you're the one who screwed up," Bree scolded, her ears tuned to his voice. "You're such an ass sometimes, Lucian. You probably went after her, turning on the infamous Ravenswaay charm."

Lucian glared at her while Bianca's eyebrow rose. "What's going on?" she asked haughtily.

"The big, dumb male bonded with the Chieftain and then betrayed her."

"He did what he was ordered to do," she said in her cool voice, an assessing gaze resting on Lucian. "If the Chieftain thinks Lucian is her bonded mate, then she'll come back just to be with him." Bree snorted bitterly. She had every reason to be angry, as Lucian's youngest brother had done the exact same thing a hundred years ago to get information from her regarding Lucian's location. It had been a family emergency, but Bree had never forgotten Uri's deception. To this day, she made sure she had several potions and wards on her body at all times protecting her against seduction.

Nila was glaring a hole through the back of Lucian's head. "She's an Amazon who went hermit, of all things," she swore softly. "She'll be nearly impossible to find. The stealth she already had will have been multiplied by the transition, which explains why Tawny couldn't find her." Lucian didn't want to think about what kind of man problems the demon had had in the past, but apparently she shared the other women's disdain of him.

Tawny seconded Nila's assessment and she, Bree, and Nila ganged up on Lucian, fury in their eyes and kinship with Ruby in their hearts. Bianca sat to the side, her thoughts hidden behind a tolerant smile. Lucian dropped his head in his hands and groaned. The only thing that would be worse than this, he thought, was if Pagan showed up to castrate him and served his balls to Ruby on a silver platter.

"Okay, now," Fields said calmly, showing why he was the Veil negotiator. "We have more important things to worry about. The Chieftain is out there again."

Lucian nodded, his heart seizing in fear for her. "Malachi's going to be after her. She's not afraid of him yet," he told them, his voice almost raw with emotion.

Tawny frowned. "She didn't seem to have trouble escaping me," she said with extreme reluctance. The tips of her pointed ears turned red. "I've never had someone get away from me before. Damn Amazonian stealth. Better than ninjas," she said with a grin.

Nila said drolly, "Which would explain why they've been used as assassins for centuries."

Bree slapped her hands on the table. "Right. We'll call the subs in and they'll start scouring the nearby communities, see if they come across her," she announced, pulling her cell out of her pocket. She looked at Nila. "You saw no sight of her on the back roads? And Tawny saw no tracks in the swamp."

Nila shook her head. "It didn't look like she even went near the road. I drove around for about an hour trying to see if I could sense her approach, but it was like she disappeared."

"Okay," Fields said, the air around him flowing faster with his excitement. "Lucian, we need some maps. Bree, call Pagan and Jackson. See if they can get Marie and some other day-walkers out here until the vamps can come out. Nila, I need to see if you can find out more information on Amazonian abilities. I'm embarrassed to say I'm not up to snuff on my race history. Tawny, I need you to go back out there and try to pick up her trail. Bianca, you go back to the safe house and arrange her accommodations."

Tawny nodded and headed out without further questions. Lucian could see the determination burning in her eyes. She wasn't happy Ruby got away from her anymore than he was. She'd find Ruby's trail, eventually.

"Lucian, the map," Fields said calmly, breaking into his thoughts.

An hour later, they had twenty of Pagan's daytime operatives in the surrounding towns. None of them were as good as their boss except Marie and she'd followed Tawny into the woods. Bree and Nila were pouring over the map trying to estimate how fast Ruby could travel. One of Nila's personal contacts was of Amazon descent and she'd called in a favor, giving them a rough estimate of stamina and speed.

Bianca had left to set up the safe house, knowing she could leave the actual capture in Lucian's capable hands. Fields kept in contact with the Veilerians who lived in the surrounding communities. Ruby was being tracked down in the biggest woman-hunt in Veilerian history.

Lucian paid them no mind. He bided his time until sundown. He methodically dressed himself in clothing made for stealth. He would

find her. He could feel the line stretched between them, feel it vibrate when she hurt herself in her haste, feel it tug when she thought about his betrayal.

His room was redolent in Ruby's jasmine scent. The bed still a mess of blankets and sheets, the pillow Ruby had slept on at an angle.

He tried to ignore the pain in his chest and went about gathering a personal arsenal. Lucian wasn't fool enough to believe he'd get her back without having to fight Malachi again. Instinct told him something very important was about to take place.

* * * *

Before heading out after his mate, Lucian looked over a report Breed Affairs had compiled. He saw the words "Amazon," "Bretina," and "Ingvar." He heard a muffled huff from Fields and knew he'd also read the most important parts of the report. Only Fields had been alive when Bretina, with Ingvar at her side, had ruled the eastern seaboard with an iron fist. Everyone else learned about them in the history books. Bretina, with her tribe of forest Amazons and a few handpicked berserker mates, had been responsible for the disappearances of several settlements in the early days of the New World.

Lucian didn't envy any leader who went up against them. Bretina was no longer leader of her tribe, but her daughter was, and she was just as ruthless and savvy as her mother. All of her daughters were. Lucian glanced through the names: Albreda, the leader and third born, Ocean, the oldest, Saga, second oldest, and Zoe, the youngest daughter. They were among the fiercest Amazons in the world and won several tournaments during the Battle of Lionesses, as those games were called.

No one outside the race was exactly sure what the purpose of the tournaments was, just that they'd been going on since the beginning of Veilerian recorded history. The resulting fighters born of the

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tournament winners were usually the fiercest and no one wanted to tangle with them.

Lucian reflected on what else he knew of the Amazons. The majority was very man-shy and was, in fact, extremely aggressive when presented with a nonrelative male. Considering how rare it was for Amazons to give birth to male children or to keep men in their lives, it was unusual to find one who didn't try to kill every man she found. They were ferocious fighters, protectors, and mothers.

The myths surrounding Amazonian mating rituals abounded with everything from BDSM to flat-out rape. Some suggested that to truly mate an Amazon was the most stupefying experience in the world and the male who managed it would never want for love for the rest of his days.

Lucian rubbed the back of his neck. "So what does all of this mean?" he asked the room at large, knowing damn well it meant his mate was none other than the only surviving granddaughter of the most bloodthirsty berserker and Amazon leader in history.

"It means we look for her and if we don't find her, we make a diplomatic appeal to the Amazons for help."

"I should've never mated her," he murmured as he stared out at the night. "I should've just stuck with the damn plan."

When Lucian turned around, it was to see Fields looking at him like he wanted to beat the crap out of him.

"You're a fool, Lucian," the elemental said harshly. He rose to his feet, the currents around him whipping his hair and clothing into a frenzy. "You've been given the one gift few immortals will ever receive and you're saying you shouldn't have grabbed it with both hands? If she is your mate, then that woman was created for you and you alone. There will be no other for you or for her. If by some miracle, she cares for you and you get her back, you'd better make damn sure you don't ruin it. Chances like this only come along once in a lifetime and, considering how long we live, you'll regret it forever." Lucian looked at Fields, his heart and his mind at complete odds with each other. He understood what Fields was saying and even agreed, but the honor of not only himself, but his family was rooted in his duties to the Council. He also had a duty to his deceased brother, Bernard, to fulfill this assignment and join Council ranks.

The Veil needed the Chieftain. The Council needed to ensure the Chieftain's safety. In weighing the desperate need of many against his own, he knew there was no real choice to make. And hopefully Ruby wouldn't hate him for all eternity.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ruby heard more rustling, turning away from Bretina. Several people were moving through the marsh, headed their way. Some sense told her it was Council representatives.

"Let's go," Bretina asked softly, the tension in her body suggesting she would and could whisk Ruby to safety.

Lucian would be on the heels of the Council reps. Even if she wanted to escape, he'd just follow. She didn't want to get her grandmother in trouble with Council, no matter how kick-ass the Amazon seemed to be. Ruby wouldn't go easy, but she wouldn't take her grandmother with her.

She had a crazy idea that maybe she could reason with Lucian. After that eye-opening vision she'd had of Amazon mates, she wondered if the arrogant vampire was her true mate. Something inside her needed to know, and the only way she'd find out was to be near Lucian again. A warning echoed in her brain, saying she was taking unnecessary risks, but her heart, oh, her heart ached to find out if Lucian was meant for her.

"Go. If you don't hear from me in a couple of days, look for me," Ruby whispered back, ignoring the warning her logic screamed. "I'm sure you'll learn where I am soon enough. The Council will want to celebrate my capture."

Bretina gave her a cocky smile. "I don't know if this is the bravest thing I've ever seen someone do or the dumbest."

Ruby let out a shout of laughter. "I'm sure it's the dumbest, but I have to know something first."

Bretina nodded, satisfied. "You want me to take them with me?" she asked tilting her head at the dead demons.

"Um, yeah," Ruby said, having forgotten about the corpses. If Lucian saw the demons, he'd go apeshit.

She helped Bretina drag the bodies further into the brush, covering them with smelly mud and leaves. "I'll bring help to move them out. You be careful with Council," Bretina warned in a near silent whisper.

"I'll be fine. If things get dicey, I'll make a run for it. They won't hurt me. They need me," Ruby swore to her grandmother, praying she was right. "Now go."

The mystical bonding stretching between Ruby and Lucian felt as though it were tightening some. He was coming, fast. Ruby frowned and watched as Bretina slinked into the underbrush, disappearing like a shadow in the face of the sun. Ruby's heart pounded as she tried to center herself for the confrontation. She didn't know the other councilors or what they might do to her, but she wasn't going without a fight. She tensed and prepared to defend herself. She hoped, prayed really, that she could convince Lucian that she was serious about her freedom. He had to understand. He had to.

She was undone when Lucian was the first in the clearing. The thunder in his expression warred with obvious concern. Her heart melted. His hands ran over her body intimately, checking for injuries.

When he finally convinced himself she was unharmed, he shook her hard, making her hackles rise. "I can't believe you did this!" he hissed at her through clenched teeth.

Any spark of happiness or relief at the sight of her accidental mate was instantly squashed. Ruby set her feet and knocked his hands away from her arms with a vicious oath. "I told you I didn't want to be the Council pet, Lucian. What did you expect me to do? Sit around and let you all decide my fate? Pretend I don't mind a group of complete strangers think they know what's best for me? Dream on, buddy." "Maybe we should conduct this conversation somewhere else," an amused feminine voice said from the shadows. The elf appeared, looking perfectly healthy. Ruby denied feeling any concern over her treatment of the tracker. "I'm Tawny Cunningham, Chieftain. That was a neat trick you used, and thanks for making sure I didn't wake up with a crick in my neck." The comment was made dryly, which cheered Ruby a bit. If the elf could laugh at herself, then she couldn't be that angry.

Lucian said nothing, pulling Ruby into his side as they headed back the way the trackers had come. Ruby noted Lucian had arrived with half a dozen people. Two she recognized as elves, and one she thought might've been a wereanimal, but the rest looked completely normal, which made her wonder where they'd come from.

Part of her felt bad these people had been roused from their normal duties to chase her, but another part, the part she was beginning to suspect was Amazon, felt extraordinary pride at her ability to elude them for so long. From what she heard by the group's quiet conversation, she'd traveled a good thirty miles from Lucian's house.

Five miles later, Ruby discovered the group hadn't traveled the entire way on foot. On the opposite side of a very soupy section of marsh, they'd abandoned four-wheelers which were quickly claimed by the group with Ruby perched on the back of one with Lucian.

They tore off through the swamps at an alarming speed, but considering they were supernatural beings, their night vision was stellar. Ruby could see very well herself and did her best not to cringe when Lucian took the ATV too close to several Cypress knees. He refused to talk with her. Not that speaking was possible with the angry snarls of the four-wheelers disturbing the quiet night, but Ruby could feel his anger and tension in every fiber of her being.

He was royally pissed. Not that she could blame him. She'd escaped his house with what she suspected was the entire Council present. His pride was stung, not to mention his weird protective streak was probably feeling sorely abused. He would believe anything could have happened to her out there, not caring that she'd lived in a place similar to this swamp and had grown up trapping in it. He wouldn't believe she'd been as safe as she had at home. He'd argue that Malachi could've found her, but Ruby was beginning to think there was more to Malachi than Council knew. Something just didn't ring true about the Eturian leader, and she wondered at Lucian's insistence that Malachi was flat-out evil.

She occupied herself on the ride back, trying to meld what she'd learned from Lucian about Malachi with what she'd personally witnessed and felt as though something was missing. He'd been charming, and she'd felt absolutely no threat from him. Not to mention, the demons who'd attacked her had said their "mistress" wanted her alive.

Her musings were interrupted when they arrived back at Lucian's house an hour later. The house was lit up like a Christmas tree and Ruby saw several vehicles parked out front. A small crowd of people spilled onto the front porch at the sound of the ATVs, watching silently as Lucian escorted Ruby to the house. The crowd parted as they came up the stairs and swallowed up the space as soon as they passed.

Lucian marched her straight up the stairs, passing two women and a blue man on the way. The trio met her eyes boldly, assessing her in a way that made her feel as though they were inspecting a newly purchased horse. She ignored their stares, shooting them a slightly triumphant glance.

Lucian steered her into his room without speaking to her and guided her to his bed. She jerked her arm away from his grip, perching on the edge.

He walked away from her as though he was tempted to do some violence to her. Ruby almost wished he would, because then she wouldn't feel the sting of his disappointment and the crumble of her own defenses in the wake of his obvious fear for her safety. She watched him carefully as he strode to the window, running a hand through his hair.

"Why won't you let me go, Lucian?" He didn't answer. "Why can't you realize I need to live my own life away from restrictions? I'll die if you lock me away."

"Don't be so melodramatic," he barked, turning to glare at her. "Your life depends on us keeping you safe. You'll be well-provided for and cared for like a guest. You won't be 'locked away' as you keep thinking."

"It doesn't matter, Luc! You're killing any feelings I have for you by doing this!" Ruby shrieked before realizing what she'd just said. She felt her face pale as Lucian's expression closed.

"They'll be taking you to the safe house," he said flatly.

"Why are you doing this?" Ruby asked Lucian, unable to shake the stabbing pain in her heart. He was standing right next to her, but he may as well have been a whole world away. There was no warmth in his face, no affection in his eyes. How could she have been so foolish as to believe his lust and claiming of her was anymore than an elaborate scheme? He lived for Council. She was the last Chieftain, an assignment he'd been given. He'd even lied to her about their being mated just to keep her content until Council showed up.

"It's for the good of all, Ruby," he said, his voice deceptively gentle. Ruby thought she caught a glimpse of regret in his eyes, but it was quickly smothered by duty.

The pain spread from her chest to her stomach and throat, growing outwards until she was one big, breathing wound. The affection she felt for him was still there, buried under pain and betrayal, but nonetheless causing her agony to hone to brutal sharpness. She could hear the other Councilors coming into the room, the noose beginning to tighten around her throat.

"Do you...feel anything for me, Lucian?" Ruby heard herself ask, not even conscious of asking such a revealing question. For a moment, he looked startled, as though he hadn't even thought about it. Then, desire lit his eyes, chasing away the signs of duty. But it wasn't love she saw in his expression. He enjoyed the carnal delights they'd explored together. But whereas she seemed to be...oh, God, she was in love with him and he just wanted sex. She didn't need for him to answer her. She saw it in his face.

Ruby felt as though a veil had been lifted from her vision. She laughed harshly, her eyes fixed on Lucian's. The Veil. The very people she had wanted nothing more than to become part of and she'd been blinded by them, by her own visions of how it could be among them with Lucian at her side. But she now knew he would never be by her side. She'd always be a responsibility to him, an obligation.

He opened his mouth to answer her, but she turned away, facing the Councilors. She didn't need to hear his lies. His eyes had told her all she needed to know.

Tawny approached her warily, as though ready for another round of violence, but Ruby remained passive. She just didn't care anymore. All the fight was gone. They were going to lock her away and Lucian would eventually become her jailer. Agony like she'd never experienced lashed through her, but Ruby refused to let any of them see it.

When she met the eyes of the rest of Council, she was mildly surprised to see that it was the Demoness, her race obvious by the little pink horns tucked into her black hair, who seemed most sympathetic. Ruby looked away, not wanting pity from anyone.

"Give me a minute," Lucian told the others, and though they didn't look happy about leaving her with him, they filed out of the room again. The blue man paused to give Lucian a pointed look before closing the door behind him.

The silence in the room was relieved only by the sounds of conversations going on downstairs. Ruby strained to hear Bianca's voice, but didn't detect it. Maybe she'd left as soon as Ruby escaped. Probably making the wedding guest list, she thought acridly.

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"I hope there'll be no further escape attempts?" he asked, his voice devoid of all emotion.

Ruby lifted her chin, meeting his gaze as she turned around.

"I'll never stop trying to achieve my freedom," she declared, not flinching as his eyes began a slow smolder.

"You will promise me you won't attempt an escape, Chieftain."

"Or what, Lucian? You'll lock me up? Oh, wait, you're already planning to do that. So excuse me if I refuse to agree to my own incarceration," Ruby hissed, crossing her arms over her chest absently rubbing the persistent ache over her heart.

His beautiful green eyes narrowed on her dangerously. "I won't have you running off with no protection, Ruby," he growled, his nostrils flaring.

Fed up with his doggedness, Ruby advanced on him. "You have no right to offer me protection. You're nothing to me! You're willingly putting me in the hands of the very people I've been running from since day one."

Quick as a rattlesnake, Lucian snatched Ruby up against his body. He loomed over her, his eyes tracing over her face where blood had dried after her graceful exit through the window. "You are mine, Ruby, and that gives me every right to protect you, and I will protect you even if kills me."

With that said, he kissed her. He kissed her with all of his frustration and anger and even a hint of fear. Ruby could feel every emotion, except love, as his hands gripped her tightly and his tongue invaded her mouth to duel with hers.

He was demanding her compliance, urging her to agree with his decree, but she couldn't do it. He was demanding her whole soul and trust when he wasn't willing to offer the same.

She pushed against him, using every ounce of her strength and willpower not to give in to him. For once, her entire self agreed with the decision to push away from him. Her heart was still aching from its disillusion, but it knew not to risk hurt again. "No, Lucian. You don't own me," she breathed, bracing her arms against his chest to force a little space between them. "I'm my own person with my own thoughts and beliefs. If you can't accept that, then we have nothing. And as you obviously don't care about me, we have less than nothing."

His eyes dilated at her challenge and he began tugging her back to his chest. "That's bullshit, woman. You're mine, and when this is all finished, I'm coming for you." He leaned down to kiss her again.

"No, Lucian," Ruby cried, not sure if even her newly discovered core of inner strength could hold up to another kiss. "I won't be your plaything. I won't be anyone's toy!"

With a strength born of desperation and panic, Ruby managed to escape his hold and stepped away from him, breathing harshly. They stared at each other in silence. Ruby could see the fury and hurt on his face, but hardened her heart against it. If she gave into him just once, he'd take advantage of her weakness.

He was breathing heavily, a flush on his high cheekbones. "Very well," he snarled, his hands fisted at his sides.

Then he walked out of the room, his shoulders straight and his head held up high. Ruby didn't allow her eyes to linger on his back as it disappeared from view. Agony ripped across her chest trying to crawl up her throat, but she held it back.

This was for the best, she told herself. Her burgeoning love wouldn't have a target anymore. If he kept his distance, she could survive the pain. Probably.

The Demoness appeared in the doorway, looking uneasy. "If you'll come with me, Chieftain, we'll be on our way."

Ruby nodded and led the way down the stairs. The crowd had dissipated some, but a good many people were lingered in the foyer and dining room. Ruby scanned the faces and though they were respectful, there were expressions of suspicion, humor, and even fear.

Imagining what she looked like, Ruby supposed they had their rights to doubt her validity as a Chieftain. The sweats she'd donned earlier in the day were now bloodstained and covered in marsh slime. Her bare feet were filthy with numerous healing scratches on them. Her hair probably looked like hell, too, Ruby thought with an inward sigh.

Lucian was nowhere to be seen, and Ruby was eternally grateful. The woman who escorted her hadn't cuffed her hands so she was free to move on her own, but the sense they wouldn't hesitate to forcibly restrain her hovered in the air.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, realizing her hands were bare. "I need my gloves," she said quietly to the woman who came to stand next to her.

An ebony eyebrow rose in question.

Ruby turned her back to the room, showing the Councilor the markings on her palms. "I don't want to accidentally touch someone and have a vision."

"Oh. Right. Tawny," she called to the elf. They whispered for several long minutes, and everyone pretended they didn't hear what was said. Eventually Tawny leapt up the stairs and Ruby was escorted out of the house.

"I'm sorry we can't stop for you to pack a bag," the blue man said from the porch steps.

Ruby tried not to stare at him, though she knew she failed miserably. His skin was unmistakably blue and there appeared to be a breeze around him though nothing disturbed the grass he stood upon. She wanted to ask what he was because this hadn't been explained in the books she'd read.

He gestured to a waiting sedan. Black tinted windows melted into black paint. It was a stealthy car, roomy but built for speed. The blue man opened the back door and waved her inside. She was pressed up against the other woman who'd been on the stairs earlier and her escort squeezed in on her other side.

Tawny, the elf, took the driver's seat before handing Ruby her fingerless gloves. The blue man took the passenger seat. The engine purred to life and they were leaving. Ruby looked over her shoulder one time and saw the figure of a man in an attic window, a phone pressed to his ear. She knew it was Lucian and also knew she was leaving a part of her very soul behind.

The only conversation to be had was when Fields introduced them all. "I'm Fields, the Linguar, or negotiator. Tawny Cunningham is the Nidrum, or tracker." He indicated the redhead. "This is Bree O'Dell, the Aristus, or the interrogator. And Nila," he nodded towards the Demoness. "Nila James is the Manu, or executioner."

Ruby shivered. She was sitting between an interrogator and an executioner. Just lovely. She really wished she would've called shotgun now.

No one said a word the rest of the trip. They stopped once to fuel up, but Ruby was never left alone for a second. Bree and Tawny were tiptoeing around her, giving her sympathetic looks that cut straight to her heart. Fields, who she'd learned was an Air Elemental, merely shook his head once in a while. Nila just stuck close to Ruby and avoided meeting her eyes.

It was the most hellacious journey Ruby had ever undertaken. Nearly ten hours later, they were somewhere in southern Arkansas. Bree, who'd taken the wheel in Lafayette, turned the car down an isolated dirt road.

Ruby spared the mansion a glance as she was led out of the car. Once inside, Ruby walked around without seeing, barely taking notice when Fields and Nila departed. When she did look around, she gaped.

They walked through the massive keep, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpets underfoot. Though older than any building Ruby had ever been in before, it had many modern conveniences. Electric lighting lined the hallway. Ruby could hear a television somewhere and smell the tempting scents of hamburgers underlined by the metallic tang of blood. They passed a crowd of people, some dressed in black S.W.A.T. pants and black T-shirts, obviously uniforms, and others dressed for rest and relaxation in jeans and T-shirts. The stronghold was just like a large hotel except as they walked further from the entrance, the rooms became emptier until they entered a hallway with no doors except at the very end. Ruby noted there was absolutely nothing on the walls of the hallway. No paintings, no figurines, no cubby holes. Nothing. It was all blank walls for twenty yards. Finally, they stopped in front of a steel door at the very end of the hallway. Tawny opened the door and motioned Ruby inside.

Head still held high, Ruby entered, surprised to see it was a bedroom. A large, comfortable looking bed and vanity were tucked into an alcove to the left of the door. In the center of the room was a throne. There was no other word for it.

Ruby approached it cautiously, noting it was made of ebony with etchings covering every inch of the surface. It was like a story was being told on the throne. From the first Elk Fire Chieftain to her, it showed every Chieftain in the blood line.

"Who made this?" Ruby asked the two women quietly. She made sure her voice reflected no emotion. The pain was still there, but determination was seeping into her again. The ice wall that had held her strong through the years after her father's death slowly began to mend itself.

"It was discovered at one of Julian's estates, Chieftain," Bree answered. Neither she nor Tawny was a fool. They could see the pain in how the Chieftain held herself so still, not allowing her eyes rest on anything for long.

"We believe the chair carves itself, milady," Tawny said softly. She exchanged a look with Bree. The Chieftain was staring at the throne as though it were an electric chair. Her expression smoothed out to reveal nothing. "If you have need of anything, Chieftain, you only need to use the intercom." Tawny quickly showed Chieftain Blue where everything was located, wanting to get out of the room before the other woman's pain smothered her.

"Thank you," Ruby said, turning her back on the women.

They left in a hurry, leaving Ruby alone. She saw there was a large screen that she could pull in front of the alcove so no one could view her bed. She liked that. The rest of the room was pleasant and roomy without being cavernous. She had her own bathroom that was bigger than her bedroom back home.

Something was missing, though, and it took her several minutes before she put a finger on it. There were no windows. The room was surprisingly well lit and most of the light appeared natural, though Ruby suspected that had to do with enchantment more than modern electricity. She was in a room at the very end of a hallway with no doors and no windows. She knew if she opened the door, there would be a guard there or a ward more powerful than the one on the windows in Lucian's house. She was well and truly imprisoned now.

The pain returned tenfold. She crumpled in the middle of her new home, her prison. Tears blurred her vision and she wished with all her heart that she would cease to feel the agony of this love. Lucian had killed it just as surely as if he stabbed her with a knife.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Locked away in the Council Safe House, time had no meaning for Ruby. She slept too much, depression draining her of energy. She picked listlessly at the delicious food delivered to her via a couple of sexy guards.

Refusing to feel anything was impossible because all she had to do was think and thinking inevitably led to thoughts of Lucian. That always caused a spasm of pain to crimp her heart. It was a vicious cycle.

He didn't love her and probably didn't even care about how she felt to be locked up, this time permanently. He was likely out there romancing the Oculum or some other woman who was more beautiful and dainty, not at all like the woman he'd pretended to claim as his mate. She hated self-pity, but with nothing to drag her mind away from Lucian, she was on the train and headed to Pity Place.

Sounds in the hall caught her attention. She looked at the door apathetically. She really didn't give a shit who walked in her cell. If it was Lucian she'd tear his heart out, she thought with an unexpected ferocity, even while she knew she'd be so glad to see him she'd probably launch herself at him instead.

It wasn't Lucian. It was Bianca. Not wanting the Oculum to see her beaten, Ruby rose and approached the throne, adopting a lazy pose and bored expression. She knew she didn't fool the other woman because Bianca smirked knowingly before closing the door behind her. Ruby caught a glimpse of the hallway, which was filled with guards. *Well, so much for overpowering her and breaking out of here*, she thought derisively. She cocked an eyebrow at Bianca who just looked smug.

"So, how do you like your new home?" the Oculum said, her voice sweet as she sashayed into the chamber. "It's quite luxurious, isn't it? Did you know the third Oculum kept a concubine here? She ended up getting him killed, but it was quite romantic." She sighed in what was probably meant to be a dreamy fashion, but instead reminded Ruby of a cackling hag. "He had it built to keep her from his army."

Tired of listening to her talk, Ruby snarled, "What do you want?"

Even though she wasn't sure how much time had passed, she hadn't been completely idle. She knew damn well there was no way out other than the door. She'd walked every inch of the room, feeling for loose stones on the floor or secret doors behind the walls, finding nothing. The lack of freedom was eating at her, making her twitch as though her body crawled with ants. It was worse now than when she'd been held in juvie as a kid. She'd deserved her imprisonment then. Ruby hadn't done anything to deserve being locked away other than inheriting power she never asked for.

The forced isolation was maddening. No one visited her other than the guards who brought her food, but they never spoke. They would just smile and bring a tray or take it away. Any attempt at conversation was ignored. It embarrassed her how many times she'd shouted at the door hoping to have conversation with a guard or someone, but no matter how loud she was, no one answered.

Sometimes, she heard conversations going on in the room with her and, once in a while, she'd see flashes of people walking around. The visions and sounds were similar to the flashbacks she'd experienced since her transition, so she figured these were just stronger echoes of them. Maybe being isolated allowed the visions a better backdrop to play against.

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Whatever the case, she was living in an imaginary world where accusations rang like bells. One persistent voice uttered, *You'll tear down the Veil and destroy us all!* over and over again, the man's voice familiar and Ruby suspected the female voice she kept hearing was none other than the woman standing in front of her, though she allowed none of her thoughts to show. If she was correct, Bianca wasn't only a first-class bitch, she was also a traitor to the Veil and her Council vows.

"You act like you're unhappy to see me, Chieftain," Bianca answered Ruby's rude question with a lilt. Ruby watched her pout. "I thought you'd be glad for the company, especially considering I have such wonderful news!" The woman practically danced in place, her eyes lit with a malicious gleam.

Eyebrow arching in question, Ruby crossed her arms and leaned against her throne. She hated the damn chair. It was gaudy and way too uncomfortable to sit in for long.

Bianca let out an aggrieved sigh. "No curiosity, Chieftain? But this concerns Lucian," she chirped, her eyes sharpening on Ruby's slightly hopeful face. "Yes! My dear Lucian is finally coming home...to help plan our wedding," she finished triumphantly.

Though she tried to keep her face from dropping, Ruby's heart fell to the floor and Bianca saw it. Her beautiful face was hard and almost ethereal in her spite.

"Yes, Lucian and his parents will be arriving soon to complete the betrothal contract," Bianca continued, her watchful eyes on Ruby. "Unfortunately, my parents passed many years ago, but Liv—she's Lucian's mother—has always looked at me as her daughter, and she's already begun planning the guest list. Don't you just love weddings?"

Fighting the pit of anger and pain churning in her gut, Ruby held her head high and tried for a droll tone. "Oh, I hate weddings. There's nothing worse than watching a woman fake being virtuous and a groom pretend he didn't spend the night before laying everything he could find." Bianca's nostrils flared and her eyes screamed a warning just before she hissed, "*Fri*!" and Ruby's entire body froze in place. Unable to move anything but her eyes, Ruby watched the smaller woman approach, trying not to show any emotion. But at least she finally had an answer as to exactly what Bianca was: a witch, not just in personality but also in profession.

"You're disgusting," Bianca hissed, her hard blue eyes blazing with hate. "Did you really think he'd lower himself to have a *relationship* with you? He used your body to get you here and just like the little tramp you are, you followed with your tail between your legs," she spat at Ruby. "You were never more than a mercy fuck, Ruby."

With that said, Bianca whirled around and sauntered to the door. "Don't worry, Chieftain. Once your usefulness has ended, you'll be free to leave. In a nice pine box. So many accidents happen to newly transitioned Veilerians. It's such a shame," she threw over her shoulder as she left the room.

The paralysis finally wore off and Ruby gingerly moved her limbs, not thinking about Bianca's hateful words. However, they struck so close to home and her constant fears of being undesirable that they echoed in her brain. Because it was true.

She'd allowed herself to be seduced into Council's hands. If Lucian had really wanted her and bonded with her as he said he had, then he would've been here when she was first imprisoned. But he hadn't been here. After their argument, he'd disappeared.

Resolutely, Ruby pushed those thoughts away, concentrating instead on the last part of Bianca's dialogue. She didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out Bianca would return to kill her. The Instinct, always prevalent when Bianca was near, was clamoring for her to run, but she had nowhere to run to. She was locked away like some dumb ass princess in a fairy tale tower and she'd let it happen.

Hours later, Ruby sat on her throne glaring at the door and trying to think up a plan for escape when a loud thump sounded from somewhere behind the walls. Startled, she tried to place the direction the sound came from, but it echoed, making the origin impossible to pinpoint.

She stood and braced herself. Maybe Bianca had decided a slow death would ruin her revenge and enlisted something to kill Ruby in some horrible manner. "Shut up." Since the morning she found Julius, the imagination she'd thought nonexistent had become quite formidable. And she was talking to herself.

Thump, thump, thud! She walked the edge of the room, trying to locate the sound.

Scrape.

Whispered curses.

Clang!

Ruby jumped away from the wall next to the bathroom. The sounds were coming from right behind the bathtub and they were growing closer.

While she watched, several of the tiles began to tremble, the grout falling from their creases and crumbling to the bathtub. They rattled softly as another loud thud sounded and then they jumped off the wall.

Ruby covered her head reflexively and listened to the thumping grow louder. She lowered her arms to see a sledgehammer come out of the wall, loosening more tiles and sending dust flying all over the room.

"Dammit, you guys are useless at this!"

"Give me the damned sledgehammer, you crazy bitch," a very deep voice said from somewhere on the other side of the wall.

"Over my dead body! You don't have the upper body strength I do," a third voice snarled as the sledgehammer wrecked through the tiles again.

"You're making so much noise, the whole damn mansion is gonna know we're here," the deep voice said again. "Will you two shut up? We're almost there." The first voice hissed, though the sledgehammer continued pounding.

"I swear, if you don't get your hand off my ass and stop pushing me, I'm gonna split your wig!"

"Girls, if you don't stop, I'm gonna split both your wigs!" the third voice said again with quiet dignity.

Ruby gurgled with laughter. There were three women pounding at her bathroom wall. One of the voices sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it. She just watched in stunned disbelief as the sledgehammer completely broke through the stone, creating a hole.

The sledgehammer was withdrawn, and a face peeked out at her. The young woman had large brown eyes, a snub nose, and wide lips that stretched into a broad smile. "Hiya, cuz, we're here to get you out."

"Isola, if you don't get out of my way, I'm going to snatch your head bald!" Ruby recognized the third voice now, watching as Bretina popped up in Isola's place.

"Ruby," she breathed, her brown eyes glancing over the entire room. "Are you alone?"

Ruby laughed loudly. "Bretina, I never thought I'd be so glad to see someone in all my life!"

"As much as I love a happy ending, we need to get our asses in gear, ladies," the deep voice said, and Ruby peered through the hole to see a very large woman behind the other two women. "Hey, sweetie. We'll just pull you through."

Ruby didn't even hesitate. The Instinct wasn't giving her any warnings, and the love she saw reflected in Bretina's face was enough to have her crawling through the hole. It was a tight fit and all four of them grunted trying to get Ruby through the opening.

"Got some hips on her, she does," the woman with the deep voice said, straining mightily.

Ruby flew through the hole and pitched headfirst into Deep Voice, and it was then that Ruby realized the third woman was a man. The

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squish of false breasts against hers and the stubble on the chin catching her hair all pointed to the fact. But since the man was with her grandmother, Ruby barely gave it any thought, though she was extremely careful getting to her feet.

She helped the man-woman to her feet and looked around. They were in some kind of hidden passage filled with dust, cobwebs, and squeaking rats. Ruby couldn't have been happier.

Once she was on her feet, Bretina crushed Ruby to her chest in a rough hug. "I knew I'd have to rescue you," she said, her voice slightly strained. Ruby suspected the former queen was fighting tears, but when they pulled apart, there was no trace of them on her face.

"This is fabu, really, but we need to get out of here now," the man-woman said chidingly.

"Oh, shut it, Rosetta," Isola snapped, wiping at a tear in the corner of her eye. "Can't you see they're reunited and it feels so good?"

Rosetta reached out and slapped the back of Isola's head. Isola responded by snatching Rosetta's wig off and throwing it down the corridor. Rosetta screeched, launching herself at Isola. The two of them tumbled around the hallway while Ruby and Bretina walked towards freedom.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Three nights after Ruby was taken to the safe house, Lucian paused in the act of infiltrating a window on Malachi's estate. It'd taken him nearly the entire time to locate the Eturian leader's hideout, and now that the hour was at hand, Lucian was concerned. The entire exercise had been far too easy, he thought, his senses searching out for some sign that he'd been detected. Everything was still, though he felt as though there was a presence waiting somewhere in the massive house.

This last assignment was making him jumpy, he decided, as he silently dropped to the floor of the study. Bianca had assured him this would be the last job he'd do for a long time. Knowing he was removing a threat from his mate made Lucian feel exonerated. In five months, Bianca's term would be up and he'd take over. He would be Oculum, and he'd have his luscious Chieftain mate at his side. Life was looking up. If he could convince her he did care about her.

"You're late," Malachi's voice growled at Lucian from the darkness.

Lucian tensed and prepared himself for a fight. His sharp eyes took in the shadowed room, noting it wasn't as lavishly decorated as he thought Malachi's home would be. It was, in fact, very similar to his childhood home, he realized with a start. Lucian's father had a very similar desk and the seating arrangement was almost the exact same.

When Malachi didn't appear, Lucian kept quiet, hoping the Eturian leader would give away the name of his spy. Bianca may have sent him to kill Malachi, but the other Councilors wanted to know who the mole was in their camp. No one had shared their suspicions with Lucian, but he thought it might be one of the Elite guards.

"Well, are you coming in or not? Dammit, I don't have time for this!" Malachi sounded agitated, a state Lucian hadn't seen him in since they were kids. He finally saw the shape of Malachi as he paced back and forth in front of the empty fireplace. "You promised me that this would end when Julius was dead. He's dead now, and I want the girl."

Lucian nearly growled at the thought of his Ruby in the hands of Malachi. Someone had promised her to Malachi for the previous Chieftain's death. Lucian was going to destroy them.

At Lucian's continued silence, Malachi growled and stopped pacing to grab the mantle. His shoulders slumped. "I can't keep doing this, *aya*. I can't keep hurting my neighbors. I want to live in peace, dammit. Nearly two hundred years of pretending to hate them, of fighting against my brother!"

Aya. Lucian froze at the term of endearment. There was only one person both he and Malachi knew as *aya*, and that was Bianca. She'd somehow coerced Malachi into forming the Eturi? Impossible. No doubt Malachi had formed the band and forced Bianca to aid him in some way. But she'd never said anything. Why, Lucian asked himself. Why hadn't she ever told him their childhood playmate was forcing her to help him? Unless that wasn't the case. Suddenly, nothing was as clear as he'd believed it to be just five minutes earlier.

"Bianca! Answer me!" Malachi thundered, whirling around and advancing on Lucian's shadowed hiding place.

Determined to get some answers, Lucian stood, stepping into a shaft of moonlight. Malachi abruptly halted, his face draining of color.

"She finally did it," Malachi whispered. He let out a loud laugh. "That bitch finally did it. She sent you to finish me off!"

Lucian betrayed no surprise. If Malachi knew he was here to kill him, it meant this was something he'd either been expecting for some time, or something he'd been threatened with. Deciding what was true required Lucian to play his cards very close to his chest.

"I see you had no trouble getting in, Luc," Malachi said conversationally, crossing his arms over his chest. "Did you damage any of my guards?"

"You're the only one who attacks innocents, Malachi."

Malachi let out another bark of laughter. "She's got you completely fooled, doesn't she? Sweet little Bianca, so fragile and beautiful no one suspects her of anything nefarious. Poor Luc, if you're not careful, you'll be marrying a little witch who makes a twelfth level demon look like a baby."

Lucian frowned. "You're operating under a misconception, Malachi. We're not getting married. I've bonded to the Chieftain," he said with relish.

"No!" Malachi's shout caught Lucian off guard. "That isn't possible! You mated my queen!"

"Your queen? I hate to disappoint you, Malachi, but you have to be a king before you can have a queen. Besides, Ruby is mated to me, and once I take my place on Council, we'll be married." Even as Lucian enjoyed a certain smug satisfaction at the devastation on Malachi's face, he couldn't deny he was worried Ruby might prefer to kick his ass rather than marry him, but Malachi didn't need to know that.

"I don't believe this!" Malachi nearly howled, his voice echoing around the room. "First, you take my inheritance, then you take Bianca, and now you're taking Ruby! Dammit, little brother, can't you just get something on your own instead of taking it from me first?"

Lucian's stoic expression finally melted away and he growled. "You're no brother of mine and everything I've had, I've earned." With the exception of Bianca, he thought idly. Bianca had jumped in his bed not long before Malachi became the Eturi leader. Malachi laughed long and hard at that. "I'm guessing dear old mom never told you the truth. How like her," he sneered. He strode forward, unbuttoning his shirt, revealing a portion of his chest. "Is this enough proof for you, little brother?"

There, on Malachi's right pectoral muscle, was a birthmark in the shape of a bird. Lucian put his hand on the identical mark on his hip. It wasn't possible, he thought in disbelief. He stared at Malachi, noting that though Malachi wasn't as tall or broad as Lucian, he greatly resembled Bernard. The same brown eyes, their mother's eyes, looked back at Lucian with a mixture of anger, hurt, and regret.

"How?" Lucian whispered. Malachi had grown up with him. They were only a year or two apart in age and there had never been even a hint they were brothers.

Malachi crossed the room to pour a tumbler of brandy. With an inquiring glance at Lucian, he offered him a measure before pouring the same generous amount for himself. He carried the drinks back, handing one to Lucian and then seating himself on the edge of the desk.

"My father was a level nine demon who worked for the Ravenswaay's. I'm guessing mum got bored one day and, voila, six months later, I came along. Your dad wasn't really bothered by it. He had an arrangement with some dryad two towns over. My dad left before I was born, so I became one of the servant's kids by the time you came along. Livy never acknowledged me and she probably would've sent me to the Guardian Guild before we grew older, but your father thought I'd be a good playmate for you." Malachi shrugged, his voice completely emotionless.

"When Bianca finally came home from boarding school the last time I was on leave, I asked her to marry me. Livy heard and had a hissy. Bianca was groomed to be your bride even though we'd, uh, had relations quite a few times." He coughed modestly. Malachi shot Lucian a look that demanded a response. Lucian sipped his brandy and thought. "What do you want me to say, Malachi? I had no idea any of this was going on. When you left, I was training for Council. When you came back on leave, you were a stranger. Bianca never gave any sign she was enamored of you," Lucian told his half-brother boldly. Now, thinking back on the entire mess, Lucian could see Bianca had played them against each other, except Lucian hadn't wanted to play. He'd just taken what Bianca so readily offered and went his own way.

He winced. No wonder Ruby was pissed at him.

"She wasn't enamored," Malachi mumbled. "But I wanted her anyway until I saw her come out of your room before I quit the Guild. You'd already been given the firstborn's portion, even though I was older. Then you took the girl I planned on marrying." He laughed a bit with genuine amusement. "Of course, if I had known what a bitch Bianca turned out to be, I wouldn't have bothered mulling over that one for long."

"Why are you pinning your crimes on Bianca?" Lucian asked quietly and without inflection.

"I'm not pinning anything on her that she hasn't done. She's quite clever, you know. Very cold and evil, but clever. You know, this whole thing was her plan. All very well-thought out, if I may say so myself."

Lucian kicked Malachi's foot to get his attention. "What plan?"

Malachi waved his hand and took another taste of his brandy. "World domination, of course. Did you know her parents were both killed during a witch trial? Bianca saw it happen but managed to get away somehow. She hates the humans. When she heard I had abandoned the Guild, she came to see me. She had a plan to make the humans pay for thinking they were at the top of the food chain and showing the Veilerians the half-breeds aren't trash. Of course, that was the only part that mattered to me.

"Then she told me how she was planning to get on Council. You knew she was having an affair with Spenser, right? And that's why she was originally chosen over you?" When Lucian did nothing but look at him, Malachi shrugged. "Anyway, she gave me information on where I could cause the most trouble with the least amount of casualties since I had a 'weak stomach.' I dealt mostly in acquisitions and little skirmishes. Bianca was in charge of the more bloody fights."

"If she was part of those fights, how come no one knew?" Lucian demanded unwilling to believe he could've been so wrong.

"She has her own personal guard, and they took care of the dirty work while she diverted Council's attention to my little escapades. By the time the little stuff was sorted and Council could investigate, no one was left alive from the big battles," he answered, his voice terse.

"Her own guards?" Lucian asked quietly, the story dominating his mind. He'd thought some of the attacks had seemed erratic and unlike Malachi's usual antics.

Malachi waved his hand again. "She's got about twelve devoted followers. Mostly witches with a grudge, but they're former lovers who believe all her crap. Quite an appetite she has, eh? Did she ever do that thing with her hips—"

Lucian cut off Malachi's commentary on Bianca's sexual skills. "Why does she want me to kill you now? What's changed?"

Pouting at having his story interrupted, Malachi studied Lucian closely. "I'm a loose end. She's planning to marry you, give up her seat on Council, and become the next Chieftain."

"The only way she could do that is to..." Lucian's words were cut off as he realized what Bianca had planned.

Malachi nodded. "Kill the Chieftain," he finished solemnly.

* * * *

Ruby and Bretina skulked along the passageway. It was several minutes before Isola and Rosetta joined them, both of them bruised, but with Rosetta in possession of her wig again. They appeared to be on good terms and were quite relaxed considering they were helping the Chieftain steal away from Council.

"So who are we gonna kill for this affront, Chieftain?" Isola, who liked to be called Izzy, asked, her voice as perky as a cheerleader's.

"Kill?" Ruby asked uncertainly. She wanted to kill Bianca, but that might have had more to do with jealousy and extreme dislike than with honor.

"Well, yeah," answered Rosetta, her broad shoulders brushing either side of the passage. "You hafta kill someone, or everyone'll think they can lock you away."

Their logic was so simple it made sense, and Ruby found herself seeking out her grandmother for guidance. Bretina was ahead of the line, occasionally peering back at Ruby with warm assurance.

"They're right. You can't let them go unpunished. We might be more civilized than the human world in some ways, but in this you can't afford to be weak. They abused your good faith, and they need to pay," she said in firm tones. She stopped walking and gave a signal for them to stop.

Ruby prided herself on her silence as they listened hard to their surroundings. She was also proud she hadn't made a fool of herself when Bretina talked about killing someone so easily. She shouldn't have been so surprised that this was their answer to her problems. After the fight with the demons, it was obvious practicality and survivalist instincts ruled the Amazon world.

Part of her agreed with Bretina and the other two wholeheartedly. It demanded blood be spilled. No one kept an Amazon against her will and got away with it. No one, not even the man her whole body longed to be with again. He would pay. Maybe not in blood, but he would pay, her soul decreed.

But who deserved of death, or at the very least, a severe spanking? Her immediate thought was Bianca and Council. She hadn't put up much of a fight to get away from them. The true culprit behind her incarceration was Ruby, but the catalyst for her being there was Lucian. There was no way she'd condone his death.

The other councilors, even though they worked in concert with Bianca, hadn't seemed to be doing anything more than what they thought was at the best interest of the people they served. They weren't an option.

"Hey, Chief? You mind getting your butt in gear?" Izzy's loud whisper sounded in Ruby's ear, making her jump.

Looking around, Ruby saw Bretina had disappeared and the other two were waiting for her to follow. "Sorry," she whispered with a hot blush and hurried after her grandmother.

Ruby could sense Izzy's shrug behind her before she heard her speak. "S'okay. There's a lot to think about. I mean, not just who you're going to kill, but how."

"Yeah, you could challenge them to a duel, but that might suck if they're a magic user. Are they a magic user?" Rosetta said from the rear.

Ruby shrugged, not wanting to clue them in on whom she'd chosen.

"But she could always commission an amulet of protection if they're a magic user," Izzy said as though such things were common.

"No, that wouldn't work. Remember when Morganna tried to fight that mage? She had one of those amulets on, but the sneaky witch she bought it from actually cursed it."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. She ended up bald 'cause she didn't duck that fireball he launched. No, an amulet won't work," Izzy commiserated sadly.

"She'll just have to ambush them. She's got the skills. She just needs to be quick enough to snap the magic user's little neck before they can get a spell off."

"Yeah, that's the best thing to do, but what if it isn't a magic user? Or gods forbid, what if it's an incubus!" Izzy whispered with a mixture of awe, disgust, and lust. The combination was enough to make Ruby glance back at the young Amazon who was standing stock still in the passageway. "An incubus?" Ruby asked curiously. She'd read a little about them, but they seemed so exotic she thought they existed on another plain.

"Oh, yes," Izzy and Rosetta breathed together.

Rosetta was the first to snap out of it, shoving Izzy along. "Get your panties out of the gutter, Izzy," she scolded. To Ruby, she said, "Izzy has this thing about incubi. She met one a few years ago, and he made quite an impression."

Looking at Rosetta's bemused face, Ruby was certain Izzy wasn't the only one who'd been fascinated by the incubus. "What was his name?" she asked and quickened her pace. She could almost smell freedom.

Bretina was further ahead scouting the passageway, though she made sure Ruby wasn't far behind before darting forward again.

"Fallon," Izzy whispered so softly Ruby almost didn't hear her. "His name was Fallon and...oh my god!"

Ruby spun around, immediately falling into a defensive posture. A man had appeared in the passageway with them, his large body blocking Izzy from view. In the shadows of the passage, he seemed massive and harsh, but when Bretina jogged back with a torch, Ruby caught her breath.

He was magnificent. Hair so blond it appeared white was arranged in attractive disarray around a square face with bold eyebrows, a strong Roman nose, full, inviting lips, and nearly silver eyes. With deeply tanned skin, his body reminded Ruby of a swimmer with its wide shoulders and trim waist, all tucked into a faded T-shirt that looked so soft, Ruby wanted to touch it. His long legs and droolworthy backside were encased in jeans that looked just as soft, and Ruby couldn't help but notice the worn parts were on his backside and right over his groin.

Comparing him to Lucian wasn't right because they were so completely different, but Ruby wondered if her reaction to him

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would've been different if she'd met him first. Her body recognized he was a prime male, but her mind and soul were completely unattached, unlike Izzy and Rosetta.

"Damn," Bretina breathed next to her, her whispered curse drawing the man's attention.

Those silver eyes flicked over all the women until finally resting on Ruby with recognition. "You're the Chieftain," he said softly, his voice deep and soothing with a deep Cajun accent.

Bretina, Izzy, and Rosetta all shuddered at the sound, and though Ruby understood the appeal, she was immune. "You're...Fallon?" she hazarded a guess.

He inclined his head, his hair brushing the ceiling. He glanced at the other women. "You're mated, Chieftain," he said approvingly. He smiled and Ruby's heart stuttered a bit proving she wasn't completely immune to his innate charms. "You must warn *la petite fille* not to say my name out loud if she doesn't wish to be visited."

Ruby nodded solemnly, watching as he pressed a gentle kiss to Izzy's forehead. He was very tender with the young woman, whispering something against her skin. Ruby squinted, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Small motes of light seemed to fly from Izzy's skin into Fallon. They danced over his face for several minutes before being absorbed into his body. He repeated the procedure with Bretina and Rosetta. He showed no discomfort over a man dressed like a woman, so Ruby figured this was nothing new for him.

When all three women were attended to in this manner, they blinked their eyes and seemed to return to themselves, though their faces still held lust and awe. Fallon bowed low, shooting a wink at Ruby before he disappeared again.

"Oy," Izzy said in a soft exhale. "That man..." She shivered.

Rosetta slapped her on the back of the head. "I can't believe you!" she ranted when Izzy turned around in outrage. "You invited an incubus in the middle of a rescue operation!" Bretina stepped up, her hand chopping down between them. "Quiet. We need to get Ruby out of here, now."

Izzy bowed her head in embarrassment, but she looked up as they began moving again. This time, Ruby stuck close to Bretina. She wanted out of the mansion. There were so many things to think on.

"You weren't affected by the incubus," her grandmother said quietly.

"No," Ruby replied, just as softly. Something told her this probably wasn't a good thing.

"You're mated to that vampire, the one who caught you in the swamp," Bretina said, her voice proving she knew her words were true, but hoping they weren't.

Ruby bit her lip and looked away from her grandmother's searching eyes. "It doesn't matter, Ma-maw," she answered, automatically slipping into the speech of her childhood. "I have to kill his intended bride and, somehow, I don't think that'll make for a happy ending."

She saw the surprise in Bretina's eyes but wouldn't give her anymore information. Ruby kept quiet and just followed the path that wound behind the keep walls. Freedom, when it came, wasn't where she expected it to be.

They emerged in a closet filled with weapons. Bretina explained she had known about this secret because of a raid she'd participated in a hundred years before. The Council hadn't owned the property then. It had just belonged to a single councilor and when he went rogue, the Amazons were hired to help the Guardian Elite.

The closet was off of a small hallway Bretina told her had once led to a private terrace, which is where they crept, their tall bodies hugged tight to the walls. The seemingly short hallway took an eternity to traverse. Ruby only had eyes for the door leading out, leading to freedom, and it took forever to reach it.

Once outside, they ducked low to the ground, four dark shadows slipping across an immense lawn with too few bushes and trees to use for shelter. There was no time for speaking, no time for looking back. They were close to being discovered, and Ruby knew if she was stopped, Bianca would carry through her threat there on the lawn rather than in the privacy of her cell.

What seemed like hours later, they slipped into thick trees that lined the northern side of the property. A fence had been concealed in the dense foliage, but it was quickly and easily scaled, then they were off. Adrenaline spiking through their veins, they sped through the woods in absolute silence, their feet seeming to never touch the ground. Even Rosetta, her body heavier than the others, managed to be silent as they ran northwest.

Bretina finally stopped, her eyes searching out the undergrowth before she began clearing branches from a vehicle they had hidden. Ruby helped them move thick limbs, uncovering a large black SUV. Without further ado, Izzy hopped behind the wheel with Rosetta calling shotgun and Ruby and Bretina piling in the backseat. The minute the vehicle started, the silence they'd been operating under was instantly shattered by Missy Elliot encouraging men to "Work It." The music was loud, it was throbbing, and Ruby closed her eyes, losing herself in the beat.

Spewing dirt and leaving an ugly rut in the forest floor, Izzy floored the SUV, their escape complete with dramatic fishtailing until Rosetta slapped the back of her head again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When Lucian left Malachi in one piece, he thought that was enough of a repayment for all the hell his childhood friend had put him through. It did not entitle his newly found half-brother to tag along in the hopes of "teaching that crazy witch a thing or two and maybe stealing a kiss from the Chieftain." The last bit had encouraged Lucian to wrap his hands around Malachi's neck and squeeze.

It had been a good wrestle. Malachi wasn't as big as Lucian was, but he was wily, and it wasn't long before they were pounding each other with fists, both of them grinning maniacally. The noise drew the attention of one of Malachi's demons, who'd stood in absolute shock for several minutes before he ran from the room shrieking.

The hilarity of the demon's reaction depleted Lucian of his bloodlust and they had called a halt to their impromptu fight.

"Your lovely mate is in trouble, Luc," Malachi said, serenely mopping up the blood from his busted nose. "What're you going to do?"

Lucian ran a hand over his aching jaw and thought about it. "I think she's safe enough at the council house with all of the GE's there. Bianca wouldn't dare attack or hurt her with the rest of Council there," he acceded, using the acronym for the Guardian Elite guards. "I don't want her caught in the crossfire."

"I can remove her and keep her here," Malachi began, raising his hands in surrender when Lucian growled. "Hold on a minute, bro. She would be completely safe with me and even though most of my demons here are lower levels, they could provide some protection for her." Lucian glared, looking for flaws in the plan. He didn't like the idea of his mate with his lothario-wannabe half-brother, but leaving her where Bianca could get to her wasn't really an option either. Lucian didn't think Bianca would harm Ruby, no matter Malachi's assessment. He'd known Bianca for so long it didn't seem possible for her to be so completely different from how she'd presented herself. He was almost convinced Bianca would surrender when she was confronted with the allegations, but even his firm belief wasn't enough to ease his fears for his mate.

"Okay, but swear to me you won't try to seduce her, Malachi, or so help me, I'll string you up by your balls."

Malachi shuddered dramatically. "You always were bloodthirsty, man. Such lovely imagery. Have you ever thought of writing? I've heard there's a shortage in children's books. I can just see it now, *See Johnny Castrated* by Lucian Ravenswaay."

Lucian couldn't help but chuckle at the image, but he still kicked Malachi in the leg to remind him of his promise.

"Fine, fine. I won't seduce our lovely new Chieftain without her permission." Another swift kick had him amending. "Okay! I won't seduce her at all. Now stop kicking me, dammit."

Ignoring Malachi's grumbles, Lucian made his way to his feet and offered his brother a hand up. "I'm sorry our mother was so cold to you, Malachi. I had no idea about your circumstances."

Malachi shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with Lucian's apology. "Eh, what doesn't kill you and all that shit. Besides, if you had known I was your older brother, you probably would've worshipped the ground I walked on," Malachi said, pausing significantly. "Do you want to start now?"

Lucian punched his shoulder, laughing loudly. "I would've been more inclined to kick your ass. Bernard would've worshipped the ground you walked on."

Malachi nodded with a soft smile. "Bernard was a good kid. I was sorry about what happened, but I couldn't return...well, after everything that happened." A grimace crossed his face, making Lucian wonder what it might've been like to have Malachi's support during Bernard's passing. "I'd already begun gathering allies for this, and Bianca assured me that you hated my very existence."

"I didn't hate your guts," Lucian said slowly, trying to remember his mind-set at the time of Bernard's death. "I hated mother and father for not letting Bernard live his life the way he wanted. They were so concerned about what everyone else would think they never thought about how Bernard felt, or thought about how they were treating him." Remembered pain crashed through Lucian, but he held it at bay. "I wanted you to come home because I wanted someone to talk to. Uri was in denial, thinking our parents would relent. I didn't know you were my brother, but I always thought of you that way until...um, all this Eturi stuff, that is."

Malachi grinned. "I didn't make it easy on you. I figured if you were going to kill me, you'd have to work at it."

Lucian shook his head, unable to speak lightly of it. "I didn't want to kill you, but I wanted you to be the honorable man I knew you as."

"Well, hell, Luc," Malachi said, his voice sounding tight. "You're not gonna kiss me or anything, 'cause I'm not like that, and if you are, then I really will seduce your mate."

"Ass," Lucian said with a strained smile and another punch to Malachi's shoulder.

"Sissy," Malachi answered, socking Lucian in the opposite shoulder. "Now all the mushy stuff is over. Let's go get the girl."

* * * *

They drove through the night, Izzy's heavy foot guaranteeing they broke speed limits in at least four counties and twelve parishes as they raced to the Amazon encampment. Ruby rested her head on the window and watched the scenery shoot by. Izzy and Rosetta kept up a steady stream of chatter and singing as they talked about music and the "hawt" men they knew. No one mentioned Fallon, and they steered clear of talking about any incubi. Bretina said nothing, but Ruby could feel her eyes on her now and then.

Ruby regretted telling Bretina about the wedding, though she congratulated herself for keeping her cool. All she'd wanted to do was cry at the thought of Lucian marrying that woman. Cry or rage, and either one would make her look like a crazy woman, not something she wanted her newly found family to think she was.

It was only as dawn began creeping over the horizon that Ruby began to recognize some of the landmarks. The rice fields along the interstate had given way to sugarcane fields and the town names began to sound more familiar.

Izzy pulled off the interstate just outside of Lafayette, driving south. Less than an hour later, they were following a bumpy, dirt road on the outskirts of Forked Island. Rosetta was talking about some bustier she wanted to buy next time they were in town, and Izzy was singing along with the Beastie Boys.

"Why is the encampment way out here?" Ruby asked, speaking her first words in seven hours.

Izzy and Rosetta exchanged glances and concentrated on the track in front of them. Bretina just sighed.

"The girls aren't exactly welcome in town. Out here, there are only a few neighbors, and they all mind their business."

"Why aren't they welcome?" Ruby asked, wondering what the Amazons could've done to be unwelcome anywhere.

Izzy and Rosetta ducked their heads reflexively. Ruby looked at them all curiously and waited for some kind of answer.

She continued waiting as they drove for at least three miles into the marsh. There were very few trees, just a cypress here and there struggling to survive. The marsh grass was at least waist high and the road was continuously covered by encroaching water. Once in a while, Ruby would see the swish of a tail as an alligator slipped into the brackish water on the side of the road.

Still, no one answered her question. She tapped her foot impatiently. Then, just when she was about to demand an answer, she heard music that overpowered the speakers in the SUV. A glow up ahead showed there was a large fire, and Ruby prayed they hadn't driven into a marsh fire.

The SUV came to a skidding stop, and Ruby's mouth dropped open. It looked like Sturgis, Purgatory, and the Playgirl mansion all rolled into one. Ruby retracted that. It looked like Sturgis, Purgatory, and a meeting of the Young and Hung Club all rolled into one. A blush rode up her cheeks.

The silence inside the vehicle was absolute as the other three allowed Ruby to take it in. There were women in every shape, size, and color strutting back and forth in various stages of dress. Some were fully clothed while others were partially dressed. They were sharpening weapons, practicing moves, shouting encouragement. All the while, music blared from massive amps. There was a wooden house closely resembling a Viking longhouse of old and, from there, several women sauntered out carrying baskets of clothing, food, and leading men on leashes.

The men. Ruby blushed more. Men were everywhere. The majority of them wore some kind of loincloth that didn't leave much to the imagination. Some looked to be human, while others looked alien, but none of them looked unhappy. If anything, they looked very pleased with themselves and the women who watched them. They swaggered and preened like peacocks.

While they watched in silence, two of the women came to blows over a very handsome man who resembled Orlando Bloom's character in *Lord of the Rings*. He had long blond hair flowing freely down his back, and his slim body bare but for the loincloth, showing just how excited he was the two women were fighting over him. As they watched, he just got happier.

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Ruby smothered a choking giggle. Izzy glanced at her in the rearview mirror, her eyes crinkled with amusement.

"Shara and Ravanna don't share well."

Rosetta winced as one brunette gave the other a solid whack to the solar plexus. "Ravanna had better watch herself if she's gonna have breath left to handle up on Collin later."

The women fell to the ground, rolling over and over until they came to a stop against their prize's legs. When they looked up and saw just how happy he was, they jumped to their feet in unison. The blond became a manwich, and Ruby averted her eyes until they led him away.

"Well, that's one elf that'll die happy," Izzy muttered as she opened the driver door.

"Sho 'nuff," Rosetta agreed, opening her door. "To think he actually thought he was above his tithe just 'cause he's some kind of prince."

Their voices died as they headed to the party, being hailed by all the women they passed. Ruby watched Izzy smack one man's bare backside as she passed by, which set him to blushing and laughing.

"Tithes?" Ruby asked Bretina, who'd stayed behind with her.

"You know we compete in tournaments every ten years for rights to breed, right?" Ruby must've looked surprised because Bretina continued. "Okay. Every ten years, all Amazonian tribes gather for a two week tournament. We compete against each other for breeding rights. Since only the strongest should procreate, the winning tribe wins the right to breed for the next ten years. The tournament is called the Battle of Lionesses. Every tournament, the Blood Maiden Tribe, this tribe, competes. We have over two hundred members, and since we've won the Battle the last four decades, we'll continue to expand. We have to sit out if we win a fifth time as our own group will be too big to support."

She paused with that cocky grin splitting her face as she watched the women's antics. "They're good women, excellent warriors, and loyal friends at your back. But they're a bit high-spirited," she said, her voice trailing off as one particularly burly woman paraded past the vehicle with a slightly less muscular male over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. "We're not allowed close to towns anymore because some men tend to be intimidated by stronger women and pick fights that we finish. After a few close calls with human law enforcement, we decided to move on the outskirts of towns and demand a tithe of the Veilerians in those communities."

Bretina paused then looked at Ruby. "We do not rape these men. They come of their own free will. Some of them are humans who have debts to be paid to Veilerians, some are half-breeds who have no chance to marry and breed within their own communities, and a few are even war captives who prefer to remain here rather than go back to their people."

"Do they all have to become, um, studs?" Ruby asked hesitantly. It didn't seem right that her people were enslaving men for their breeding purposes.

"Oh, no! Not at all! Most of them prefer to be studs," Bretina answered with a short laugh. "There is a legend that says once an Amazon mates, that male will never find another who will bring him to the heights of Heaven without dying. The men remain here searching for such a mate, and sometimes they even go to other tribes in the hopes of finding one there. If they don't want that, they just do cleaning and housekeeping duties or babysitting duties until their time is up," she said with a gesture towards some men who appeared to be cooking.

Ruby noticed a sizable group of men who were wearing pants with designs that matched the tattoos on their chests. Bretina noticed where her attention rested. "Those are mated men. The symbols on their chests are part of their mate's war shield. My Ingvar refused to wear a shirt no matter how cold it was," she said, her face softening in memory. She snapped out of it. "Come, you need to meet the queen." Bretina got out of the vehicle and waited by the hood for Ruby. Suddenly feeling nervous, Ruby took stock of herself. Ratty sweats she'd washed in the bathroom sink back at the council house and bare feet. Her last bath had been her first day of captivity. She braved one armpit and winced. She stunk to high heaven. Great, just great, she thought. Her first meeting with royalty and she smelled like a jock.

She got out of the vehicle and took a deep breath. "Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The walk through the encampment was enlightening.

"What's that?" Ruby asked Bretina as she caught a glimpse of strange looking buildings in the center of the camp. Closer up, she saw there was some kind of barrier between the camp and the buildings. By turning her head just the slightest bit, Ruby could see what looked like the outline of a door in the middle of empty space.

"It's a Watching Wall," Bretina responded, pressing her hand against the barrier, showing Ruby how her hand disappeared through it. Shrieks sounded and several Amazons raced up to the barrier before seeing Bretina and Ruby there. "That's where all of our children are rather than living in camp with us. We've used one ever since you were lost to us. It reflects the children's area but doesn't allow them to see us. If you have a child there, and only if you have a child there, you can enter otherwise the alarms sound." Bretina withdrew her hand and they spent several long minutes watching the empty area.

"Where are they?" Ruby whispered, worried that her voice might bother the stillness of the scene. Ruby noticed nocturnal animals had begun wandering through camp, being chased off by a stone thrown at them from an unseen guard.

"They're in Scythia, our homeland. They're brought there after their first year and remain until maturity."

Ruby thought about it carefully. She knew if she had a child, she wouldn't want it running around a bunch of half-naked men, but also knew their ways had been set long ago so the women wouldn't stop having their beef showcased. The best solution would be for the kids to be kept away from the main area. Sometimes tradition was a bitch.

"Come on, the queen will know you're here and wonder where we are," Bretina said, leading Ruby to the longhouse.

Everyone who noticed them stopped to watch the Chieftainmarked woman pass, nudging their neighbors until the entire camp was silent except for the music. Coincidentally, whoever was in charge of the playlist chose that moment to strike up "All Hail the Chief," punk-style.

Bretina chuckled under her breath. "Infantile brats," she mumbled and continued walking.

With the punk song as their theme, Ruby found herself following Bretina at a brisk pace, and soon they were in the cool, dark confines of the longhouse. When she heard the shuffle of clothing and feet, she realized most of the crowd had entered the hall behind them.

Pretending she wasn't the least bit intimidated, Ruby followed Bretina up the Amazon lined aisle. The building was nothing more than a single large room with chests lining the floors and hundreds of shields decorating the walls. There was no way the entire tribe slept in here though. There would be no room and, God forbid, no privacy.

At the opposite end of the house, there was a single wooden chair. In it sat a woman who looked just a few years older than Ruby. Her long brown hair was held up in some elaborate style Ruby would never be able to duplicate, but it showed off her strong features. Features that became more familiar the closer Ruby got to her.

The woman stood and Ruby saw the queen was just a bit shorter than herself. In fact, Ruby realized suddenly, she was one of the tallest women in the camp. Most of them came only to her shoulder, though one or two looked as though they could be taller than her by a couple of inches.

"You've brought us the Lost Child, I see," the queen said as they came within speaking distance, though her voice carried throughout the hall. Ruby idly wondered if that was the purpose of the building, to make public speaking easier.

Bretina bowed to her queen, her hair nearly sweeping the floor with the steepness of her stance. Ruby stood tall and inclined her head at the queen. She might be part Amazon, but she was no one's subject.

The queen's soft brown eyes lit with unholy glee. "The child grew up, hmm?" the queen murmured, her eyes lingering on Ruby's tattoos and proud stance. "Tell me, Lost Child, how did you find this Amazon who calls herself your grandmother?"

Bretina stepped back to Ruby's side and nudged her gently, encouraging her to speak. Ruby glanced around. Bretina nudged her again. Ruby saw Izzy and Rosetta off to the side beaming at her.

"She found me and helped me to fight a group of demons," Ruby grudgingly admitted.

"How did you find each other, Lost Child?" the queen asked loudly, her eyes steady on Ruby.

"I escaped from Council."

"Hmm. Tell me this story. It sounds interesting," the Queen said, sitting down again and arranging her long, leather-clad legs in a comfortable sprawl.

Taking a deep breath, Ruby told the story of her escape, but not the real reason why. She told of the fight with Bretina and her subsequent surrender back to Council hands, but again, not the real reason why. She told the queen about the impossible-to-escape cell she'd been given and her rescue from it by Bretina, Rosetta, and Isola.

Throughout the entire recitation, there were soft whispers, softer gasps, and murmurs of approval. When she finished, there was silence, and Ruby dreaded to hear what the queen would say. She didn't think they would harm her, but they might give her some means of punishment for being weak.

Instead, the queen stood again. "Lost Child has returned with tales many warriors would envy. Not many of us have escaped from Council not once, but twice. I ask you. Is she worthy of the Blood Maiden Tribe?"

It was quiet for a moment. Then a roar echoed throughout the room. Ruby looked around at the women cheering wildly. Bretina was cheering as well, her shoulders stiff with pride.

The queen held up her hands for quiet. "Lost Child has become a Chieftain, the first female to ever be given into that duty. Do we accept her as one of our own and offer her sanctuary from her enemies?"

Again there was a roar, this time accompanied by thumps upon shields and chests. Ruby's eyes watered, but she held the tears back. These strong women were offering her shelter and protection against Council should she need it.

The queen stepped down from the small dais that held her chair, approaching Ruby with her hands outstretched. "My people have charged me with the duty of welcoming Lost Child back and renaming her Lineage Chieftain Ruby Fontenot-Blue of the Elkfire line. My family has honored me with the task of offering our home to our Lost Child. Do you accept these terms, Chieftain Ruby?"

Everyone seemed to hold their breath as they waited for Ruby's answer. Bretina looked worried at Ruby's silence, as did the queen.

She bowed her head slightly. "I accept, Your Highness."

The resounding cheer almost deafened Ruby while the sudden thumps on her back just about brought her to her knees. Everyone wanted a chance to touch the newest addition to their tribe. Ruby could hear Izzy bragging to someone that she'd seen Ruby stand against an incubus and come out on top. The leering smile she gave her audience made Ruby laugh. These women were fabulous, she thought with an inner grin.

When the well-wishers finally wandered off to prepare the feast Ruby overheard the queen order, she felt battered, yet happy for the first time in a long while. Her heart was lighter, even with the shadow of her feelings for Lucian lurking around. "I'm glad to see you again, Ruby," a soft yet commanding voice said, drawing her attention back to the queen whose eyes were searching Ruby's face intently. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Ruby frowned, trying to sift through the very few memories she had of her childhood. Once in a while, she'd dreamed of a young woman with few worries and lots of laughs. A woman who looked a lot like the queen, but Ruby had always thought she dreamed of her mother.

"I...don't know," Ruby said hesitantly, watching as the queen's face fell. "I remember a woman who looked like you, but I think she was my mother? She used to sing to me."

Happiness bloomed on the queen's face with Ruby's last words. "That was me! I used to sing you lullables because Zoe had a terrible singing voice, and we all threatened her with death if she croaked one note!" The queen beamed. "I'm Albreda, the sister closest to Zoe in age, your aunt."

Ruby tilted her head to the side, studying the queen carefully. She could see it now, she thought. She vaguely remembered a sweet singing voice and someone scolding her mother about having a horrible voice, telling her she needed to work more on her battle skills because if anyone else heard her singing, they would think she was dying and try to put her out of her misery. Laughter, lots of laughter, Ruby remembered. Laughter and love. It crept into her mind, a child's voice talking to her favorite aunt.

"Tante 'Breda?" Ruby asked tentatively, her face tight with concentration. "I remember a Tante 'Breda and Tante 'Shin?"

Queen Albreda laughed out loud, grabbing Ruby in a tight hug. "Yes! I am your Tante Albreda and your Tante Shin is Ocean, my sister." She kept her arm around Ruby as she looked around. "Ocean! Saga! Get your asses over here and say hello to your niece."

Two laughing women approached, both of them at an even height with the same shining brown hair as Bretina and Albreda, though their eyes were blue instead of brown. Ocean, the older of the two, stepped forward and placed a soft kiss on Ruby's forehead. "Welcome home, dearest. We missed you," she said just as softly, her lips trembling slightly.

Saga, the next oldest sister, wrapped Ruby in a tight hug. "Ruby! We missed you so much! You need to tell us all about what happened when you were taken away."

Ruby nibbled on her bottom lip. Should she tell them about her isolated childhood? Would they resent her father more than they already did? Ruby couldn't tell. She wasn't angry at her father for taking her away. He thought he'd never see his only child again, but she was angry he hadn't told her about her family. If she had known about them, she might have been able to deal with life a little better.

"Girls, let her breathe. Ruby, let me show you to your tent," Albreda said firmly, guiding Ruby from the hall. "Mom? Come with us?"

Bretina beamed, hooking her arm through Ruby's free one as they trailed to the back of the longhouse. There was a doorway nestled in the far corner, almost hidden from view. It led back outside, but the walkway was lined with tall grass.

"We put the family tents together. The longhouse is for the single women with no families. It helps them to bond with others," Albreda explained. "Families try to live close together."

She led Ruby to a grouping of five tents at the end of the walk path. The first tent was the largest, which Ruby learned was Albreda's as it had to accommodate five guards. The second largest tent was Bretina's, since she was the elder of the family as well as the former queen. The other three tents were smaller, and only one was completely unadorned. Each tent so far had some kind of emblem painted on the side, insignias that matched the ones embroidered on each woman's clothing or skin.

Albreda's pants carried a red stag in an oval; Bretina's vest had a silver hawk with three lines underscoring it. Ocean had boasted a brand on her bicep that showed a wave with a gull flying overhead, while Saga wore an amulet that depicted a musical note held in a hand.

"We will have the herald adorn your tent while you wash up," Albreda announced as she led Ruby to the fifth tent. "It is important for everyone to know you carry your battle markings proudly."

Ruby just nodded, too surprised at her accommodations. Though it was a tent, there was a large bed on a raised platform. A real bed, she thought, in a tent! The bedding was all plain white, but so thick and comfortable looking she didn't think she'd balk at all. There was a small chair and wash stand in the corner and, hallelujah, there was a large fan hooked up to nothing.

When Albreda noticed where Ruby's attention had strayed, she smiled. "We're more pampered than we used to be, I'm afraid. We bargained with a coven of witches for some bespelled cooling devices and got these," she said indicating the fan. "It doesn't require electricity or batteries and will keep your tent as cool as you like."

Eyebrows raised in amazement, Ruby said, "Neat."

Looking over the rest of her new living quarters, she saw there was mosquito netting over the bed. It would keep the bloodsuckers out. Bloodsuckers. Lucian. Sadness washed over her, but she determinedly shook it off.

"It's perfect," Ruby said with a warm smile. Albreda and Bretina looked relieved. They obviously didn't realize she'd spent her entire life roughing it with her dad and probably expected her to whine about sleeping in a tent. As far as Ruby was concerned, this was almost better than any hotel she'd ever gone to.

Hotel. "Oh, no!" she cried. "Briggs," she said as they looked at her, startled. "My dog! He's back in Cypress Point, and he's been there without me for...how long has it been?" she asked out loud. She counted mentally. "Two weeks?" She'd lost complete track of time, Ruby realized in horror.

"A dog, huh?" Bretina said slowly. "When I was coming back from our first meeting, I followed your trail back to that house, then

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followed one of the Councilors to town. They believed you might have returned for him. When they realized you hadn't, I took the dog."

"You have Briggs?" Ruby asked her grandmother in astonishment.

The other Amazon blushed lightly. "It was nothing. He's quite flatulent, isn't he?" she asked in disgust before leading Ruby to her own tent.

When Ruby heard a grunting snuffle, her heart lightened. It *was* Briggs! She saw him sleeping on a tiny bed with soft covers and shot her grandmother a teasing look, which made her blush even more.

"Briggs!" Ruby cried happily, rushing to the bed.

Briggs, overwhelmed by the sight of his mistress, opened one eye and snorted.

Not worrying about his lack of excitement, Ruby gathered him into her arms, squeezing him tight. She'd missed him so much, she thought with surprise. He had been a constant in her life and now that her life was out of control, she needed his steady, unflappable presence. He obliged her sentiment by swiping a quick tongue across her cheek before groaning again.

"Well, maybe now you can take him back to your tent," Bretina said gruffly, apparently not wanting to show she was touched by the scene.

"Thank you so much, Ma-maw," Ruby whispered.

Albreda cleared her throat. "Well, come along. We'll feast tonight, and we can decide how to fix this problem with Council once and for all," she said firmly.

Ruby put Briggs down, grabbed his bed and headed back to her tent. Her thoughts were centered on the problem with Council, and Lucian was at the center of it all. His absence and subsequent fall into Bianca's hands felt like a blow to her heart.

That night, most of the tribe gathered in the long hall for a feast the likes of which Ruby had never seen before. There was roasted wild pig, deer, and duck. Someone had caught an alligator and the tail was being fried outside. The smell of that and fish frying tantalized the senses. Huge vats of red beans and sausage were served with mounds of rice. There was so much food Ruby worried it would go to waste, but she quickly realized these women had hearty appetites.

She sat at the front of the hall with her family, noting the similarities between them, mainly their facial structures and builds. They were a lively group. Saga was perky and friendly, while Ocean was more quiet and shy. Albreda spoke with her people with a casualness Ruby found fascinating. Though she was the queen, she didn't seem to let it go to her head. There were moments when she addressed someone formally, but usually they were elders of the tribe. Bretina was treated with respect by all, though she acted as though she'd never ruled the tribe at all, her manner friendly and open with everyone. The pride she showed in Ruby's status as Chieftain was evident for all to see.

Ruby's current difficulties with Council were discussed by everyone, and they all had suggestions. They ranged from sending Ruby to various tribes around the world to attacking Council flat-out and taking over. None of it really appealed to her.

"I want to be a part of the Veil," she said when someone asked her what she wanted. "I've never been a part of something before and with these powers, I feel like I need to be available to help when needed."

Albreda nodded. "This is true. You have a responsibility to your office, but there is also a lot of danger for Chieftains. We've seen it for centuries, but we've never paid much attention to it." She saw Ruby's confusion and smiled. "Amazons have never relied on Chieftains for confirmation of their queens. I like to think that because we're all women, we're smart enough to realize the strongest of the warriors should lead and trust in her to step down when she is unable to," she said softly, tilting her head towards her mother.

Bretina just smiled. "It's always been that way. I don't regret stepping down from the throne. I should have done it before because then I could have spent more time with you, Ruby, but I didn't. Now, I see that the queens before me knew when to step down, conceding leadership to the newest strong warrior. It just so happened to be Albreda when I stepped down. Chieftains are called in when sons and brothers and husbands get involved in the leadership process. Men want their legacies to live on, wanting empires. We just want our families to be safe and we know the strongest should lead. It's always been this way and always will be."

"I believe we should provide Ruby with protection at all times," Ocean said softly, her gaze thoughtful. "She belongs to our family, and we have relatives all over the world. If we rotate a select group of guards, she'd always be protected anywhere she went."

Albreda and Bretina nodded enthusiastically.

Ruby felt overcome. "You'd do that for me? But what if I want to live in a city?" she asked, thinking about some of the women's problems with male aggression.

Saga made a rude sound. "The guards we're talking about will be seasoned and carefully selected for their mild tempers."

"A good thing, too, 'cause Ruby here has more than enough of her own temper," a woman's voice cut into the conversation, bringing utter silence to the hall. Emerging from the shadows was none other than Pagan, the blue-headed vamp.

Albreda flashed to her feet. "Pagan! You came!" she cried, rushing to greet the vampire with a whoop and bone-crushing slaps on the back. "Look at you. Wasn't your hair purple last time?"

Pagan grinned, flashing those sharp fangs. "Yeah, got tired of it," she said jokingly, her eyes pinning Ruby to the spot. "Got room for one more?"

"Of course," Albreda answered warmly, pulling the vampire down to sit between her and Ruby.

"Chieftain," Pagan said solemnly, though her eyes sparkled with something Ruby couldn't pinpoint. "How did you end up here?" she asked mildly as she accepted a plate piled high with food.

"Ruby's Zoe's daughter," Albreda said from Pagan's other side.

The vampire froze, her eyes wide and unblinking. If Ruby hadn't been watching, she'd have thought the vampire wasn't even breathing. "*You're* the Lost Child?" she asked incredulously.

Ruby shrugged. "Apparently my dad kidnapped me and hid me away."

"Holy cow," Pagan breathed. "You're supposed to be at the Council safe house, aren't you? What happened? The ladies bust you out?"

Ruby didn't bother answering, but the rest of the tribe filled in the details, embellishing here and there as they saw fit.

Pagan's mouth was hanging open when the tale was finished. "Have you told Lucian any of this?" she demanded.

"No, and he won't know either," Ruby replied sternly. "I'm going to handle this on my own."

Pagan let out a loud laugh. "Oh, girl. You just joined the Veil and you think you're ready to take on a Councilor?"

Silence descended as everyone waited for Ruby's reply. Pagan seemed to realize she'd just challenged Ruby and though she looked contrite, she didn't take it back.

Without another word, Ruby motioned for Pagan to follow her outside. When they were outside with most of the tribe looking on, Ruby launched herself at Pagan.

Chapter Twenty-Six

They grappled. Ruby knew Pagan had more strength than she did, but she was hoping her weight and longer reach would help her in the fight.

Pagan grunted as she pelted Ruby with a flurry of painful kicks and punches to the chest. Ruby was stunned at first but recovered quickly, grabbing the vampire's foot and flipping her away. She had half a second to regroup before Pagan was on her again.

Ruby fell beneath the other woman's fierce attack, but didn't let her seemingly defenseless pose undermine her confidence. Once Pagan was on her, Ruby grabbed her right shoulder as she slid her body to the left, pushing Pagan's upper torso further over as she rotated her body to the side. She nudged the vampire's head away, hooking her foot under her chin, causing Pagan's shoulder to get locked between Ruby's knees.

Ruby suspected the submission pose was something one of her Chieftain predecessors had used, and somehow she knew once she grabbed Pagan's waistband and began to lean forward on her knees, she could seriously hurt the other woman. Ruby set herself up holding Pagan's trapped arm, and began leaning forward. The vampire hissed and shouted in pain before slapping her hand on the ground.

Ruby released Pagan, helping her to her feet. When they were standing face-to-face again, Pagan bowed slightly. Cheers erupted as the tribe congratulated Ruby for her victory.

"How'd you know that shoulderlock?" Pagan asked curiously.

Shrugging her shoulders, Ruby answered, "Must've seen it somewhere."

Albreda rolled her eyes. "She's a fully transitioned Amazon with Chieftain abilities. Combine them together," she said with a clap of her hands, "and you've got a bad mama jama."

Ruby said nothing, knowing this was true. Her Chieftain abilities were becoming more pronounced. She didn't feel the need to attack, just defend, and the combative moves she'd learned from her predecessors were definitely helping her out.

As the fight had come to an end, the tribe headed back to the feast, leaving Ruby and Pagan standing alone.

"Does Lucian know where you are?" Pagan began once everyone was out of earshot. "Cause I don't think he'd appreciate having his mate—"

"He's mated to Bianca," Ruby cut in harshly, turning her eyes back on the vampire. Rage at her feelings for Lucian and her inability to have him flared within her. "He used me so I would willingly go with Council. He left me there with that bitch, and she was planning to kill me before the nuptials. Does that sound like we're mated?" she asked through her teeth, red flickering at the edge of her eyes.

Pagan's violet eyes widened. "What the hell? Bianca? That isn't possible!"

"I heard it from her mouth, Penelope. She was planning to have me killed. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm tired and need to sleep."

She stomped off in the direction of her tent, ignoring the bewildered vampire she left in her wake.

* * * *

"Something isn't right," Lucian whispered to Malachi.

His brother just grunted, "You think? We're in the Council sewers and your heavy ass is standing on me."

Lucian shifted his weight on Malachi's shoulders and peered through the drain. People were rushing around, but none of them were the seasoned GE's. So far, he'd only seen much younger recruits who seemed lost. Something wasn't right, and Lucian had a feeling it involved Ruby.

"What's going on?" Malachi hissed, adjusting his shoulders.

"There are several guards I've never seen before, some very young recruits who look like cadets, and not a single Elite running around," Lucian whispered back. "I also don't see any councilors. Where in the hell would they be? They're supposed to be guarding Ruby. Wait, is that—damn, that's Davide."

"Davide Harrity?" Malachi asked his voice properly horrified.

Harrity was a complete monster as far as the Veil was concerned. A half-Demon, half-Giant, Harrity had been implicated in so many crimes many wondered why he hadn't been incarcerated. Except the witnesses to every one of his crimes managed to disappear which just ensured no one ever said anything against him. Standing at well over seven feet tall, the Halfling shouldn't have been anywhere near the Council safe house, but he walked through the hall like he owned it.

"He's one of Bianca's friends," Malachi grunted softly. "I think she uses him to intimidate the rest."

Lucian swore under his breath. This was not looking good at all. If Harrity was here with not a single councilor or GE in sight, it could only mean Malachi had told the truth and Bianca was a traitor to the Council and a danger to Lucian's mate.

"What are you doing here already?" a woman's voice asked sharply.

Lucian's eyes widened. Bianca appeared in the doorway, but she looked nothing like she normally did. Gone was the designer clothes and perfectly coiffed hair. She was wearing a vinyl cat suit that molded to her body like paint. She was wearing what Lucian had always called hooker heels and had a whip wrapped around her waist. She looked dangerous despite her diminutive height.

Harrity's face broke out into a sappy grin. "Bianca," he cooed, his smashed up mug softening into infatuated lines. "I came as soon as you called." He picked her up, kissing her passionately. Bianca was stiff at first, but then those vinyl clad legs wrapped around as much of Harrity's waist as they could. Soon they were panting and groaning in the middle of the hall. Several recruits stared in shock and dismay. They'd apparently expected the Oculum to come to their rescue.

Lucian watched one tiny woman slip away so silently no one else noticed. He only hoped she was finding a way to alert the GE's that the safe house had been invaded.

Harrity and Bianca broke up their snogfest with a loud sucking sound. Lucian tried not to gag.

"Have you seen her yet?" Bianca cooed at Harrity, smoothing back his greasy blond hair.

"No, my love. I thought I'd wait until you got here. I know you like to watch me work," he said with a leer.

"Oculum," one brave recruit spoke up timidly. When Bianca narrowed her eyes on him, he gulped. "What are you planning to do?"

"None of your business," Bianca stated coldly, slithering down Harrity's body. She approached the half dozen recruits who stood frozen in the hallway. "You should be at drills. Why are you here?"

The same recruit spoke up. "GE Kincaid told us to remain behind so the Chieftain would be safe. She told us not to leave our post."

Bianca's head cocked to the side as she studied the young werewolf. "Kill them."

The recruits tried to defend themselves, but a dozen battlehardened males dropped into the room and slaughtered them right before Lucian's eyes.

He hadn't even realized he was about to throw open the grate he was hiding under until he felt Malachi yank him down. They scuffled for several minutes before Lucian came back to his senses.

"Quiet, Luc," Malachi breathed in his ear. "We won't be able to get Ruby out of here if we're caught."

Lucian nodded grimly, his heart bleeding for the young lives just lost. "I think one of them might have gotten away. A young female Halfling."

"Good, then she's probably alerting the GE's. C'mon, let's find your Chieftain before Harrity and the gang decides to take care of her."

Ice encased Lucian's heart at the thought of his mate in Harrity's hands. "Let's go," he said grimly.

They slipped through a grate in the kitchen, which was deserted. Lucian was pretty sure he knew where Ruby was being held and led Malachi to the second floor. Except when he got there, the rooms were empty and showed no signs of having been used. The ice in his heart spread to the rest of his body.

"She's not here," he rasped, hatred and pain coating every word. Malachi gripped his shoulder, offering sympathy, but Lucian shrugged it off. "I should've kept her with me." He ran a hand through his hair, tugging slightly and trying to think of where else Bianca might have put his mate. Thinking wasn't coming easily to him. Thoughts of what Harrity and the others could be doing to her kept whirling around his head.

"Pull it together, man," Malachi said harshly. His eyes glowed red as his demon side began to show itself. "Is there any other room that Bianca might put her? Somewhere she wouldn't be able to escape from?"

Lucian racked his brain. Then his head shot up. "The Oculum's quarters!"

He raced out of the room, Malachi hot on his heels. They sped through the mansion, making sure they avoided the voices celebrating Bianca's triumph. Up three more flights of stairs and down the long, barren hallway, Lucian and Malachi ran as if their lives depended on it. When Lucian saw the steel door at the end, he flung himself against it, trying to weaken it somehow so he could get to her. "Hold up," Malachi said, pulling Lucian away. From his pocket, he withdrew a small vial of green liquid. "I got this stuff from one of Bianca's friends a few years ago." He removed a dropper from the top and dribbled only a few drops into the lock.

After several minutes of checking back for Bianca's followers, Lucian watched the lock melting away as though it had never existed.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart. He could almost smell his mate through the steel. When he opened the door, he was almost overwhelmed by her essence. She'd been in this room, he thought, looking around frantically for signs of her.

"Ruby," he called out hoarsely. His voice seemed to echo back to him. The bed was rumpled from where she'd slept, though the sheets were long cold. He and Malachi split up, Lucian searching the room and Malachi heading to the bathroom.

"Holy shit," Malachi whispered, causing Lucian to run into the spacious chamber.

"What the hell..." he breathed.

A huge hole behind the bathtub showed someone had busted through. Following his nose, Lucian crawled through the opening, ignoring the tight fit and numerous cuts from the broken tiles.

Once Malachi was through, they stood still for several minutes, letting their senses soak up the deserted passageway.

"Several women, it smells like," Malachi said unnecessarily.

They followed the passage until they came to a spot where it intersected another. "Which way?" Lucian growled, impatient to find his mate.

Malachi sniffed again. "There was another demon in here...an incubus," he murmured with a frown. "Fallamhan?" he called out loud.

A man materialized in the passageway, his body glowing softly. "Malachi," the incubus mumbled. "Oculum-se," he said with a nod at Lucian. "What's up, Malachi? Why are you using my secret name?" Lucian didn't wait for Malachi to reply. He simply grabbed the pretty-boy incubus by the shirt and lifted him off the ground. "Where. Is. My. Mate." he growled, his voice falling to a deep bass.

Fallon's nostrils flared slightly. "You're the one she's mated to," he commented casually, as though it was nothing for him to be held suspended in the air by a vampire.

"Damned right I am," Lucian growled again, banging the incubus against the wall. "Where is she?"

The incubus sighed deeply. "She was here with some Amazons. One of them called me."

"Amazons?" Malachi asked curiously but was cut off by Lucian.

"Did you touch her?"

Now anger flared in the incubus' eyes. "I do not touch mated females, *couillon*."

"You'd better not," Lucian replied, ignoring the insult to his intelligence. "Where did they go?"

"I don't know," Fallon told him, the honesty in his face encouraging Lucian to release him. Once on his feet, Fallon straightened out his clothing with quiet dignity. "She was with a group of Amazons I have seen before."

"Why was she with Amazons? Did they break her out?" Malachi asked impatiently.

Fallon flicked him a glare. "I didn't stop and make small talk with them," he answered through clenched teeth. He looked straight at Lucian. "I did notice, though, that she strongly resembles the queen of the Blood Maiden tribe."

"How do you know the queen?" Malachi asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

A wicked smile crossed Fallon's face. "I know all the women in my territory."

"Where?" Lucian demanded.

Fallon sighed, rolling his eyes slightly. "Vermilion Parish. I believe that tribe has a permanent camp near Black Lake."

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Lucian was already speeding down the passageway by the time Malachi wrapped his mind around the idea that Ruby was an Amazon. "I should've guessed," he said sheepishly and looked in the direction Lucian had run in. He looked back at Fallon. "Wanna tag along? It's bound to be fun."

Fallon frowned and folded his arms. "I guess you finally told him."

Malachi shrugged. "Yeah, he was coming to kill me for Bianca, so I figured he should at least know the truth." His form wavered as he dissolved so he could appear back by the car they'd taken to the keep. "So, do you want to come? I'm sure Lucian will make an ass of himself, and that's worth the trip."

"Fine, fine," Fallon breathed.

They dissolved and appeared next to the Jeep Malachi kept for rugged driving. Five minutes later, Lucian was behind the wheel and they were speeding through the night.

"What are we going to do about Bianca?" Malachi asked as he bounced around the front seat. Lucian was going to tear the damn car apart if he kept driving this way, he thought with mild amusement.

"I'll notify the rest of Council about what's going on. Hopefully, she doesn't know where to find Ruby, and I'll have time to hide her."

"Um, do you really think that's possible? I mean, she's surrounded by the toughest babes in the world. I think even Harrity would hesitate to take on a whole tribe."

"I don't give a damn. I'm her mate, and it's my right to protect her like I should've been doing all along," Lucian growled, his eyes flashing red.

Fallon let out a long-suffering sigh and stretched out on the backseat as though he were about to take a nap. Malachi just coughed softly, watching the scenery pass. "It'll take us several hours to get

there, and by then it'll be daylight. You won't be able to help her much."

"Shut up," Lucian snarled, his foot punching the gas pedal.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ruby sat on her bed with Briggs snoring next to her. She didn't want to think about Lucian, but her heart wouldn't let her not think about him. The few hours of passion they'd had were welded to her memory, and nothing was going to tear them out. Ruby had a feeling she'd fallen too deeply in love with the damned vampire, and she'd be miserable forever knowing he was with that bitch.

"He isn't going to marry her," Pagan said from the doorway to her tent.

Wiping a tear that had slipped down her face, Ruby glared at the other woman. "You weren't there when he left me with the Council. He tried to force me to agree! What kind of mate does that?" she demanded loudly.

Pagan sighed, flopping down on the ground and stretching her legs in front of her. "He's a male, Ruby. They don't think like we do. You should know that. I mean, hell, you're an Amazon. Not just an Amazon, but the beloved, newly returned niece of the queen. Isn't there something in you that says men are stupid?"

A watery laugh escaped Ruby. "Yeah, something does, but he never came to see me, and I know he was there."

Shrugging, Pagan slipped off her boots and massaged her feet. "There's no telling with Luc. I've known him for a few years, and he's not exactly an open book."

Ruby did her best not to quiver with jealousy. Had Pagan and Lucian ever...?

"Ugh. No!" Pagan said, correctly reading the jealousy in Ruby's face. The absolute disgust on her face was plenty of confirmation that

Pagan and Lucian had never shared an intimate relationship. "I hate men more than your relatives do, girlie. But Lucian isn't so bad, I guess. He's got this code of honor that's ridiculous to keep up with."

"Yes," Ruby said haltingly.

"He has this need to protect everyone. It caused hell with me when he and I first began running into each other. He thought I should stay at home and let Mortimer take care of me." She snorted loudly. "As if. Mortimer's so busy mixing his potions and doing his experiments he wouldn't notice if a...werewolf broke into the house."

Ruby noticed her hesitation and knew Pagan had been about to say "bomb went off" but didn't because of her parents' deaths. Sympathy warmed her heart, pushing her heartache away, and she studied the other woman carefully. Pagan was beautiful, and the blue hair just enhanced her uniqueness.

"The thing is, Ruby, if you find your mate, you should grab a hold of him and never let go. I don't know how it is with Amazons, but I knew your mom, and she was totally into your dad, so Amazons must have some sort of mating bond. For vampires, it's like breathing air. You live for your mate. You live to make each other happy. It's a beautiful thing," she breathed, her gaze turned inward, no doubt thinking about her parents. "If you're mated and"—she sniffed slightly—"from your smell, bonded, you can't just let Bianca take Lucian from you. I don't know what the hell that woman was thinking, but I can promise you Lucian never gives her a passing thought."

Ruby was quiet for several minutes. "My family tells me I need to take revenge on the person who locked me away."

Pagan licked her lips, her gaze thoughtful before slowly nodding. "I get that. It's the way things are here."

"That's what I'm told. However, if I punish the person directly responsible, it would be Lucian."

Pagan sucked in a shocked breath, realization blooming on her face. "Oh, man, you're right. He did trick you...a bit."

"I'm going after Bianca," Ruby confessed softly, her eyes on Pagan's ethereally beautiful face. "I'm not doing it because of Lucian, but because she was planning to kill me, and because her death would improve the world." Ruby hoped that was the truth and she wasn't just fooling herself.

"I hear that, so when are we going?" Pagan asked eagerly, stuffing her feet back into her clumpy boots.

"I haven't decided yet, but I'm not involving the entire tribe in this."

"The hell you're not!" Izzy cried from somewhere on the other side of the tent. She burst through the flap and tripped over Pagan, who was still on the ground. "Umph," she grunted as she landed facefirst on the floor of the tent.

"Hon, you need learn to make better entrances than that," Rosetta sniffed from the doorway. She minced into the room wearing an extremely short skirt in leopard print with an equally brief leopard print top. That it was actual fur made her look like a cross between Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.* and Brendan Fraser in *George of the Jungle.* "Sweetie, you'd better think twice about not letting the other girls know about your plan. They don't like secrets 'round here, and with you being part of the royal family..." She paused, shrugging one broad shoulder. "Trust me, it wouldn't be pretty for you when you got back. Your Nana would be so fired up...."

Ruby fought a giggle at Rosetta calling Bretina 'Nana'. The word conjured up an image of a tiny ancient woman with a bun and knitting needles, far from Bretina's robustness. The women looked at each other and laughed anyway. Briggs continued snoring.

The feeling of camaraderie was so pleasant, Ruby relaxed.

"So what do y'all suggest?" she asked, absently scratching Briggs behind one ear.

They spoke up all at once. "Challenge her to a duel."

Ruby nodded. "I guess that'll have to do it. What do I do about her magic? She can paralyze me in a heartbeat."

Pagan frowned. "That sucks," she said gloomily. The other two nodded. Pagan brightened up. "Mortimer might have something that makes you less susceptible to spells."

"You think he'd help?" Ruby asked doubtfully.

Mortimer's twin just rolled her eyes with a snort. "Trust me, if he's been working on anything, he'd love to try it out."

"Um, yeah, but I don't want to die so he can experiment."

"That would suck," Izzy agreed solemnly.

"You'll just have to try it on someone else before you meet Bianca," Pagan answered vaguely, pulling out her cell and flipping through her contacts.

Her conversation with Mortimer was brief and angry, but in the end the scientific-minded vampire agreed to let Ruby test one of his potions and even suggested a couple of magic users to practice it against. "He'll be here tomorrow night with a couple of his mage friends, and you can give it a shot," Pagan affirmed after hanging up with him. She stood gracefully, unfolding her long legs and once more looking like the badass she was. "You'll need to run through some drills and, if I know your family, they're going to be hard on you."

Izzy and Rosetta agreed happily. "You'll wish you were dead."

"Yeah, girl, you'll almost wish we hadn't saved you," Rosetta inserted gleefully.

Ruby glared at all three of them. "You guys really, really suck."

They spent several long minutes chatting and Ruby was so comfortable with them, she didn't even stop to think how strange it was that there was a drag queen in the Amazon camp. She must've frowned because Rosetta caught her expression with a charming grin.

"Just got to wondering how I got here, huh?"

Nodding slowly with a blush climbing up her face, Ruby apologized. "I'm sorry to be so rude," she began, but Rosetta and Izzy giggled, waving away her apologies.

"I was a performer on Bourbon Street and I was *good*," Rosetta said with false modesty. She pressed one large hand to her fake bosom, adopting an innocent expression. "Then, one night I got in a bit of trouble with a centaur, but I swear, I didn't know he was a centaur. Anyway, we got in trouble—boy was that fun—and when his father found out, I had to pay restitution. Here I am thinking I'd have to crack open the checkbook a few times, right? No, indeed! They shipped me here! As you can imagine, I wasn't what they were, um, needing in camp, so they tried to get rid of me right away."

Rosetta paused, an expression of fond remembrance crossing her face. Izzy grinned in memory.

Sniffing and nodding, Rosetta continued. "They tried everything from locking me in a trunk and dropping me off in the middle of the Quarter to trying to buy me off with jewelry! It didn't matter, though, I refused to budge. Finally, this little one here couldn't take it anymore and asked me why I wanted to stay. What else could I say? I love their clothes! They needed a little help though 'cause, honey, these women didn't know anything about skin care!" She sounded so horrified Ruby and Pagan laughed uproariously.

Izzy just rolled her eyes and elbowed Rosetta. "Anyway, once they realized I wasn't going anywhere and I had no expectations, they grudgingly allowed me to stay. They made me train with them, though, which was almost enough to send me running for my life. I'm an entertainer, not GI Jane, but you can't tell these ladies anything! And, then, they tried to get me to stop wearing revealing clothes! Can you imagine?"

Ruby shook her head with a grin. Rosetta sounded as though they'd asked for her to cut off her right arm.

Izzy laughed hard. "Remember what you wore on your first day here? You had these six inch platforms on—" "I loved those shoes. I'll never forgive Macy for wearing them to go hunting!" Rosetta cut in, pouting just a little.

"This fuchsia micromini skirt, and a silver and pink leopard print halter top." Izzy laughed more. "She walked into camp, *oohing* and *aahing* over our leathers and boots and next thing we know, she wouldn't leave."

Ruby and Pagan were giggling with them, imagining Rosetta gushing over the dominatrix style clothing the Amazons preferred.

"We couldn't get her to go home. Every time someone trussed her up and packed her off to New Orleans, she was back the next day with more outfits and make-up! She held make-up and skin care classes and after that, there was no getting rid of her."

"I've made it my business to take care of the beauty in this camp," Rosetta claimed loftily. "Before I came here, they used bar soap to wash their faces!" She looked so horrified it sent Ruby and Pagan off into laughter again. "Now, they all take care of their skin and let me coordinate their outfits when they're allowed to go to town. It's fabulous!"

"Well, you are the best dressed tribe," Pagan conceded with a sly grin. "The Iberville nymphs are constantly bitching about how sexy the Blood Maidens look when they end up passing through."

"As they should! Why, those nymphs only dress in silk," Rosetta said with a sneer. "Silk has its place, but leather. Leather should be the staple of every woman's closet. Makes a man crazy to see a woman in leather."

Ruby agreed, and the talk drifted to what Ruby should wear for her duel. For a while, she was able to shove Lucian from her mind and her heart thanked her for the reprieve.

* * * *

No matter how hard Lucian pushed the car, they were only in Lafayette when dawn peeked over the horizon. His eyes burned at the first rays of sunshine, and they had to pull over to a motel.

Inside, he paced and ranted at the delay while Malachi and Fallon dozed on the beds. He glared at them for looking so peaceful but couldn't really be angry at them. They'd come along even though it was his mate in trouble.

He wiped a hand over his exhausted face. He needed to rest. Malachi had been right when he said that pushing himself beyond his reserves wouldn't help them when it came to rescuing Ruby. Shoving his brother to the far side of the bed, Lucian stretched out next to him.

Staring up at the ceiling, Lucian had to admit if any good came of this whole farce, it would be that he finally knew the truth behind Malachi's actions in the past. It couldn't have been easy for him to give up his comfortable life and strike out on his own. Part of Lucian admired Malachi's gumption even while he railed at his mother. She was a cold woman, and it didn't surprise him that she'd ignored Malachi's existence.

Malachi would never replace Bernard, but knowing he had another brother, one he'd once considered a friend, meant a lot to Lucian. He wasn't sure what was going to happen when Ruby was finally safe and Bianca defeated, but he hoped Malachi would completely abandon his dreams of an Eturian empire and live within the confines of the Veil.

Eventually, he drifted to sleep, but his dreams were rife with images of Ruby being tortured by Bianca and Harrity. When he woke, it was with a gasp. The other two were sitting at the rickety table next to the window, eating something greasy and speaking quietly.

"Let's go," Lucian said as soon as he'd showered and changed back into his clothes.

Malachi and Fallon were still sitting at the table, but at his command, they exchanged wary glances.

"Have you fed?" Malachi asked bluntly.

Lucian shrugged. "I'm fine."

"When was the last time you fed?" Fallon asked firmly.

"Four days ago," Lucian admitted. He was feeling a bit weak and more than a little frantic, but he didn't have time to hunt. His blood nearly boiled with the need to make sure Ruby was safe.

"I'm not stopping until I find her, so either you come with me, or you stay here babysitting each other."

They stood with reluctance, not bothering to hide their displeasure. No doubt they were wondering if one of them would be a meal if Lucian became enraged and desperate for nourishment.

Fallon insisted on driving, telling them, "I know where the hell I'm going and neither of you do." Unable to dispute that, Lucian bullied Malachi into riding in the back of the Jeep and they were off again.

The closer they got to their destination, the more Lucian's emotions spiraled. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before. He'd always kept to a strict schedule of feeding in order to remain at the top of his game. Right now, his body was demanding food, and his soul was crying out for relief from the maelstrom of emotions he was feeling. The demands pounded through his body, making his gums throb with need.

He was so caught up in the tumult of his body and soul he barely noticed when they began driving down a bumpy road. Some sense reached out and found the thread of his bonding with Ruby. The further they drove into the marsh, the stronger the pull until he knew for certain she was up ahead.

Fallon drove the jeep into a clearing, and Lucian was out of the vehicle before it came to a full stop. His heart pumping and his emotions screaming for notice, Lucian followed the bond through the camp. He pushed past Amazons of all shapes and colors, bypassing them as though they weren't even there. His sole purpose was to get to Ruby.

Maybe the Amazons knew better than to get between a vampire and his bonded mate, or maybe they were just so shocked to have three males drive into their camp that they were dumbfounded, but whatever the reason, none of them stopped Lucian, Malachi, or Fallon as they raced through the encampment. A few of them looked actually stunned as Fallon hurried by and Lucian briefly wondered if he should've left the incubus in the car.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Lucian spotted his mate. Upon seeing her, his heart stuttered, and his emotions momentarily stopped screaming. She was beautiful standing in the firelight, her body moving with motions he recognized as training exercises. She was wearing dark brown leather pants that hugged her hips and legs before tucking into a pair of knee-high moccasins. Her torso was lovingly displayed in a leather halter similar to the ones the other Amazons wore. Sweat glistened on her ivory skin, making Lucian's mouth water.

So engrossed in devouring her with his eyes, Lucian jumped when the familiar crack of a whip sounded and Ruby leapt to the side. She wasn't quite quick enough though. He heard her inward hiss as the whip carved into her shoulder. Lucian felt a roar of rage growing inside him, howling for blood.

He was going to tear them apart. He was going to dine on their-

He watched, stunned and more than a little aroused, as his mate countered the vicious attack with one of her own, her whip dancing in the air, snarling and cracking. The yelp of the unknown attacker let Lucian know she hit her mark.

Lucian drew closer to her, pushing his way through the women crowded around the fight. She was amazing, he thought through a haze of lust. He felt a twinge of unease when he saw Ruby's opponent was a mage named Mangus. Mangus was well-known for his love of hand-to-hand combat, though he used his magic just as much as any other mage. Off to the side, Lucian noticed Mortimer, Pagan, and Sheena, yet another mage with combat training, watching the duel. Mangus drew his hand back with a word of power, throwing a spell at Ruby as she cracked her whip at his torso. Lucian's shout caught in his throat as Ruby shuddered with the spell's impact. She didn't go down, though, snaking her whip out one more time, managing to wrap it around Mangus' throat just as he was about to sing out another spell.

Lucian charged forward, his shout finally making its way out of his throat, bellowing across the training yard.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ruby grinned at Mangus who, despite having her whip coiled around his neck, beamed back at her. The potion Mortimer had given her had been bitter as hell, but when Mangus and Sheena threw spells at her, she was able to shake most of them off and continue fighting. It had been agreed that whips were going to be used in the duel since it was Bianca's favorite, and best handled, weapon.

The past two days had been spent practicing with the whip as well as hand-to-hand combat until Mortimer showed up at dusk with the potion. Her aunts had taken turns beating the ever-lovin' hell out of her and then turned her over to Bretina for whip lessons. Ruby thought it was a lucky thing this Chieftain bit had made her a fast healer because she'd be so covered with cuts and bruises and in so much pain she wouldn't be able to move. When the mages had shown up with Mortimer, they'd immediately tested the potion with small spells, gradually increasing the severity of their incantations until she could withstand even the paralysis spell Bianca had used on her two days before.

Ruby loosened the tension on the whip coiled around Mangus' neck and was about to pepper him with questions when she heard a bellow of rage that sounded hauntingly familiar. Every hair on her body stood up at the angry roar erupting from Lucian's muscled throat.

For a moment, she was frozen with happiness until she remembered the scene from their last meeting and also that he hadn't come to see her when she was locked up. Fury at her own gullibility and hope mingled with desperate lust and love to cause a cocktail of emotions she was unable to keep a reign on.

Whirling on her heel to face Lucian head-on, Ruby snarled, "You!"

Heedless of her fury and the gazes of the entire tribe, Lucian stalked over to her, grabbing her by the arms to give her a quick shake. "Are you insane, woman? He could've killed you! You could've died from that spell!"

As if realizing what he'd just said, Lucian turned on Mangus with a snarl. "I'm going to kill you," he growled at the mage who began backpedaling in the face of Lucian's fury.

Looking between her whip and Lucian, Ruby tossed it and threw herself on his back, wrapping her legs and arms around his neck and torso. "Calm down, you idiot, he was helping me!" she hissed in his ear, hoping he might appreciate her not screeching at him.

What she hadn't counted on was the feel of him between her thighs, even in this innocent pose. The width of his waist was wellremembered, and the press of her chest against his back sent trills of pleasure through her body. He was so hot, she thought, breathing deeply of his scent. The spark of lust became a flame that quickly took over her body.

Ever since she'd beat Mangus, she could feel...something building in her core. For some reason, the fighting and resulting victory made her body hungry for hot, rough sex. Having Lucian here made it even worse, and she feared she might throw him down on the ground and take him in front of the others. She gritted her teeth as her core clenched with want. She had to fight it. She could fight it. She hoped.

Lucian paused, trying to gently shake her off, but she stuck like a burr, refusing to let him hurt the mage. "Let go of me, woman," he muttered, grabbing her hands and unlocking her arms from around his neck. But instead of throwing her off, he kissed her palms gently, tickling them with his tongue, one after the other. "Why are you here, mate?" he growled, his body relaxing under the weight of hers.

Ruby carefully disengaged her legs, sliding down his back. It took nearly everything she had not to rip his shirt off and trail a path down his spine with her tongue. Knowing her family's tribe looked on gave her a little semblance of control. She cleared her throat. He was an idiot man with a bitchy woman waiting for him to come home after sowing some wild oats. The flame of her anger, which had wavered under the onslaught of lust, began to grow again.

Turning to face her, Lucian looked down at her, crossing his arms over his chest. Ruby copied his stance, but when he went so far as to ask her again why she was there and dared to call her "mate," following his question with an arrogantly raised eyebrow, she lost it.

She poked him in the chest, trying not to think about what she really wanted to do with her fingers and his chest. "Look here, Luc. I did what you wanted. I went back to Council without a fight and guess what? Your crazy ass girlfriend was planning to kill me, so excuse me if I grabbed the first ticket out of there, which just so happened to be my family!" she yelled, pointing a finger at her aunts and grandmother, who'd begun creeping towards them.

Lucian shook his head. "You should've come to me. I am your mate. I will protect you," the cave vamp said, grunting out each word.

Ruby literally saw red. "My mate?" she jeered. "I thought mates were supposed to stay together, not lock each other up."

Watching his beautiful lips tighten, Ruby felt a pang in the vicinity of her heart. He hadn't even bothered denying he and Bianca had a relationship. Either he was still thinking she was in danger from Malachi, or he was just determined to keep her with Council.

"May I?" a voice sounded from behind Ruby, causing her to jump since she'd been so focused on Lucian.

Spinning around, she gaped at Malachi. The Eturian leader bowed to her, smiling sweetly. Well, that theory just flew out the window, she thought with a sinking feeling. They had obviously arrived together. Betrayal seared through her. He was planning to take her back to Council, like a lamb to the slaughter.

"Butt out, Malachi," Lucian growled, spinning Ruby around again and tossing her over his shoulder.

"This is getting to be a bad habit with you, Lucian," Ruby snarled, pummeling his back with more fury than she had the last time.

No one interfered as Lucian lugged her over the practice field towards the tents. She heard him ask someone for directions and, next thing she knew, they were in her tent.

He tossed her on the bed where she bounced right back out, rushing him with a screech of fury. They wrestled for several minutes, and Ruby knew he was trying not to hurt her while she lashed out at him with everything she had. In the end, she was back on the bed, this time with Lucian wrapped around her like a boa constrictor, holding her until she ran out of fight.

"Why did you come here?" he asked softly, his voice tinged with what Ruby suspected was hurt.

What did he have to be hurt about, she snarled silently, refusing to answer him. He'd left her at the mercy of her enemy, and he wanted to play the injured party? "This is my family," she squeaked out when he flexed his arms around her rib cage.

"I am your mate," he insisted, sounding far too patient, like he was teaching a child how to say the alphabet.

"That's what you say," she huffed, blowing a stray chunk of hair out of her face.

"It's what I know."

"So I was supposed to tell my grandmother 'sorry you went through the trouble to knock a hole through a solid stone wall with a sledgehammer, but I'll just wait here until the man who claims to be my mate comes to get me?' You must be out of your mind, Luc. That bitch was going to kill me. I wasn't sticking around to let her do it." Ruby took a deep breath. "Besides, you left and never told me you were coming back. For all I knew, you were going to come back before the wedding, get a little nookie, and ride off into the sunrise again," she added bitterly.

* * * *

Lucian frowned at the canvassed ceiling. Her lack of faith in him hurt more than he would ever admit. Seeing her facing down a mage with nothing more than a whip had put him in a fury of lust and disbelief. Lust because there was nothing sexier than his mate meting out punishment. Disbelief because she somehow thought she needed such skills to protect herself when she had him.

Holding her close, his body yearned to bond with her again, and his soul cried out for relief from the emotions turning him inside out. His lovely Chieftain fit so perfectly against him, he thought with relish. Her bountiful curves sank into the hollows of his own body, making him feel like he was ten feet tall.

He felt guilty for leaving her in Bianca's care, and nothing would ever erase the terror he'd felt at thinking Bianca's personal guard had put their hands on her. Seeing her in the midst of an Amazon camp had settled something in him while the mated part of him realized his battle for her heart was just starting. He'd given Ruby plenty of reasons not to believe in him. But now, it would be different because he would protect her and never leave her side again. Well, until he contacted Council and they worked up a plan to dispose of Bianca and her entourage with as little bloodshed as possible.

Lucian told himself it was a good thing she'd found her family because now he could leave her here while he took care of Bianca and was officially set up on the Council. Then their lives could start, he promised himself. Just one more little separation, and they'd be together forever.

Unable to help himself with her so close, he swirled his tongue around the delicate shell of her ear, feeling her shiver slightly in his arms. Maneuvering her onto her back, he trailed his lips over her cheek until he found her lips, already parted and moist for his kiss.

The howling in his soul briefly abated as he fed on her mouth, his tongue thrusting and tasting the sweet depths. He growled, pulling her into him as he devoured her. It seemed like years since he'd tasted her, and he was suddenly starving.

She moaned softly, pushing her hands into his hair, pulling the strands down around them to form a curtain. Her touch sent a shockwave through his body, and he suddenly needed her more than he'd ever needed anything or anyone else.

Ruby never protested once as clothes were ripped, shredded, and torn away from their bodies. She just eagerly helped. Her hands were greedy and hot as they roamed over his naked skin, sending him in a frenzy of lust.

* * * *

She couldn't get enough of him, Ruby thought desperately. Her body was on fire, her folds already saturated with arousal. Fueling her lust was her earlier victory and the skills she'd learned earlier in the day came to mind.

With a wicked smile, she flipped Lucian on his back, straddling his waist. He looked startled until he saw the flame in her eyes.

"I am going to rock your world, vampire," Ruby whispered boldly, leaning down to press a hot, open mouthed kiss on his sexy mouth.

Their tongues dueled with no clear winner. They were both moaning in hunger by the time Ruby tore her mouth away to trail her tongue down his jaw to his throat. The bite she'd placed there so long ago was still visible, and she pressed her teeth into it lightly.

Lucian's hips arched off the bed and his hands tangled in her hair, holding her to him. She could feel his pulse beneath her mouth, and it was so arousing she nearly sank her teeth in fully. "God, baby," he moaned, his hands stroking down her back to rock her against his stomach, his arousal pressing against her buttocks. "I need you so much."

His words caused her womb to clench with lust. He leaned up, his mouth latching onto one beaded nipple, ripping a cry from her throat. She rocked against his stomach, her wetness saturating his skin.

"You're so hot," he whispered around her flesh, his tongue working her nipple expertly. One of his hands slid over her hip, pulling her harder into the taut muscles of his stomach. "I want you to ride me, mate," he demanded harshly.

Nearly mindless with need, Ruby could only obey, sliding her hips further down his body until his cock was poised at the entrance of her swelling flesh. Some voice in the back of her mind told her she was playing with fire and he would demand even more from her, but her body overrode all logic.

With a cry, she impaled herself on his massive cock, her inner walls stretching to accommodate him. Once he was fully embedded in her flesh, she let out a sigh of relief. It felt right to have him as a part of her.

His hands roamed up her torso to cradle her breasts, his thumbs flicking over her taut nipples and sending a blast of sensation to her womb. She threw her head back, gasping as the reflexive clenching of her womb caused his cock to jerk inside her.

"Move, Ruby. Ride me," he urged her, his voice a growling bass. He emphasized his words by pinching both nipples.

Ruby moaned loudly and began to rock her hips on him, his cock gently retreating and filling her to the brim over and over again. She panted, sweat gathering on her skin as Lucian stroked his hands over her, murmuring approvingly.

When one hand slipped down to where they were joined and gently plucked at her swollen clit, she cried out and began moving faster. Soon, Lucian was as lost as she, thrusting his hips up at her when she lowered her own, driving himself deeper into her body. "Baby, ah, baby, come for me," he rasped huskily, his fingers playing her like a piano. He thrust harder, making Ruby clutch at his shoulders to hold herself in place.

He turned his head and grabbed her wrist with his free hand, bringing her vein to his mouth. When his fangs pierced her skin and began drawing on her, Ruby bucked, a scream working its way past her tight throat as she came.

The frantic bucking of her hips and strong clenching of her inner muscles brought Lucian's climax, which he poured into her welcoming body just as her blood rushed eagerly down his throat.

The fingers tormenting her clit never slowed, just continued to rub and circle until Ruby's body pulled tight with another orgasm, this one stronger than the first. She fell, her body draped over Lucian's chest as the wetness of her orgasm coated both of them.

Pulling back from her wrist and gently licking the punctures before kissing them, Lucian wrapped his arms around her, pulling her deeper into his body. They were still joined, and Ruby felt a contentment she hadn't experienced since the last time they made love.

Sex was the only thing they seemed to agree wholeheartedly on, she thought fuzzily. Their bodies recognized each other, and the pleasure they experienced managed to eclipse any argument they had, at least temporarily.

Ruby didn't fool herself. She knew Lucian was still trying to protect her from herself, and she'd have to disabuse him of that. How she still wasn't sure.

She wasn't about to tell him about the duel. It went without saying that if Lucian knew she was going to deliberately place herself in danger, he'd tie her up and take care of Bianca himself. She wondered if he even knew the extent of his mentor's spiral into darkness. Since he hadn't said anything, she suspected he didn't know. *It isn't my place to tell him.* If he was still convinced Bianca was an innocent and worthy councilor, then nothing Ruby would tell him would make a difference.

A rumbling purr erupted from Lucian's throat as his hands leisurely stroked her back. His satisfaction in their bed play made Ruby glow with triumph. She wasn't an oddity in the Veil, she now knew. Big, strong women were respected as warriors and Lucian apparently heartily approved of her body since every time they were together they went off like roman candles.

"Ruby," he breathed against her temple, pressing a kiss to the tender skin. "Woman, you are hotter than Hell."

"I'm glad you think so," she said back in a shy whisper. She still wasn't used to being considered hot.

His arms tightened around her as he gently eased their bodies apart and laid her next to him. With his arms around her and their legs entwined, Ruby felt replete. This was where she belonged, in his arms.

But how could they resolve their problems if he refused to see her as a strong individual instead of another burden? She didn't kid herself. He cared about her, at least a little, but caring wasn't the same as love, especially where obligations were concerned. If he loved her, his protectiveness could be understood and welcome. Without love, however, he would eventually come to resent her, and her love for him wouldn't be enough to make them equal partners in their relationship.

The problems whirled around her mind, but no words passed her lips. This time with him was precious. Tomorrow she would set up the duel and, then, she'd take control of her life.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

With Ruby pressed against his side, Lucian could finally breathe. The passion they just experienced had him buzzing like the finest whiskey. Ruby was everything he could've hoped for in a mate: strong, beautiful, smart, and sassy. He admired her determination to fulfill the duties of her office while at the same time his mind reeled in horror to imagine the danger she courted.

She just didn't understand that making herself available to the Veil put her at risk. Someone would take it into their head that she needed to be destroyed lest she reveal a leader they didn't want in place. Her life depended on her staying away from the general populous.

His arms unconsciously tightened around her as his primal self snarled at the idea of someone hurting his mate for any reason. Bianca would be dealt with, he decided firmly. Council would learn about her betrayal tomorrow.

Right now was meant to be spent with his mate, bonding with her, making sure his possession was branded on the surface of her heart. His chest hurt it was so full of love for her. When it happened, he didn't know, but he suspected he'd fallen for her when she escaped from his house.

Seeing her determination to live her own life was something to be admired even as he feared it. He could see living with her for all of eternity because she'd never do what he expected. She'd fight with him tooth and nail, but she'd never betray him. Their sex life would be beyond amazing, he thought with a soft chuckle. "What's so funny?" she mumbled against his shoulder, her voice husky with satisfaction and sleepiness.

Lucian brushed his lips over her forehead. "Just thinking we should make sure there's a fire extinguisher nearby anytime we're in bed together."

She giggled. It was a soft, girlish sound that melted his heart. He couldn't resist placing a soft kiss on her mouth. He almost blurted out his love for her but held back because the last time she'd asked him if he loved her he hadn't been able to answer.

"How did your grandmother find you?" Lucian asked out of the blue.

He'd been stroking his fingertips up and down her spine, setting off tingles and soothing her at the same time.

Ruby nestled closer. "I ran into her in the swamp when I escaped your house. She wanted to take me away then and there, but I thought I'd give you a chance. When she didn't hear from me for a couple of days, she and two of the other women broke me out." She stated it all matter of factly, not wanting his guilt.

His arms tightened slightly, and he tensed but didn't defend himself. She surprised herself by giving him a detailed description of what she remembered from her childhood spent with them, stories they'd shared with her during the feast mingling with her own memories. He laughed several times, the sound rending her heart.

"What about you, Luc?" Ruby asked when she'd finally emptied herself of stories. "I've known you for a little while now, but I don't know you. Not really." And that bothered her. She had been intimate with him, but all she really knew about him was that he was apprenticed to Council and was stubborn as a Mississippi mule.

He sighed, his chest rising and falling under her cheek and Ruby could sense that he really didn't want to answer. She was surprised when he began talking.

"I'm the oldest son in my family. Well," he paused with a wry laugh, "I thought I was the oldest son in my family. Seems mom was an unhappy housewife and had a little fun with one of dad's clerks. The result? A baby vampire-demon Halfling who became the scourge of the Veil."

Ruby sat straight up and looked at Lucian incredulously. "Malachi?" she whispered in shock. She could actually see a resemblance between them. They both had strong jaws and, though their coloring was different, they had the same shaped mouth and eyes. "Holy cow."

Lucian laughed harshly, pulling Ruby down into his arms again. "Yeah, that's pretty much how I felt too. I didn't find out until last night either. I grew up with him, thinking he was the son of one of the servants, and he was my brother. I liked him a lot back then. We were best friends. Then, mom had Uri and Bernard." His voice was strained as he said his last brother's name. "Uri was just like me, boisterous and loud. Bernard was more...gentle. He didn't like playing with swords or playing soldiers. He read a lot and studied botany. When we were older, it was obvious to everyone that Bernard was gay. It didn't bother me or Uri, but our parents hated it." He paused, his voice tight and his body tense.

Ruby pressed a gentle kiss to his chest and stroked his arm. This was obviously a very painful subject, and she wished she could tell him it didn't matter, but it did. She needed to know what drove him so she could understand him better.

He took a deep breath. "Mom and dad arranged a marriage for him to some debu-vamp who was related to the area's coven master. She was a timid little thing and wouldn't have caused her mate any problems, but Bernard only wanted his Ryan. Ryan was a jazz entertainer, a human who'd fallen in love with Bernard without knowing what he was. When Bernard told our parents he wouldn't marry anyone because he was going to live with his male lover, our father kidnapped Ryan and had him killed.

"I'll never forget that night, Ruby. We were sitting in the study, having another family discussion about Bernard's marriage. Mom and Dad were frothing at the mouth, but Bernard refused to give in. I was so proud of him. Uri was too. Then, one of Dad's guards walks in with this dead human in his arms. It was Ryan. The guard threw Ryan at Bernard's feet and, oh God, the pain on his face." He was whispering now, his voice barely audible over the sounds of the camp's festivities. "Bernard just stopped living. He wouldn't eat no matter how willing the donors were or how hungry he got, he refused to eat. Then, one day he stepped out of the house during daylight and let himself burn to death."

Ruby's heart was in her throat. The pain in his voice was evident and Ruby knew if she looked at his face, she'd see every pain etched upon his face. Instead of looking at him, she wrapped her arms around him, giving him her unconditional support. He'd suffered so much. The death of his brother, his parents' betrayal, the loss of a brother he hadn't even known was his.

"After that, I decided I was going to make it my purpose in life to make sure everyone has a voice. If Bernard would have had somewhere else to go other than home, he and Ryan might've had a chance. As it is, the way the houses are set up, the house is everything. If you're cast out, you have nowhere to go. I want to change that, so I sent myself to the Guardian Guild for training and, once I was finished there, began campaigning for a spot on Council."

Ruby nodded against his side, finally understanding. He was protective because he hadn't protected his brother. He was never going to change because that's what made him the person he was. Could she give in to him and let him protect her against her better judgment?

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Lucian mentally kicked himself. What a way to ruin a perfectly good afterglow, he snarled in his head. He hadn't expected to expose so much of his soul to her, but in the quiet of the bed, with his heart so full of love for her, he'd given her the power to unman him. He'd wasted so much time with her, he thought with a groan.

When she'd asked him if he had feelings for her several days ago, it had caught him so off guard he'd been simply too stunned to answer. Then, her temper set in, which meant she'd never hear a word he said. They were like fuel and fire when they were both trying to get their way, but he believed she'd see things his way if he could impress upon her the danger of her position in the Veil.

But not now, he told himself as he gently rolled her onto her back. Right now, his hunger for her refused to fade.

He kissed her, trying to show her how he felt, his heart pounding like a bass drum when she kissed him back so sweetly. God, this woman would drive him mad, but he'd go gladly.

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When Ruby woke the next morning, it was to find herself in bed with Lucian. They'd made love so many times during the night her body was feeling a bit raw and more than a little lazy.

Sprawled there with him draped over her like an overheated blanket, Ruby finally admitted the depth of her love for this male. She would give her life for him, she thought fiercely, hugging him close as he slept. He may never return her feelings, but he couldn't fake his desire for her and his honor would demand he remain at her side protecting her from all he believed would harm her.

She winced. She didn't want his damned honor. She wanted his love. She wanted him to love her as fiercely as she loved him, willing to give up everything for her as she'd given up her freedom when he asked it of her, but she had a feeling that would never happen. Lucian's honor and strong sense of duty were so ingrained he'd never willingly toss them aside, even for his mate.

Not only that, she thought grimly, but she had a feeling he was going to try to lock her away again. Oh, maybe not in a luxurious Council room, but he'd stash her away somewhere and make it impossible for her to fulfill her destiny. That thought made her slip out of bed, careful not to disturb him.

As she quickly dressed in a spare set of leathers, Ruby stared at him, basking in the sight of his naked body spread out over her bed. The blood he'd taken from her had given him back his color and peace, his face completely relaxed in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Ruby watched the vampire she loved, wishing he could give her the heart he so closely guarded.

When she heard the camp beginning to awaken, she took a deep, fortifying breath. She had to do this. Pride and honor demanded she take action against the one who wanted her dead. Duty and destiny urged her to take this final step towards her future, whatever that might be. With one fleeting press of her lips against Lucian's, Ruby left the tent.

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Chapter Thirty

It had been laughably easy for Ruby to set up the duel with Bianca. The witch had been waiting for Ruby to contact her. She seemed so pleased with the duel it was almost as though Bianca had planned everything from start to finish.

The guidelines for the duel were worked out between Ocean and one of Bianca's seconds. They agreed to meet in the middle so neither had home field advantage and they'd worked out the agreement that if Ruby won the duel, she would no longer be hunted by Council. If Bianca won, Ruby would submit to Council punishment. Of course, they all knew if Bianca won, Ruby was dead.

It was something none of them openly discussed. Ruby knew Bianca wouldn't let her walk away from the field if she won. Ruby wasn't too sure she could return the favor to Bianca, but conceded it was something to think upon when the time came.

It hadn't been easy for Ruby, Ocean, Bretina, and Sheena to get away from the camp. Though Lucian was still asleep, Malachi had been on the lookout and made his displeasure at seeing her prepping to leave, very clear. Ruby had a feeling if Albreda's guard hadn't appeared, Malachi might've attempted to truss her up and carry her back to bed with Lucian. The last she'd seen of the Eturian leader he'd been imprisoned inside a Watching Wall—this one showing a cell—and though he'd glared at his captors, he hadn't attempted to harm them. Something told Ruby his days of being the plague of the Veil were nearly over.

Mangus hadn't been happy about their leaving either but had understood. He'd pointed out they were going to be in a world of trouble when dusk came because Pagan had intended to take part in the duel as a second, and Mortimer had wanted to give Ruby lastminute instructions on the potions before the fight. Ruby was glad they'd left when they did because she was already feeling nervous enough having her grandmother and aunt with her. To have a full entourage would've distracted her too much.

It was nearly ten in the morning before they left camp. Sheena drove while Ocean and Bretina gave Ruby last-minute pointers on the fight until she begged them to leave her alone with her thoughts.

Not that her thoughts were in any way calming. She went over the night before with Lucian, reliving every caress and kiss. She loved the stubborn vampire to pieces. He was the one for her even though he was the most overbearing, arrogant, and protective male she'd ever met. His past hurts had shaped him into the man he was, and she couldn't deny that his flaws made him lovable.

She sighed, looking out at the passing scenery. Lucian would never be malleable or passive and neither would she. If they couldn't work out this problem he had with her being her own person, they would have frequent explosive arguments. But the make-ups would be sweet, she thought.

The biggest obstacle was Lucian's position on Council. He deserved his seat and was the best candidate for it, but his position would require her to be locked away. Ruby didn't fool herself. She knew she could probably survive being confined by Council, but this would slowly kill the love she felt for Lucian, knowing he was her prison guard.

The best thing would be to break things off completely. She'd tried it once before and, though she hadn't been happy, she'd survived. She could do it again on a permanent basis. She had to. Wasn't there some proverb about loving something and setting it free? Living in a constant state of unrequited love was hell on earth, but living as a prisoner would kill her. There was no happy medium unless Lucian suddenly changed his ways, which was impossible,

considering he was over two hundred years old and stubborn as all Hell.

"What do you plan to do about the Oculum-se?" Bretina's quiet voice spoke next to her.

Ruby jumped a bit, having forgotten the others were in the car with her. She turned to see Ocean and Bretina watching her with careful concern. Her heart ached and she smiled at them, though she knew it was sad and not in the least bit reassuring. "I'm going to let him go."

Ocean nibbled on her bottom lip and turned to look out the windshield. "It is possible to have both worlds, Ruby." She turned back, her face glowing. "Did you know that I'm married?" Ruby shook her head. "Yes, I married a werewolf about fifteen years ago. He can't live with us because he's an Alpha, and I can't live with him because I'm one of the Queen's bodyguards, but we see each other as often as we can, and each time is sweeter than the last." Her face softened, showing a beautiful woman in the prime of her life. "My husband knows I can't live among his people as I know he can't live among mine, but we love each other enough to compromise, to...rest, I guess you could say, in each other's world. It works for us. This is possible for you and Lucian."

Though she smiled at the beatific expression on Ocean's face, Ruby shook her head. "Lucian doesn't love me. He wants to own me mind, body, and soul. There will be no compromise, even if I were willing. No, I'll let him go and, eventually, we'll forget this whole farce ever happened."

The other three women wisely refrained from laughing, though Ruby detected humor in Bretina's face. "Why don't you decide where you want to go and we'll arrange round the clock protection for you?" she asked Ruby calmly.

Ruby whipped her head around. "I can't live with you?" she asked in shock. "Of course you could, Ruby, but if you're determined to shoulder your duties, you will need to be somewhere centralized and available to the people of the Veil."

"Oh," Ruby murmured softly, frowning into space. She hadn't realized that, she thought with dismay. Would fulfilling her destiny mean she had to say good-bye to her family too?

Bretina patted her hand soothingly. "One of us will count among the guards except for Albreda. There's no need to feel abandoned, child."

Blushing, Ruby squeezed Bretina's hand, keeping hold of it as they sped north. If she couldn't have Lucian, then she would make herself content to have some of her family around and the powers she'd been gifted with because she knew Lucian would never compromise on his principles.

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The chosen spot for the duel was in a secluded wood north of St. Francisville. Nestled in the Tunica Hills, the duel site was a small clearing with a ravine on one side and hills on the other.

When they arrived, it was a little past three and Ruby wanted to be on her way before dusk. She'd need to put serious distance between Lucian and herself so she could think about her options.

Ocean and Bretina made Ruby change into a new pair of leather pants even though Ruby insisted she wasn't going to a fashion show, just probably her death.

Her levity wasn't appreciated, and she got a few cuffs from them, but finally let them lace her into the pants and felt awed by what she saw. They were black, of course, but up one leg was a familiar pattern of curves and swirls in the same colors of her tattoos.

Bretina beamed at Ruby. "We stayed up late last night embroidering these for you. You've brought joy and honor to us, Ruby," she stated, wrapping her strong arms around her granddaughter.

Ocean hugged both of them, and they stayed like that for several minutes before Sheena delicately cleared her throat. When they looked, Bianca and her entourage had arrived.

With her shoulders back and chin held high, Ruby approached the Oculum, determined to conduct herself with the dignity and strength her family believed she had.

"Oculum," Ruby acknowledged Bianca with an inclined head. Today Bianca was dressed in leather as well, though hers was more revealing. Her perfect body was displayed to its best advantage, and her short hair was slicked back with gel.

"Chieftain, how lovely to see you again," she purred, her eyes flicking over Ruby with disdain. "I see you found some overgrown carpet munchers to befriend."

The men in Bianca's group laughed uproariously, and Ruby spared them a single glance, taking them in. Two of them were most likely mages since she couldn't detect anything obvious in their appearances to suggest otherwise. The man who approached the dueling circle with Bianca had to be a giant.

He was well over seven feet tall with greasy blonde hair and a brutish face. He studied Ruby cautiously and hovered over Bianca protectively. *He's in love with her*, Ruby realized with surprise. She wouldn't have expected Bianca to inspire anything but lust in people, but this giant obviously felt otherwise.

"Childish, Bianca, but I'm not really surprised that your IQ hasn't surpassed your height," Ruby answered Bianca's taunt with one of her own. "Maybe one day you'll grow up big and strong too," she said in a sickeningly sweet voice.

Seething, her eyes blazing with hatred, Bianca uncoiled the whip she held in her hand. "You're going to pay for that, you stupid bitch." Having taken her potion an exact hour before the meeting, Ruby was as ready as she'd ever be. Uncoiling her own whip, which had been wrapped around her waist, Ruby took a fighting stance.

Bianca was predictable, throwing out a spell almost immediately. Ruby managed to withstand it and snapped out the whip, catching Bianca on the arm. The witch's eyes widened in alarm and shock, and then narrowed with determination.

Their whips snaked back and forth across the circle, snarls and cracks the only sounds other than Bianca's continued muttering. She cast spell after spell, never seeming to require a rest between castings, and Ruby's body soon felt the magical damage. Ruby was wearing down faster than Mangus and Sheena had predicted. Neither of them seemed to have guessed Bianca had seemingly endless reservoirs of power because they hadn't prepped her for this.

One particular spell caught Ruby by surprise, blinding her momentarily, which Bianca took immediate advantage of by lashing at her and catching her on the thigh. The pain was immediate and Ruby hissed. She couldn't take time to grab at the wound, though, instead snapping her own wrist and striking Bianca across her torso.

Sweat trickled down Ruby's face, the salty fluid making the scrapes and cuts burn like fire. There was no chance to wipe away the droplets, no opportunity to catch her breath. Ruby fought purely on instinct.

Bianca screeched out another spell and, this time, Ruby flew back from the force of the incantation, her whip falling from her hand. She landed hard on the ground, the air knocked out of her lungs. Black dots danced before her eyes, and she felt the lash of the whip like fire across her chest. Gurgling out a cry of pain, Ruby's body stiffened in agony.

Squinting through tears, Ruby saw Bianca approach, flush with victory. She knew if Bianca got off another spell, it would finish her. She felt around for her whip.

Malevolent pleasure lit Bianca's face. "I'm going to kill you just like I did the other Chieftains, and you're going to give me your powers, bitch. I'll finally have what I've been waiting on for years," she hissed as she edged closer. "You can also kiss your friends goodbye because none of you are walking out of here alive."

Yes! She closed her hand around her whip. Praying she didn't miss her mark, Ruby snapped out her whip from her prone position. The leather struck true, wrapping around Bianca's throat, cutting off her air and spell.

Her eyes widening in shock and fear, Bianca dropped her whip, clawing at the one wrapped around her neck. Ruby struggled to her feet and used the whip to pull Bianca closer. Once she was within striking distance, Ruby laid Bianca out with a right hook. Eyes rolling to the back of her head, the petite witch sank to the ground. Ruby stood over her, her hands on her knees as she fought to catch her breath again.

Blood pounded in her ears, rushing by her eardrums so loudly she couldn't hear anything but the thud of her heart pounding. She lifted her head and squinted into the sunlight.

Sheena, Ocean, and Bretina were in combat with Bianca's seconds. The giant battled against Bretina like a madman, trying to reach the witch, while Sheena and Ocean easily defeated the other two.

In a matter of minutes, Bretina fell beneath a massive fist as the giant lurched towards Ruby and Bianca. Fear and fury rekindled Ruby's bloodlust. She went after the giant herself.

They met in the center of the clearing, and his hands latched around her throat as he roared, his spittle spraying over her face. Ruby twisted in his hold, letting gravity take her body down. When he adjusted his hands on her neck, Ruby punched him in the throat and kicked him in the groin with all her strength.

The giant fell to the ground with a loud crash, hands clutching his privates as he gagged and tried to breathe. Sheena rushed over to perform a binding spell on him before Ocean clocked him in the jaw hard enough to knock him out.

"That won't hold someone his size for long," she said as she wiped her hand over her forehead.

"Did you guys hear what Bianca said about the other Chieftains?" Ruby asked, still unable to wrap her mind around Bianca's insane boasting.

Ocean and Sheena nodded. "These guys weren't going to let us go either. The minute you two began fighting, the wizards start casting spells. This was a planned battle," Ocean said in disgust.

Bretina was slow to get up, but she dragged herself off the ground, her mouth bleeding and smiling. "I knew you could do it! We just had to put your ass through the ringer first."

Ruby chuckled tiredly, binding Bianca's wrists with a piece of rope and gagging her for good measure. "We need to get out of here. I want to drop her off to the other Councilors and start my new life."

Chapter Thirty-One

"Dammit! Wake up, Lucian!" a voice shouted from a distance.

Groaning and rolling over to pull Ruby back to his side, Lucian ignored the voice, only waking up when he realized Ruby wasn't in bed. Blinking his eyes open, Lucian looked at the empty pillow next to him.

Lucian jackknifed to his feet, momentarily ignoring Malachi. She was gone. Her boots were gone, and so were her clothes. The only thing remaining was her dog with its legs cocked out and crossed.

"Where is she?" Lucian rasped, fury and worry flooding his system. God help him, if she'd run away again he was going to paddle her ass.

Malachi looked ill at ease and looked away from Lucian's intense gaze. "She's dueling with Bianca," he said softly, his eyes rising to meet Lucian's again. "They left hours ago and haven't returned."

"What!" Lucian roared, his fangs springing forth with the intensity of his rage and terror. Instantly, images of Ruby torn apart or blinded by a spell as Bianca ripped her to shreds danced before his eyes. "Why didn't you come get me when they left?" he demanded from his brother, picking the shorter man up with one hand and lifting him off the ground.

Instant fury lit Malachi's face, and he hissed a spell that made Lucian cry out in pain and drop him. "Don't ever assume because I've decided to call you brother means you rule me, Lucian. I was imprisoned in a Watching Wall until just now; otherwise, I would have come to let you know that your hardheaded mate was leaving to fight the wicked bitch of the South." Malachi was growling by the time he finished, frustration lighting his face.

"They locked you up? Where's Fallon?" Lucian asked absently, taking a minute to look through the tent flap. It was still daylight, though dusk was approaching.

"The queen made him leave last night. Seems there's a taboo against incubi entering an Amazon camp and, yes, they locked me up! Three of those women grabbed me and tossed me through the Wall!" his brother answered indignantly.

"Three?" Lucian asked, beginning to plot how he was going to locate his woman and defeat Bianca. He couldn't believe the crazy Amazon thought she could take on a witch of Council powers by herself. He paced.

"Yeah," Malachi said huskily. His eyes were unfocused, and it was then Lucian noticed Malachi's clothes were wrinkled and his hair ruffled.

He stopped, somewhat in awe of his brother. If Ruby was anything to go by, Amazons had voracious sexual appetites. He'd lost count of how many times she'd managed to inflame him the night before. For his brother to have bedded three Amazons was simply...awesome. Lucian shook his head. He needed to concentrate on Ruby, not Malachi's apparent boundless sexual abilities. Although, Lucian thought, it wouldn't be bad to learn what his secret was.

"When's the duel?"

Malachi looked at his watch. "They left several hours ago. She went with Sheena, her grandmother, and one of her aunts. No one seems concerned and, in fact, they're out there preparing a shield and totem for the hall bearing Ruby's name and exploits." He laughed loudly. "I think there might even be a spot on them detailing her capture of a vampire male in his prime who is so enamored of Ruby Blue that he would enter an Amazon camp unarmed."

Lucian punched Malachi in the chest to hide the blush in his cheeks. "Shut up. Where's the duel? Wait, why is Ruby fighting a

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duel with Bianca?" he suddenly asked, his mind trying to work out how Ruby knew who the corrupt councilor was.

Malachi shrugged, shaking off Lucian's blow. "Not sure exactly, but I think Bianca confronted the Chieftain when she was imprisoned and began bragging. Bianca isn't always the brightest bulb in the pack, you know."

Ruby had known Bianca was planning to kill her, and she'd formed a preemptive strike by calling the Oculum out in a duel. It was a brilliant move, he grudgingly decided. If Ruby could defeat Bianca, then she would clean up a mess most of Council hadn't realized existed. But Lucian was more concerned with what would happen if Ruby lost. Bianca was determined to take Ruby's powers and the only way to do that was to kill her.

His hands clenched in frustrated fear. He needed to find his mate.

"Where's the duel?"

"Somewhere in the Tunica Hills," Malachi said absently as he pulled open his shirt and looked at his chest.

He was covered in bite and fingernail marks. Lucian couldn't help the chortle that escaped as it helped release some of his anger and frustration.

Malachi blushed and hurriedly closed his shirt. "Does your mate, you know..." he trailed off.

Lucian pulled the hair away from his neck, showing Malachi the heavy bruising around a perfect set of his mate's teeth. "What can I say? My mate thinks I'm delicious."

They both laughed, though neither of them could shake the feeling that they might've missed out on something important.

Just then, Lucian's phone suddenly blared "Highway to Hell" and he picked up, knowing it was Nila. "What happened?" he barked into the cell as he hurriedly threw on his clothes.

The demon sniffed. "We just had a phone call from the Chieftain. She said she bagged some baddies and wants to give them to us since she doesn't have room on her trophy wall for all the heads. What does that mean?"

Lucian sank onto the bed, his body depleted of strength. Malachi hurried forward, his face going white until Lucian waved his hand reassuringly. God, she'd lived. His mate had taken on the Oculum all by herself and was trying to dump her burden off to Council.

"I meant to call one of you guys yesterday, but time, uh, got away from me," Lucian admitted sheepishly, thinking about just how time had gotten away from him. His life-mate had taken care of her own problem without interference from him.

Something began to creep into his mind then. Doubt. Doubt that he was strong enough to take care of her. Doubt that she needed him as much as he needed her. She'd climbed from their bed strong enough to fight Bianca and defeat her while he slept like a baby. Nausea churned in his stomach. His mate didn't need him. She was her own woman and always had been. He'd simply been too blind to see it.

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Malachi took the phone from Lucian, noting his pale face and stunned expression. Putting it to his ear, he calmly explained the situation to Nila. Something was wrong with Lucian, and he wanted to get off the phone to find out what it was.

"I cannot believe you two went off without first clearing it with us!" Nila was screeching at him, her fury just as potent as it'd been when they were cadets at the Guild Academy. She'd had a chip on her shoulder since day one, and it looked like that hadn't changed. "And you," she continued scathingly. "You're his brother? I'm calling the other councilors to let them know about the Oculum's activities and I expect you both to be there when she's presented. We'll send a portal."

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"Nila," Malachi began soothingly only to hear the phone click. Well, that hadn't gone as well he could've hoped. She was probably still pissed about him scoring higher than her on the Demonology Defense final, not to mention his little stint as the Eturian general.

He turned to his brother, who sat staring into space, his expression dead. "Lucian, what happened?" he asked as gently as he could. Gah, he thought disgustedly, who would've ever thought he even knew how to be gentle?

Lucian's eyes flickered briefly as they met his own. "She doesn't need me, Malachi. She's never needed me, and now that the real threat against her is over, she'll leave me."

Malachi ran a hand over his face, sighing tiredly. "She isn't like most of the women in your circle, Lucian. She's an Amazon Chieftain. She was born to be independent, but that doesn't mean she doesn't care about you." He felt like such a sap talking about feelings and stuff, but he couldn't bear the hurt on his brother's face.

"You don't understand, Malachi. Since the minute we met, I've been trying to prove to her I'm her only hope of navigating the Veil, and she kept telling me she could do it alone," he said letting out a bitter laugh. "I was fooling myself, brother. She did it on her own, and I wasn't there to protect her."

"Shit," Malachi breathed, clicking his teeth together in annoyance. "You can't be everyone's protector, Lucian. I know you feel guilty about Bernard. Hell, I feel guilty about Bernard, but nothing we do is going to change what happened. All that should matter now is that your woman managed to fight her own battle and win."

Lucian nodded, his face set in tight lines. Malachi had a feeling what he'd said hadn't made a damn bit of difference. He let out a frustrated sigh. Being a big brother was more of a pain in the ass than he'd thought it would be.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ruby hauled Bianca's body through the front doors of Veiled Art and Emporium while Ocean, Bretina, and Sheena grappled with the captured warmages. The giant had gotten away from them while they were hauling the others off. They hadn't stuck around to look for him, wanting to unload their unhappy prisoners on Council as soon as possible. They'd taken a jet from Baton Rouge to an airstrip in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Summer was summer everywhere else, but here it was Heaven on Earth. The humidity was negligible, and it was a balmy seventysomething. It was so completely unlike home that Ruby was stunned. A month ago she'd feared going up her driveway to get her mail, and she'd just flown hundreds of miles to meet with Council, but this time in a position of power.

They no longer had anything to hold over her head. On the flight up on the plush private plane the Blood Maidens kept ready, Ruby had talked at length with Bretina and Ocean about her options. She didn't want to move out of south Louisiana and wasn't even sure she wanted to live in one of Julius' houses, but on the other hand, she feared staying close to home meant her chances of seeing Lucian again were higher.

She hadn't talked about him with the others, but she knew they were aware of her agony of decisions. Ruby was downright nauseated at the thought of running into Lucian with another woman. On the other hand, she couldn't imagine being away from the Blood Maiden tribe. They'd quickly become her family and, throughout the flight, she'd received numerous texts on the cell Ocean had given her. Women she didn't even know, hadn't formally met, shot her texts with felicitations and urgings to return back to camp and regale them all with a blow-by-blow of the fight.

Their support lifted her spirits. Then had come the text from Kali asking her if she had made her decision, as the tea leaves weren't giving her a clear answer and she really wanted to meet up for dinner one night. Everyone wanted to know what her next move would be and she had no clue.

Veiled Art and Emporium was located above an empty storefront on Main Street. Going up the stairs would've been easier without having to lug a kicking and snarling witch, but Ruby managed by slinging the woman over her shoulder and bounding up the stairs. Ruby made sure she jostled Bianca frequently. Bretina, Ocean, and Sheena brought up the rear, their voices bouncing off the stairwell excitedly as they fought with their own prisoners.

The art store was a perfect cover for eccentric people, and Ruby couldn't deny stepping into the hallowed halls of the Council's most secret meeting place intimidated her. The ceramic tiled floors were pale grey. The walls were an even lighter grey from which color exploded in the form of paintings. Ruby wasn't much of an art connoisseur, but the paintings were riveting. Her eyes danced from one frame to the next, and each time the colors were more vibrant and spoke to something deep inside her.

One painting in particular caught her attention. Dumping Bianca on the floor, she stepped forward to take a closer look. On a field of white, two living flames arched towards each other. One was orange and deepest red, and the other was blue and emerald green. They appeared to gravitate towards each other, caught in a mating dance. Smooth sweeps of the brush had given the red and orange flame a woman's face while the other had a strong masculine face buried in the tongues of flame.

"You like it?" a male voice said from somewhere above them.

Ruby looked up for the first time noticing there was a loft above the gallery. The blue man, Fields, stood at the railing looking down at her. She nodded dumbly.

"I'll give you a price later, but first I think you have something that belongs to us?" he asked, his voice laced with amusement and anger.

"Right," Ruby muttered, hauling Bianca to her feet.

She dragged the Oculum to the stairs and led her to the loft. The stairs were more difficult to manage with Bianca on her own feet since the witch kept kicking out with her wicked heels.

"So help me, Bianca, if you kick me one more time, I'm going to bitch slap you into tomorrow!" Ruby snarled, throwing her the rest of the way up the stairs.

Her grandmother and aunt made *tsking* sounds then cracked up laughing. Ruby glared at them before sticking her tongue out. This had been one helluva a day, but she wouldn't have traded it for anything.

Once in the loft, Ruby quickly took a step back. Lucian was seated at a long table set in front of the window. It was after dark, so she shouldn't have been surprised to see him, and she wasn't. It was the lack of expression on his face as he looked at her that stunned her. He looked completely shut off from her, like he didn't know who she was.

Even though she'd decided this might be the best way to handle things, Ruby felt heartsick. He obviously didn't care for her because as soon as he acknowledged her and her entourage's presence, he turned away to talk with Nila.

Lounging against the window was Malachi, and he looked a little happier to see her than Lucian had. He gave her a quick wave before affecting the same bored look Lucian had. No one seemed uneasy to have Malachi in attendance, which made Ruby wonder what had happened while she was fighting for her life. Tawny, Bree, and Nila were already seated at the table with Lucian. Fields quickly took his seat at the right of Lucian and they all turned their gazes to Ruby in unison.

Bianca had fallen to the floor and was blubbering pathetically. Ruby felt a twinge of pity for the witch even though she hardened her heart. The witch would've killed her without a second thought, so she shouldn't feel sorry for her.

"Chieftain, what grievance do you bring before Council?" Fields asked formally.

Ruby took a quick look around the room, finally taking note of the guards posted in the corners and a few people seated in the shadows. She suspected they were witnesses to all Council proceedings, and one of them had a scroll and quill in their hands, writing feverishly.

"While I was a...guest of Council," Ruby began, hesitating slightly over the circumstances of her incarceration. Ocean let out a strangled chuckle which earned her a glare from Ruby. "When I was with Council last time, the Oculum hinted that I was to be killed. I've had frequent visions of Chieftain Julius' last few years and have heard several conversations he had with Oculum Bianca. He knew she was planning to take over the Council and the Veil. He also knew Lucian Ravenswaay was the rightful Oculum, not Bianca."

Bianca had begun to screech behind her gag, her eyes glittering with hatred.

"I challenged her to a duel with the terms set for my freedom if I won, and returning to Council hands if I lost. During the course of the duel, it was discovered she was planning to kill me and my seconds just like she had the other Chieftains," Ruby stated boldly, not letting her eyes rest on Lucian for a single second. She could feel Lucian looking at her, though it wasn't the heat of desire she felt, but cool indifference. She mourned the heat that had burned between them, but this was for the best, she reminded herself. "I don't know how many of the others she killed, but she stated it before witnesses. We also managed to capture two of her seconds, who acted dishonorably by attacking my seconds during the duel."

Stepping back, away from the table and Lucian, Ruby allowed Ocean, Sheena, and Bretina to step forward and give their accounting of the duel. Ruby paid no attention to the rest of the proceedings.

She watched Lucian from the shadows as he asked questions. He was in his element, she thought wistfully. His intelligence was displayed to its best advantage among the other Councilors. They worked well together, with Lucian and Nila leading the questioning, Tawny and Bree asking for minute details and Fields for clarifications. They were a cohesive unit, all determined to get to the bottom of Bianca's treachery.

Malachi watched them as well, his eyes guarded until they lingered on Lucian. His eyes held affection and respect as he looked at his brother. Yes, Ruby thought with an inward sigh, this was where Lucian was meant to be. Not at her side watching her lead a full life as a Chieftain. She really did have to let him go. Her throat closed on the revelation.

"Very well," Fields said suddenly, drawing Ruby's attention. He motioned to a couple of the guards who came forward to lift Bianca to her feet. "You'll understand if we don't remove your gag, Bianca. We wouldn't want any of your spells getting away from you before you've had a chance to think about the ramifications." He stood as did the other Councilors. "You are hereby sentenced to banishment from the Veil. You will be confined to the Halls of Silence until the end of your days. Councilors, do you agree?"

"Aye," they all said in unison. A shimmering oval appeared in the room, swirling with color. The guards ushered a squirming Bianca through the oval which snapped shut just as soon as they were through.

Ruby blinked. So that was what a portal looked like, she thought hazily.

"Well, that was exciting," Bree said with a wry smile to Ruby, releasing the tense silence that had fallen over the room.

Everyone milled around, several of the shadowy witnesses stepping forward to meet the newest addition to the Veil and the person who'd managed to thwart Bianca's plan. Ruby was beset by vampires, werewolves, demons, and fairies. One being, a tall man with the most melodious and seductive voice she'd ever heard, identified himself as a male siren, or crooner, and asked her to dinner.

Lucian came nowhere near her and, within minutes of Bianca's imprisonment, he was gone without a single word. So that was it, she thought despondently.

She smiled at the well-wishers, turned down the crooner, pleading a headache so she could make an early escape.

Fields stopped her at the door. "You were interested in the painting?" he asked, motioning her over to the frame.

Ruby felt the same sense of rightness upon looking at it. For some reason, she hurt less viewing the painting, and she decided right then and there she had to buy it.

"How much?" she asked wondering if she had enough money in her many accounts to cover the cost.

He shook his head, his hair blowing in the otherworldly wind that followed him around. "No cost for you. You've done us all a service, Chieftain. One we'll never be able to repay, especially after the way we went after you. I hope you'll look upon us more favorably in the future."

Ruby smiled slightly, liking the blue man regardless of his part in her troubles. "You were doing your job, right? It isn't like you had a personal grudge against me. I mean, Bianca's been herding the Chieftains towards extinction for centuries, and you guys did what you thought was best for me. I can't blame you."

"Do you blame Lucian?" he asked softly, his eyes intent on her face.

Ruby felt her face pale. "No. I know he was just doing his duty."

"It won't be an easy road for him," Fields continued turning to study the painting that had enthralled her upon entering the building. "He has to prove to the entire Veil that he isn't like Bianca even though most won't think he is. It's going to be tough in the next few months."

Ruby just nodded, not sure what Fields wanted her to say. That she was sorry for Lucian? She couldn't be sorry for him. He finally had the Council seat he'd been working towards for years. If Veilerians did believe he was like Bianca, she knew he was strong enough to withstand it.

"I have a feeling things are going to change in the Veil, Chieftain," he said, turning towards her with a gentle smile. "I hope for the best."

Ruby managed a tight smile. "So do I, Councilor, so do I."

They spoke for a few more minutes, arranging for Ruby's painting to be forwarded to Julius' house on the outskirts of Opelousas, Louisiana. Once she got away from Fields, she had to maneuver her way through the rest of the overexcited crowd. She made vague promises to attend gatherings and dinners, though she barely paid attention to what was asked of her, simply nodding and smiling as she fought her way to the door.

Once outside in the cool twilight air, Ruby slumped against the building, one hand braced over the ache in her chest. Lucian was gone for good this time, she knew. No matter the sweetness of their last coupling, he'd just walked away acting like nothing had happened between them. The rip in her heart might never heal, but it would lessen over time. She hoped.

"Hey, babe, you okay?" a voice said, startling Ruby so badly, she yelped. Some big, bad Amazon she was, she thought in disgust.

Malachi grinned impishly, and Ruby couldn't help but think back to the first time she'd seen him. "You always manage to startle me, Cromwell." He buffed his nails on his shirt. "It's a talent. So, are you okay?" he asked again, more intently this time, his eyes searching hers for something.

She shrugged. "As well as can be expected considering I fought a duel today, caught a bad guy, and just got the brush-off from the man I thought was my mate." She bared her teeth in a grimacing grin. "All in a day's work for the Chieftain."

"Give him time, Rube. He'll come around. You just took him by surprise. You took us all by surprise, if you want to know the truth. I've never seen so many quaking knees since the time I raided an Angel Sanctuary when I first joined the Eturi." He chuckled darkly, and Ruby couldn't help but join in. He really was a charming man in a dark and sort of evil way. "So, what's doin' now?"

She shrugged, rubbing her forehead at the onset of a headache. "Guess I'll find somewhere to live and open shop. I also need to find an apprentice or ten, I guess." She really wasn't sure what she was going to do, but it at least sounded like a plan. Maybe she could forget Lucian and concentrate on training.

"Well, you just give me a call if you want a shoulder to cry on," he said with a wink. He handed her a business card and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Don't be a stranger, Chieftain. I have a feeling you'll need a shoulder more often than you think."

With that cryptic remark, he disappeared into the night. Shortly after, her entourage finally caught up with her. There were excited hugs all around as they celebrated Ruby's official release from Council.

"Let's go back and celebrate with the tribe, Ruby," Bretina said gently her hand cupping Ruby's cheek. "We'll help you decide where to go from here in the morning."

Ruby just nodded and gave a tired smile. "That sounds like a plan."

The four women piled into an expensive sedan and sped into the night without seeing the vampire who stood in the deepest shadows watching the woman he loved and cursing his own cowardice in not approaching her. She didn't appear to be mourning him too much, he thought acridly. Maybe this aching hole in his chest was just vanity raising its ugly head because a woman could actually walk away from him. Rubbing the spot with a shaking hand, Lucian knew he was lying to himself.

* * * *

In the Blood Maiden camp, bonfires lit the night sky as hundreds of Amazons celebrated the ascension of their own to the exalted office of Lineage Chieftain. Toasts were made in her honor, and more than one infatuated male recited poems to her beauty and bravery.

Ruby just laughed at the ridiculousness of such virile men trying to impress her. She didn't drink because her stomach wasn't feeling up to it, but she did eat more than usual. Depression was a bitch, she thought with a false smile at Izzy. Even surrounded by the excitement and ribaldry of the party thrown in her honor, she was lonely and despondent.

She wanted Lucian to compose bad poetry about the color of her hair. She wanted him to be the one to jump up to refill her glass of water and offer her the choicest pieces of roasted pig. Ruby sighed and finally sat back, her stomach full and her heart laden. She just wanted her mate.

"Hey, little one," Albreda said coming to sit next to her. "Having fun?"

Ruby forced another smile making Albreda laugh, hugging her niece to her fiercely. "You're missing your man."

Not even bothering to protest, Ruby sighed deeply, her face drawn with sadness. This really sucked, she thought as she watched a Centaur male arm wrestling Saga. Studying her for several long minutes, Albreda finally whispered, "Why don't you go to him, Ruby? You obviously love him. You'll work something out."

Hope, which had become a damned annoying emotion, once again sparked in her soul. Why hadn't she just said to hell with it all and gone after him? She loved him, and even though he hadn't shown much emotion at the Council meeting, she was a fighter. She could fight for his love. She would fight for his love.

"Find out where he is," Ruby ordered the queen, who just laughed and pulled out her cell phone.

"Pagan? Hey, girl, do you know where Lucian is?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

"You're an idiot," Pagan muttered, glaring at Lucian over her mug of beer. Sometimes a man needed a severe kick in the ass to get him to realize anything. She'd learned from Tawny and Bree that Lucian had not only refused to talk to Ruby when she appeared before Council, but had also made no attempt to assure her of his affections. She wanted to kick his fanged ass from one end of Bourbon Street to the other.

"Shut up, Pagan. I don't want to hear it," he snapped back at her, his fangs springing forth in a snarl.

He'd changed so much since Ruby had come into his life. At first Pagan had thought it couldn't be worth it, the uncertainty, the fear, but he'd sounded so in tune with Ruby she'd known he loved the Amazon. Learning Ruby was, in fact, the Blood Maiden Tribe's Lost Child, she'd feared Lucian was setting himself up for heartbreak. But Ruby had changed Pagan's mind. The woman was head over heels in love with him and would make him a strong life-mate.

But Lucian acted as though he had no more consideration for Ruby than he would for any other Chieftain. In fact, he was eyeing a woman at the bar.

Pagan stiffened. He wouldn't. He did. He left her sitting at the table and approached the woman while Pagan watched him with a disbelieving face. He leaned over to whisper in the human's ear, but it didn't take a genius to figure out they were leaving together.

The minute they disappeared from view, Pagan was on her feet, glowering after him. How could he do this to himself? Oh gods! How

could he do this to Ruby? Ruby, who loved him so desperately she'd turned herself in to Council even though it meant her freedom!

Feeling sick with the knowledge that her friend was no longer the man she'd thought him to be, Pagan left the bar.

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Lucian leaned against the alley wall and pondered the human woman standing before him. He'd come out here expressly to erase Pagan's disapproval from his mind and attempt to forget Ruby. The human woman was beautiful and mere weeks ago, he'd have been all over her, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't seem to make his body respond to her. She looked at him with hungry anticipation that he wasn't going to appease. He sighed deeply and pulled her towards him to take her vein.

Her ensuing pleasure was easily forgotten as Lucian grimaced at the bland taste of her blood. Ruby tasted like spiced wine, her blood sweeping through his mouth like sunshine. The human moaned loudly, reaching orgasm as Lucian finished feeding. He gently eased her back through the door of The Pit and readjusted his clothing.

A whisper of sound met his ears as he walked towards the street. There, at the mouth of the alley was a figure that stopped him dead in his tracks.

Impossible, his numb mind thought. She was supposed to be with her family in godsforsaken Vermilion Parish, not in New Orleans, and definitely not in the alley he'd attempted to cheat on her in. There was no way the Fates would be so cruel, he thought in anguish, but there she was. His Ruby.

He saw she was wearing leather breeches that hugged her full hips and long legs, her torso covered in a scarlet tunic belted at her waist by the whip she'd defeated Bianca with. He'd heard about the fight at least a dozen times tonight, and his arms ached to hold her and kiss every spot Bianca's whip had touched. Her hair shone with health in the dim light of the alley. Lucian took his time taking stock of her, noting there seemed to be something different about her, but unwilling to dwell on it while she was looking at him as though he'd betrayed her. Again.

"Ruby," he said, starting towards her, stopping when he got a good look at her face. The affection was gone, he thought in shock. The light that usually burned in her black eyes had never failed to make him feel ten feet tall, but now the precious look was gone. Instead, he saw pure hate blazing at him from his mate. His mate! He'd shamed his mate in the worst way imaginable. His throat closed up, and his eyes burned ominously.

"Ruby, please, let me explain," he stammered, stumbling towards her, his hand lifting. If he could just touch her, she'd realize he was a fool who needed one more chance to make it up to her. She'd see he needed her like no other, that the human woman had been nothing more than an experiment. She'd forgive him.

"Keep your hands to yourself, vampire," she hissed coldly.

Lucian stopped abruptly. She swept her gaze over him, and Lucian felt a burn of shame creep up his cheeks. Had it been last night he'd held her in his arms and loved her all night long? He felt filthy. Not just from his betrayal, but from knowing she deserved so much better than him.

"I don't know why I came here, Lucian, but I'm glad I did." She raised her hand in quiet dignity before he could speak, her face never giving him a glimpse of a single emotion except disgust. "I guess I thought we should clear the air, maybe see if we could work something out." She laughed harshly before visibly pulling herself together. "Anyway, my door will always be open to Council." She stressed the word, clearly stating he was not welcome unless it was in the formal capacity.

She turned away from him and Lucian couldn't help the stumbling step he took towards her. "Ruby, wait. Let me explain what happened. I-"

Ruby swung around with an ugly laugh. "Don't you get it yet, Lucian? I don't need you anymore, and you never needed me. Now it's over for good. You don't have to feel guilty about me anymore. It was an experience, that's for sure." She laughed again, though there wasn't any amusement in her voice.

"But, Ruby, how did you find me?" Lucian asked when he could finally find his voice. Unfortunately, by the look on Ruby's face, his tone suggested he wasn't glad to see her when that wasn't the truth.

Lucian couldn't describe the feelings he was experiencing. All he knew was, the minute he'd seen her, his entire body felt as though it were lit by a million candles. He cursed his drunken decision to step out with the human woman, knowing his mate had seen him at his worst He stubbornly refused to believe her words. She loved him, he knew that. He'd known that when he let her be taken away by the Council, but his sense of honor demanded he put the Veil's needs before his own. Now, he knew he couldn't live without her.

When he'd informed his fellow Councilors he wasn't going to pursue Ruby any longer, the other Councilors acted as though he'd committed high treason, which, in a way, he had. Lucian knew, as well as every other Veilerian, mates were a precious gift from the Gods. Nearly every mating resulted in a love match that lasted through time. Lucian had seen the devotion of mates and envied them, and then he had turned his back on his own. Council was concerned not only because of his less than honorable treatment of Ruby, but in her they saw a powerful political ally. With her powers, she could make or break the Veil and, as a Councilor, Lucian had put that alliance at risk.

Ruby sneered at him, the expression alien on her kind face. "I was coming to find you," she said disgustedly.

Lucian closed his eyes and slumped against the brick wall behind him. "It isn't what you think, Ruby," he began softly.

"That's funny, Lucian. It looked like you were about to fuck a bimbo in a dirty alley and since the evidence speaks for itself," she cut in, her glance falling to his mouth where Lucian could feel the human woman's blood trickling down his chin, "don't waste my time. I really don't care anymore. Live your life like you want; just don't bother lying to me."

Feeling another flush work its way up his neck, Lucian wiped his chin, straightened his shirt, and began again. "I couldn't—it wasn't…it didn't happen," he stammered awkwardly. Inwardly, he cursed. He was known for his glib tongue, but in the presence of his cold, hardened mate, he was as lost as a schoolboy. The guilt of his transgression weighed heavily on him and that guilt worked to make him angry. "It was nothing!" he suddenly shouted. "She was nothing!"

"Then I feel sorry for you, Lucian," she shot back, her voice laden with pity. "I know you never felt anything more for me than lust, but at least I can honestly say I didn't use anyone. I genuinely cared for you," she continued, her voice growing softer, warmer. "I wanted you to be happy. Part of me still does, but you—you only live for your position. I pity you, Lucian. But not enough to let you hurt me again."

She turned around and walked away. Lucian followed her at a distance, unable to let her out of his sight. On the edge of the street, four equally tall and lethal women stepped up next to her. Her personal guard, he realized.

She moved easily through the crowd on Bourbon Street, no longer reeling from strange, impersonal touches. She'd conquered her fear. She was a strong woman who walked with her head high as she sailed through the crowds that parted as soon as she approached. Lucian noticed several men eyeing her with lust and nearly tore the throat of one who caught up to her long strides and began talking to her.

Ruby was his mate, he thought angrily, pushing people out of his way. No mortal would be able to love her as much as he did. She was beautiful and brave and had a heart as big as the universe. She was perfection. He loved her because she managed to do all the things he'd been certain she couldn't do. She shattered the glass ceiling of his expectations of her.

So what that she'd managed to save herself and robbed him of the chance to play the hulking Alpha male? That was part of her beauty. She didn't need him to survive, but she'd loved him once. She still could because he needed her more than any position of power.

Lucian realized he hadn't honored his brother's memory after all. Bernard wouldn't have approved of Lucian shunning his life-mate. Bernard had died for his love. How could Lucian do any less?

He watched the human male say something that made her laugh. She shook her head, making the male give a regretful sigh as he let her go on without him. The human was joined by his friends who ribbed him good-naturedly as they all watched the beautiful Amazons saunter away.

She carried herself like a queen, he thought warmly. No, not a queen, a Chieftain. She'd finally pulled the mantle of her office around her, bathing those around her in the power she exuded. A power even the most obtuse human could feel.

Lucian decided then and there, in the midst of thousands of humans, he would do everything in his power to win her back. She was his mate, and she would be his forever.

He just had a few things to do before he could prove how much she meant to him.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Five months later...

Ruby felt free. She was in her own home again, or sort of her own home. She still hadn't gotten used to the idea of owning five mansions across the U.S. and several millions of dollars. It was a lot for her to take in. She often felt like an imposter walking through the lush halls of Julius' homes, but other times she felt like she'd come full circle.

Not that she was ever alone anymore. Briggs was still her smelly, constant companion, most of the time. He loathed long walks just as much as ever, preferring to stay inside to bathe in his groaning, flatulent magnificence. But there were no longer any solitary walks in the woods. Any time she stepped foot outside, one of her Amazon guards would alert the others and she was surrounded. Albreda even insisted four guards accompany her on her daily wilderness treks. Today's guards were Choctaw, Saga, Morganna the Bald, and Izzy.

Ruby was glad of their presence, even though part of her resented their constant watch. Putting her hand to her back, she rested a few minutes, breathing in the deep musk of the forest and freshly turned earth. Her guard respected her need for isolation, keeping out of sight.

In the stages of her final weeks of pregnancy, Ruby was sure she shouldn't be quite so far from the house, but the woods called to her. Remembering the simplicity of her human life eased her. She was no longer Ruby the hermit. She was now Ruby, the last Chieftain of the Elk Fire line. She felt pride in her achievements. She'd finally found her niche. It had taken her stumbling into a supernatural world, but she was an honored citizen in it. She no longer stood on the fringes of life; she was a part of it.

It hadn't all been sunshine and daisies though. The first couple of weeks had been the worse. Missing Lucian so much and angered over her last images of him, she'd cried nonstop. Ruby rubbed her right eye as it teared up. Dammit. More often than she wanted to admit, she'd find herself on the verge of calling Pagan to find out how he was doing and if he was with another woman yet. She'd always drop the phone like it was a hot poker. Her pride had been the only thing keeping her going, but now she had something else. A child. A baby to love and care for. She smiled, smoothing a hand over her rounded belly.

The voracious hunger that had gripped her at the celebratory bonfire had been the first stages of pregnancy. Within two weeks, her emotions were ping-ponging all over the place, she cried at the drop of a hat, and became hornier than a fifteen-year-old boy on prom night. Within the month, her belly had begun to balloon. Apparently, baby vampires didn't require as much time to "bake," as Izzy said.

Only her family and Kali knew about her condition. When she was approached by a group in need of her services, she made sure she was enveloped in heavy robes to hide her ever-expanding belly. Ruby wasn't about to let any of Lucian's friends know about her baby on the off chance they'd let it slip to him. Not that she wanted to keep Lucian from his child, but she didn't want him around with expectations of how they should go on. Knowing his sense of honor, he'd bully her into living with him as his mate. Not that she wasn't tempted to do just that.

She sighed, leaning softly against a tall pecan tree. Deep in her heart, she still loved him and craved his presence like a drug, but she couldn't live through that agony again. Even remembering it caused her breath to quicken in pain. No, it was best for him to know nothing of her baby until she was ready to face him. Then, once she was more secure in her position as Chieftain and confident she wouldn't break down at the first sight of her mate, she'd approach him about it. He'd be furious, but she could live with that.

She'd just decided it was time to head back to the house when she heard sounds of a fight echo through the woods. Ruby's heart pounded. She quickly slipped into the trees, trying to see who was attacking her sisters. No sooner than she saw Choctaw wrestling with a large male figure did Ruby find herself grabbed from behind, a hand cupped over her mouth.

Instinct guiding her movements, she stomped her heel on his toes and sent her elbow flying into his midsection. He grunted in pain, but didn't release her. She struggled wildly, her breath rushing in and out of her mouth, her only thought to protect her baby. She inhaled again and stilled.

Ruby's nostrils quivered with the scent she drew into her nose. She recognized his scent. Lucian. For one weak moment, she let her body relax against him, reveling in the feel of his taller, more powerful frame supporting hers. She'd been so alone! When his arms slipped around her to pull her more firmly against him, Ruby remembered she wasn't shaped the same and he would know.

She pulled away, whirling around to face him. Her heart froze. He looked exhausted. New lines bracketed his mouth, and there was a pinched look around his eyes as though he had a perpetual headache. Her heart went out to him. Lucian's hair was much longer than it had been the last time she saw him, nearly to his hips and tousled, like he hadn't bothered brushing it. There was a frantic glitter in his eyes as they devoured her face. Ruby made sure to step into the shadows a bit, hoping they would distort her figure further.

"Ruby," he breathed her name, his eyes lit by something she was too afraid to identify. He moved so fast she could barely track him. One second he was ten feet away, the next he was so close to her they were nearly touching. Lucian quickly rectified that by brushing her hair away from her face, cupping her jaw in his big hand. "Ruby, oh baby," he muttered, brushing his lips over her eyelids and cheekbones. Tracing his mouth along the scrolling tattoos on her temples, he breathed, "I missed you so much. You'll never know how much."

Ruby trembled, feeling her tremors echoed in Lucian's body. His body was taut with tension, but he held her so gently she almost melted into a puddle of Amazonian goo. Hearing the battle still raging brought her back to herself. She pushed him away, careful to keep her arms low enough so their torsos didn't touch.

"What are you doing here, Lucian?" Ruby asked as calmly as possible, though she could hear the crack in her voice. It felt so good to be touched by him. The hugs she'd received from friends and family were reduced to pathetic attempts just from the feel of his hands on her shoulders.

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't answer her. He stared at her so long and hard, Ruby knew he could see straight through her heavy robes to the rounded belly aimed in his direction.

"I came for my mate. Your bodyguards wouldn't leave peacefully, so my men are trussing them up to give us time to talk privately." He sounded so calm and reasonable Ruby almost didn't understand what he said.

"Trussing them up?" she asked bewilderedly. She looked around. Sure enough, her bodyguards were being tied up by the burly men. "What?" Then it hit her, the first thing he said. "Coming for your mate?" she screamed up at him, beyond anger. All the hurt she'd suffered at his hands came back to her. She let loose with a fist and punched him right in his arrogant eye.

"You bastard!" Ruby realized she was probably worked up more than she needed to be, but her emotions were like a train, and Lucian was on the tracks. "You arrogant, pigheaded, son of a bitch! You did not just appear out of nowhere and incapacitate my guards, my kinswomen! And now you expect to claim me for your little woman? I don't think so!" She kicked him in the shin and gave him a left hook in the breadbasket. He was looking at her in complete astonishment.

"I'm glad I have your attention, you long-fanged idiot. I am the Lineage Chieftain. I answer to no one. I belong to no one. I've started a new life here. I'm not going back with you to be smothered in the plastic bubble you want to wrap me in, so you can forget it!" Ruby was good and mad and determined to let Lucian have it with both barrels. "The last time I saw you I told you I didn't need you, didn't I? Well, guess what, bub, I still don't need you. I made a life for myself here with my sisters. They are all I need, not you and your misguided attempts to give me to the Council under whatever guise you decide."

Lucian just stared at her, his eyes taking in everything calmly and quietly.

Abruptly, all the fire went out of her. "Let them go and return to the Council, Lucian. Tell them I'm not going to be locked away again. I will fight you, and them, to the bitter end. I swear I will." She spoke with quiet dignity, ignoring the curious eyes of the men Lucian had with him.

"I can't do that, Ruby," he said just as quietly.

She drew in a sharp breath. That damned pain arched through her body once more. He would never put her above his precious honor and Council, she thought bitterly. She wanted to hug her arms around her stomach in a vain attempt to comfort herself and her child. The child Lucian would never know because he was too busy being chased by his demons to realize honor was nothing without love.

"I resigned my position on Council a month ago," he continued, watching her face carefully.

Ruby felt her eyes go as wide as half-dollars. Lucian resigned?

He nodded solemnly. "I was tired of pretending my duties were more important than you. I tied up some loose ends while I was able to, which took longer than I thought it would. Otherwise, I'd have been here sooner." He smiled wryly. "Besides, I think my fellow Councilors were going to slip a knife between my ribs for being

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stupid enough to abandon my mate." His smile faded again. "My parents have decided I'm no longer their son. But Pagan's talking to me again, and she's willing to add me to her team to do consulting work if I want it."

Just standing there, Ruby stared at the man she loved more than anyone in the world, wanting so badly to believe his words, but unable to let go of the pain for long.

Lucian gave her another wry smile. "Yeah, I know. You don't care anymore. But see, Ruby, I care. I care a lot. You had me so confused," he told her, letting loose a self-deprecating laugh. "When I let Council take you, it was because you were coming to mean too much to me. When you entered the Council chambers like you owned the world and didn't need me, I knew you'd realized you didn't need anyone. Later that night, you saw me trying to find some way to push you out of my heart, but I couldn't do it. Even then, you were my world, and I was too stupid and stubborn to realize it."

Ruby shook her head. "No, I'm not, Lucian. Council is your world. It's what you live for." She gently reminded him of his words, words that had speared her heart a million times over the last few months.

It was Lucian's turn to shake his head. "No. At one time it was, but not anymore. You're what I live for," he reached out and brushed his fingers along her left temple. "You're my mate, my love, my everything, for eternity. I love you, Ruby Mae Blue."

Feeling as though her knees were going to buckle, Ruby slumped against the tree, staring up at her lover with a strained expression. If what he said was true, he'd severed all ties with the people he'd worked beside for the last forty years, for her. Even though she desperately wanted to reach for the precious gift of his love with both hands, she was still too wary not to look for the catch.

Lucian seemed to realize she was still scared, his face tightening for a brief moment before relaxing into the boyish grin he'd given her so often their short time together. He fell to his knees before her, grabbing her hands and pressing firm kisses to the backs of them. "Will you marry me, Chieftain Ruby? Will you bond your life to mine forever? That is, if you don't mind me being the First Consort." He peeked at her through his eyelashes, looking both hopeful and fearful.

Raising a trembling hand to his beautiful face, Ruby stroked his cheek. She loved this man with all of her heart. God, how she loved him!

"Yes!" she screeched, throwing her arms around his neck, she hugged him fiercely.

Laughing joyfully, he squeezed her close, his mouth lowering over hers to devour her in a powerful kiss. Only when his hands moved down to clasp her hips and pull her closer did his kiss falter.

His eyes showing fearful hope, one of his hands roamed over her rounded belly. "Ruby?" he choked out, his eyes tearing up a little.

"Did I mention you knocked me up and *have* to marry me now?" she asked impishly, pressing a kiss on his astonished mouth.

He shouted in triumph and jubilation, picking her up and whirling her around before realizing she was probably too delicate for such activities. "When?" he breathed into her mouth.

Ruby grimaced lightly. "Probably right about now."

Later, after she brought their first son into the world, Ruby wished she'd had a camera when she told him because the fearsome vampire known as Oculum Lucian Ravenswaay paled, his eyes rolling back as he fainted dead away.

Epilogue

"Are you kidding me?" Lucian roared at his wife. He paced around their bedroom, looking as harried as any sensible man could when faced with his wife's insane ideas. Briggs gave a groaning sigh that suggested he was well-used to the sight of a vampire arguing with his mistress and it wasn't worth waking up for. "No, absolutely not!"

"Lucian, don't fight with me on this," Ruby said firmly from her vanity. "I'm part of the Blood Maiden tribe and it's my right and my honor to participate in the tournament."

"You are not taking part. When I agreed you needed to see it, I didn't mean from the bloody field! I thought you'd sit in the pavilion and cheer them on or something, not fight against Vandal the Violent!"

Ruby huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. After nearly three years of marriage, she and her mate still fought like cats and dogs. At first, it had been about who was going to attend their child's birth and she'd won that fight, she thought proudly. It helped that Dominic's arrival had come so quickly Lucian just wanted to get her in a bed and safe more than he wanted to fight with her.

Then, there was the fight about where they would live. He'd won that one. They kept a permanent home on his estate outside of Cypress Point, and Ruby had been happy to concede victory to her arrogant husband that time. She had tea with Kali once a week and attended every charity dinner, dance, and auction she was invited to. Considering her position as Chieftain and Lucian's wife, it was a lot. Their social calendar was full. Add to that Dominic's soccer practices and appointments for her Chieftain duties, and she was constantly on the go.

When Bretina and Albreda approached her with the idea of participating in the Whipping Post competition of the Battle of Lionesses, she'd jumped at the chance to do it. The Blood Maidens were in and out of her and Lucian's home, and it wasn't unusual for the house to be packed to the rafters with Amazons.

So she'd tricked Lucian just a bit about what she intended to do at the tournament, but when he'd seen her competition outfit, he'd thrown a fit. Was it her fault she'd never loss the bountiful breasts pregnancy had given her? The man was completely irrational and drop-dead sexy, she thought with hunger as he continued pacing around their bedroom.

She was wearing the outfit that started the argument, and Ruby didn't see what the big deal was. The latex bodysuit actually managed to make her look svelte and the plain, rigid corset that went over it pushed her breasts together proudly, crowding the V of her suit. She hadn't even put on the knee-high boots Rosetta had found for her and he'd thrown a fit.

"You are not going, that's it. No compromise on this one, Ruby Mae," he growled and paused in front of her.

Ruby licked her lips, peeking up at him through her eyelashes. "But baby, it's just a little contest. I'm good with the whip, you know that."

Those beautiful green eyes she'd never grow tired of kindled with desire. His eyes drifted over her ensemble, and she preened for him. The bulge in his trousers gave evidence he wasn't unaffected by the sight of her in the skintight latex.

"The tournament starts in three days," she said, stroking her hand down her cleavage and reveling in the thrill of feminine power she had over her husband. "If I compete, I get to keep this outfit."

It was his turn to lick his lips, his eyes becoming heavy-lidded with desire. "Fine, but if you get hurt, I'm going to paddle your ass," he growled, yanking her into his arms and carrying her to their bed. "Now, show me how to get you out of this thing."

* * * *

One week later...

It was no surprise the Blood Maiden tribe won the Battle of Lionesses again. Lucian had been granted special permission to attend the tournament and watched in tense silence as his wife battled contender after contender in the Whipping Post contest. The object of the contest was to lash your opponent as many times as you could in a two minute period. The real competition was to see who could actually withstand the burning cuts and slashes from your opponent's without stepping out of the circle.

He'd growled so fiercely every time Ruby got cut that the other spectators had moved away warily. But his indomitable wife defeated every opponent, including Vandal the Violent. Now, she stood with her sister Amazons and accepted the flagon of wine, toasting her husband with a cheeky grin. She was sweaty, bloody, and flushed with success, and he'd never seen a sexier sight in all his life.

Lucian couldn't help the spike of pride he felt when she acknowledged him in front of the entire Amazon Nation. This brave, spunky, independent woman belonged to him, and he to her.

She'd made his life so full and given him a sense of peace he'd never experienced before. With her and Dominic in his life, he didn't obsess about the past.

Ruby had forced him to return to Council because she believed in his vision for the future and that was something he looked forward to. Already, several decrees concerning sanctuaries were in the process of being passed through Council. If he sometimes became highhanded about his son's daytime protection, Ruby just scowled at him and pointed out their son was safe with twelve Amazon "aunts" trailing him everywhere.

Lucian had a feeling his son would never settle for any woman less spectacular than his own mother, which was fine by him.

Ruby sauntered over to him in the high heeled knee-high boots Rosetta had found her. Lucian felt his blood growing hot enough to rival a supernova and he barely even noticed a disgusted Briggs waddling towards a bevy of Amazons carrying platters of food. He was man enough to admit watching his mate crack her whip with skill seriously turned him on.

When she finally reached him, he threw her over his shoulder and ran back to their tent. Ruby just laughed and urged him to run faster.

That night, Ruby and Lucian conceived an Amazon who would go down in history as being the first to single-handedly defeat a pack of renegade werewolves while serving in the capacity of Oculum. Her father, by then well desensitized by five Amazon daughters and two vampire sons, would just shake his head and wonder what he did to deserve it all. Her mother, the High Chieftain over a contingent of fifty Chieftains, would look at him with a grin and say, "We learned how to compromise, my love."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danica Avet was born and raised in the wilds of South Louisiana (that would be somewhere around Houma) where mosquitoes are big enough to carry off small children and there are only two seasons: hot and hotter. With a BA in History, she figured there were enough fry cooks in the world and decided to try her hand at writing. For eight years she played at writing, but in 2008, she decided to get serious and began down the rocky road to publication.

Unmarried with no children, Danica is the lucky pet of a compulsively needy dog and two cats. The pitter-patter of little feet has been known to make her break out into a cold sweat.

Writing is how she gives the voices in her head a way out. They speak to her constantly wanting their stories told and she does her best to accommodate them. She writes paranormal romance and may eventually branch out to contemporaries. When she isn't writing, working, or contemplating the complexities of the universe, she spends time gathering inspiration from her insane family, reads far more than any sane person would want to, and watches hot burly men chase an oblong ball all over a field.



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