



NEO'S REALM

*Crimson
Moon*

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

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CRIMSON MOON

Carol Lynne

Dedication

A special thanks to Jambrea and Theresa A.

Chapter One

His nose buried in a book, Ramiro Delgado lazily rested his hand on the blond head of the fae who was currently sucking him off under the table. *The Frenzy*, the neighbourhood feeding bar in The Realm, only had a few patrons this early in the evening, and Ramiro planned to take advantage of the calm before the rush.

The tongue flicking the head of his cock was delightful, but when Ramiro felt the fae trying to work magic by probing his hole, Ramiro grunted. "Stick to the cock, kid."

Kid? Ramiro shoved away that particular image. The little fae under the table was probably twice his age. There was just something about the spritely-looking fae that made him think of them as younger.

When the fae's tongue drilled its way into the slit on Ramiro's crown, he'd had enough of the game. Fisting the fae's curls, Ramiro plunged his entire length down the creature's throat and came. The climax wasn't satisfying and wouldn't sustain his desire for long, but at least he could go where he needed without showing his desire for the one he couldn't have.

Ramiro waited until he heard the fae cry his own orgasm before pushing his chair back. He stood and stuffed his softened cock back into his suit pants. "Thanks." He took the time to brush his palm over the fae's cheek before picking up his book and heading out of the door.

As he walked towards the palace, Ramiro's thoughts went to the book in his hand. It was an ancient diary-of-sorts that he'd found in The Realm's archives. It was more-or-less an instruction manual, full of ideas on how to retain humanity after being turned.

Although Ramiro was supposed to be looking for ways to defeat the hybrid creatures Morwyn had created, it had given him an idea. He stepped up to the gate surrounding the palace Ian Kildare had created, and waited. Because of the strong wards surrounding the palace, there was no need for a guard at the gate. Only those imbued with the proper clearance could enter without instant evaporation. With so many magical creatures living in The Realm, other forms of identity clearance just weren't feasible.

Ramiro entered the King of the Vampire's palace with purpose. "Where's the King?" he asked one of the guards under his command.

"Dining room," the guard answered without making eye contact.

When he reached his destination, Ramiro stopped at the closed doors. "When you have a moment," he called through the heavily carved wood.

From within, a cry of release sounded. "Enter," Ian ordered.

Ramiro opened the door just as Ian pulled his robe closed. The human on the table in front of him was naked, as usual, with a sated smile on his face. The quickly-healing holes on the human's neck told Ramiro, without words, the King had just fed from the man.

Holding up the book, Ramiro approached the head of the table. "I was wondering if I may speak to you about something I've just read?"

"Of course." Ian settled himself back into his chair. "I see you've found my diary. I must've been mad to give that over to the archives, but I was young and stupid at the time." Ian claimed to be the first vampire, Faelan, the mysterious King of the Fae had created. Because no one had ever stepped up to contest his claim, Ramiro believed him.

Ramiro took a seat close to Ian. The two of them had become close friends over the years, and although he showed Ian the utmost respect in front of others, when it was just the two of them he could cut out the formalities and talk to Ian as a friend. He glanced at the Royal Donor on the table. Ian was the only vampire in The Realm allowed human donors, and the smell of the human's blood called to Ramiro. He swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth and tried to concentrate on the reason he'd sought Ian's expertise.

Ian chuckled and reached out to caress the inner thigh of his donor. "Would you like something to eat?"

Yes, Ramiro wanted to scream, but he knew it was forbidden. It was punishable by death for any vampire to drink from one of the Royal Donors. "Thank you, but I've already eaten once this evening."

Again, Ramiro tried to get his thoughts on track, while Ian continued to stroke the man in front of him. "I seek your advice, old friend."

"Then you shall have it," Ian answered.

"You write about ways to preserve humanity for those turned. It has me wondering whether it would be possible to preserve your wolf if a shifter was turned."

Ian released his hold on the donor's cock. "Leave us," he told the hardening man.

"Yes, Your Majesty." The donor rose before donning the sheer red robe of his station.

Ian waited for the man to leave before returning his attention to Ramiro. "I gather this is about your friend..."

"Gunnar," Ramiro supplied with a roll of his eyes. Not only had Ramiro spoken to Ian of Gunnar, but the King had met the Alpha werewolf before the kidnapping and subsequent changing of the wolf.

"Yes, Gunnar." There was a devilish grin on Ian's face as he rested his entwined fingers on his chest. "I've never heard of a vampire retaining his animal traits once turned, but then there are so few."

"But do you think it's possible?" Ramiro prompted.

"Possible? Probably. But I'd strongly caution against the attempt. It's different when humans are turned because they're weak. Their human selves will step back and allow the vampire side of them to take the lead. I don't see that happening with a were, especially an Alpha. The result could easily be insanity along with the inability to stay in one form."

Ramiro nodded. Everything Ian said made sense, but he still wanted to tell Gunnar there was a chance of holding onto his wolf. The further Gunnar's wolf slipped away, the harder it became for the Alpha. Ramiro hated to admit it, but he missed the posturing the two of them had once engaged in.

"You're going to try it anyway," Ian surmised.

"I'm going to tell Gunnar there's a chance, and let him make up his own mind."

The grin was back on Ian's handsome face. "You love him."

"I do not." Ramiro stood. "I just hate to see a strong man weakened."

"If you say so." Ian rang the small brass bell in front of him. A voluptuous woman stepped into the room wearing a sheer red robe. "If you'll excuse me. I think it's time for dessert."

Ramiro bowed his head before exiting the dining room, leaving the book on the table. It was one thing to watch Ian play with a handsome man, but he'd never felt desire for a woman's body. He left the palace in search of Gunnar.

* * * *

Gunnar shifted his weight on the uncomfortable cement bench. Although the park was the one place in all The Realm that felt like home, the benches were pure torture. He supposed it was to assure no lingering, but it would be nice to be able to at least sit for a couple of hours and enjoy the trees and grass.

With that thought in mind, Gunnar stood and stepped over the small rock wall onto the plush green grass. Although there were signs posted to stay on the paths, Gunnar didn't care. He needed to feel the earth under him. His wolf might be dying, but it still called out to him from deep inside.

"Breaking the law? I'm surprised at you," Ramiro said from the sidewalk.

Gunnar didn't bother opening his eyes. "Arrest me. Send me back to Italy." He held up his hands, wrists together. "Got cuffs?"

Ramiro chuckled, the deep sound of his voice going straight to Gunnar's cock. *Fuck!* Gunnar hated the attraction he felt for the vampire. Before he'd been turned, Gunnar had been able to appreciate Ramiro's masculine sex appeal, but that was as far as it went. However, the more he tried to accept his new life, the more his body responded to the centuries-old vampire.

Gunnar sat up in hopes of hiding his erection. "Did you want something?"

Ramiro stepped over the barricade and stared down at Gunnar, hands in the pockets of his black designer suit pants. "Why are you wallowing on the ground?" he asked in apparent disgust.

"Because it feels good." Gunnar ran his fingers through the thick green carpet of grass. "If you weren't such a sissy, you'd get down here and join me." *Shit.* Why the hell had he said that? Gunnar felt like biting off his own tongue.

Instead of sitting in the grass, Ramiro squatted down. The new position gave Gunnar an even better look at the large cock trapped behind the thin suit pants. "I need to talk to you about something, but I'm not about to sit on wet grass in order to do it. Why don't we go down the street and get a drink?"

Gunnar averted his gaze. "It's not wet yet. You think I'm stupid?"

"Whatever." Ramiro ducked his head enough to stare into Gunnar's eyes. "Come on, have a drink with me."

The last thing in the world Gunnar wanted was to accompany Ramiro to The Frenzy. He'd been talked into it once before and hadn't been able to look at Ramiro in the same way since. It wasn't the feeding that bothered him. It was watching the little fae fuckers service Ramiro right in front of him.

"I'm not going to The Frenzy again. I've already told you that."

"Wasn't talking about going there. Besides, I've already eaten this evening," Ramiro stood and held out his hand. "I thought a nice glass of Liquid Crimson at Giovanni's would be nice."

Gunnar slapped Ramiro's hand out of his way and stood. With his feet back under him, Gunnar discreetly adjusted his hardening cock before stepping back onto the cement path. Trying to get his mind off his body's desires, he decided to make small talk as they walked side by side towards the bar.

"Why don't they want us on the grass?"

Ramiro glanced at Gunnar before returning his attention to the sidewalk in front of them. "Because, as you've already discovered, it calls to your were instincts." He cleared his throat, suddenly looking extremely uncomfortable. "After being here for so long, the other weres wouldn't be able to control their shift, and The Realm isn't equipped for hunting."

"And by other weres, I take it you mean everyone but me," Gunnar surmised. Gods, if only he could still shift, but they both knew it wasn't even a possibility.

"Maybe," Ramiro mumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Ramiro opened the door to the bar and motioned Gunnar inside. Gunnar had only been to Giovanni's on a few occasions, but he found he liked the dark atmosphere. Maybe it was because it seemed to match his mood lately.

They found an empty half-round booth at the back along one wall. Gunnar slid in one side while Ramiro raised his hand to get the waitress's attention. He held up two fingers and the woman nodded. Ramiro sat down across the table and scooted in until his back was to the wall.

Gunnar grinned. Ramiro always seemed ready for a fight. He wondered if the vamp ever let down his guard for more than a few minutes. They both remained quiet until the waitress brought two stemmed glasses of the intoxicating wine and blood mixture. "So what did you want to talk about?" he asked after several sips.

"Does your wolf still speak to you?"

Gunnar sat back further in the booth. It was the first time in several weeks his wolf had been mentioned. Gunnar thought about his uninterrupted moments in the grass earlier. "Sometimes, but not the way it used to. Why?"

Ramiro's dark eyes narrowed. "You felt it earlier, didn't you?"

"Yes," Gunnar admitted.

"I read something earlier that has me thinking."

"Dangerous," Gunnar said, cutting Ramiro off.

"Shut up and listen," Ramiro countered. "According to the book, the best way for vampires to hold on to their humanity after being turned is by living amongst humans. It made me wonder whether we could save your wolf by having you do the things you once did as a wolf."

"I can't shift," Gunnar spat. He took a deep, calming breath. It had taken him weeks to come to terms with the changes taking place within him. Having Ramiro bring it up felt like a slap in the face.

Ramiro finished off his Liquid Crimson and signalled for two more. "I guess the bigger question is would you like to retain your wolf as part of who you are without being able to fully shift?"

The question left Gunnar speechless. How many nights had he lain awake begging the Gods to let him keep his wolf? Now, however, he wondered if keeping the wolf aware yet trapped would be even worse.

"I know it's not an easy decision to make, but you need to give it some serious thought before your wolf fades even further." Ramiro started to reach for Gunnar, but stopped and withdrew his hand, picking up the wine glass instead.

Gunnar nodded. "I will," he finally managed to say.

Ramiro's head tilted to the side. Although the movement was purely innocent, and totally Ramiro, Gunnar's body took instant notice of the candlelight reflecting in the vampire's dark eyes.

"I have to go." Gunnar pulled a wad of crumpled money from his pocket before tossing it onto the table.

Ramiro seemed surprised. His black eyebrows rose as he gestured to Gunnar's full glass of Liquid Crimson. "But you haven't finished your drink."

"Losing my head is the last thing I need right now." He slid out of the booth. "Thanks," he said before turning to dash out of the restaurant.

Once he'd made it to the sidewalk, Gunnar took off towards the park. *Fuck!* He'd been a second away from pulling Ramiro into his arms and forgetting all about his wolf. It was time to get his head on straight.

Gunnar veered from the park and headed towards the one place in all The Realm he hated most. He knew he could've asked Ramiro to accompany him to The Frenzy, but why invite hard feelings between the two of them? Gunnar hated that Ramiro fucked his way through dinner every night, but he was in no position to say anything to Ramiro about his sex life.

Standing outside the door to the packed bar, Gunnar took a deep breath. He'd only been in The Frenzy on one occasion, at Ramiro's urging. Unfortunately, as soon as he'd stepped inside the club the smell of sex and blood had nearly driven him insane. He'd wanted nothing more than to push Ramiro over a table and fuck him. No other creature in the club had appealed to him. He couldn't imagine rubbing against one of the fae. Having sex with them in exchange for their blood was absolutely out of the question as far as Gunnar was concerned, so he'd run.

Footsteps behind him drew Gunnar's attention. He glanced over his shoulder and winced at the sight of a smug-looking Ramiro walking his way.

"I would've joined you if you'd only told me you were stopping off here," Ramiro said.

"I'm not *stopping off here*. I need to speak with Audric. Since the threesome seem to spend most nights here..." Gunnar shrugged instead of finishing the sentence. "Why don't you go in and ask him to come out and talk to me?"

Ramiro crossed his arms over his chest. The gesture drew Gunnar's eyes to the muscle mass hidden under the expensive suit, weakening him further. *To give in is to give up*, he told himself once more.

"Why don't you hunger for blood the way I do?" Ramiro asked.

"Who said I didn't?" Gunnar returned defensively. "I just don't think it's worth prostituting myself to get it."

Ramiro's eyes rounded. "Is that what you think I do?"

"Isn't it? You pick up strangers to fuck in exchange for their blood. What's the difference?" Gunnar wasn't about to back down from an argument. It had become obvious Ramiro thought less of him for drinking the bottled blood The Realm provided.

Ramiro's dark eyes narrowed to mere slits as he took several steps forwards, putting himself mere inches from Gunnar's already heated body. "I'm a vampire," he stated. "You're still thinking in wolf terms. You are what you are, and the sooner you get that through that thick skull of yours, the happier your new life will be."

"So in your eyes, I need to become a slut if I want to be happy with the changes in my body that I didn't fucking ask for in the first place?" Gunnar knew he was lashing out, but he needed to do something or risk exposing his true feelings to Ramiro.

Instead of getting pissed off, Ramiro's expression softened. "Few of us had a choice in what we've become. I spent many years hating myself for desiring the one thing my body needed to survive. I'm only trying to save you from that, because your hatred won't change anything."

Gunnar swallowed around the lump in his throat at the raw emotion evident in Ramiro's voice.

Ramiro reached out and grasped Gunnar's neck, moving his thumb to brush over Gunnar's bottom lip. "I'm not a monster. The reason I give my donors what they want is to make me feel better about taking from them. I could tease them like Audric and many of the others do, but I find that...selfish."

Lost in the gentle touch, Gunnar licked the pad of Ramiro's thumb as it passed once more over his lips.

Ramiro gasped, moments before pressing his lips against Gunnar's. For several long moments, Gunnar allowed Ramiro's thrusting tongue to explore the inside of his mouth. *Gods!* For weeks he'd wondered what it would feel like to have Ramiro hold him, kiss him, fuck him. The last thought pulled Gunnar out of the haze he'd found himself in. *I'm an Alpha, damn it.*

Breaking the kiss, Gunnar pushed against Ramiro's chest. He shook his head and backed away from the tempting vampire. "I can't," he said as he turned and ran.

* * * *

Several moments later, Ramiro stood inside The Frenzy still dazed by the kiss. Damn that kiss. Why the fuck had he done something so stupid? Now that he knew Gunnar's body would respond to him, Ramiro wouldn't be able to think of anything else. He'd tried to pass his preoccupation with Gunnar off for weeks as nothing but desire, but after one kiss he

knew the truth. Ian had been right, somewhere along the way he'd fallen in love with Gunnar.

"Back so soon?" the little blond fae from earlier asked.

Ramiro shook his head. "I'm looking for someone."

"I could help you," the fae offered.

Ramiro spotted Audric across the room. Although Audric was with a donor, Kern was only a few feet away. "Thanks, but I see him." He wove his way through the crowd, the taste of Gunnar still clinging to his tongue. *Fuck!* How was he supposed to concentrate on anything if he couldn't get control of his emotions?

"I need to speak with Audric," Ramiro told Kern.

Kern's gaze went to the tented pants Ramiro wore. "No."

Ramiro rolled his eyes and ran a hand over his obvious erection. "This isn't about Audric. I just need to ask him a few questions."

Kern gestured with his chin. "He's almost finished with his dinner."

Although Ramiro got along with Kern, the man was extremely protective of Audric. Ramiro knew he'd have to include Kern in the discussion if he hoped to have more than a few seconds to converse with the werewolf-turned-vampire. "Where's Haig?" Rarely did you see the three of them not together.

"With his sister," Kern answered without taking his eyes off his mate.

"Galena's here?"

"Even though she was hidden away in that fucking cage most of the time, Neo thinks she can be of some use to us. He brought her and Flick to The Realm this morning." Kern glanced up at Ramiro. "Whether or not Galena can be of help, I'm glad she's here. Haig was about to drive me crazy worrying about her."

Not having had a family for centuries, Ramiro did his best to look sympathetic. "I understand."

His poor acting job was saved by Audric's appearance. "Ready?" Audric asked Kern, cock in hand.

Kern encircled Audric's erection with his hand but shook his head. "Ramiro needs to talk to you first."

Audric's brow furrowed. "What's going on?"

Ramiro glanced around. Several sets of eyes were on them. There was no doubt the crowd waited for the nightly sex show Audric put on after feeding. "Not here."

"You're joking, right?" Audric asked, thrusting into Kern's hand.

Ramiro knew what he was asking. The sexual buzz that accompanied feeding was incredibly powerful. He decided to give Audric a break. "Meet me outside in ten minutes."

Audric nodded before climbing onto Kern's lap.

Ramiro turned away and studied the crowd. Should he indulge in a quick blow job while he waited? Gunnar's earlier statement came to mind. Although Ramiro still wasn't sure what Gunnar's problem was, he decided against finding a quick hook-up. Instead he went outside to wait.

He strolled back and forth in front of the club as vampires and fae went in and out of the building. Humans had always volunteered to donate their blood for the sexual aspect and thrill of it, but Ramiro had never taken the time to figure out why the fae did it. Was it purely sexual on their part? Ramiro couldn't imagine a fae needing the thrill.

"Okay, what's so important?" Audric asked, stepping out of the bar.

"I was wondering if you'd remembered any more about your wolf, and what you went through after being turned by LaMont?" Ramiro asked.

"Why do you ask?" Audric's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "No good can come of it."

"I think I may have found a way for Gunnar to hang on to that part of himself. So tell me why you don't think it's a good idea?" It seemed Audric agreed with Ian. Perhaps it had been wrong of him to talk to Gunnar about the possibilities.

"Because not being able to shift is equal to you starving for blood. It's a hunger that won't go away. To wish that on someone is to hate them, in my opinion." Audric's voice had gone down several octaves. It was more than obvious the man was pissed off at the very idea. "I had to bury that part of myself or risk insanity. Gunnar was a born Alpha. For him, the risk is even greater."

What had he done? "Thank you for your honesty." Ramiro needed to find Gunnar and drive all thoughts of holding on to his wolf from his head. "Excuse me, I have to go."

Before Ramiro could make a move, Audric's hand was wrapped around his forearm. "I know you're only trying to help him, but both of you need to accept what he's become."

"You're right. I understand that now." Ramiro took off, hoping it wasn't too late.

Chapter Two

Gunnar stared at the walls of his bedroom. Living in the palace with Spiro and Neo had proved to be important, but he missed the open space of the vineyard. He thought of the rest of the wolves and cats who'd been relocated to The Realm for their safety.

The sooner they put an end to Morwyn and the Galway Alpha, Juniper Cavanaugh, the faster he could get his people home. Gunnar fisted his hands. He could no longer claim the weres as his people. It had been the hardest thing to come to terms with. Belonging to and leading a pack had meant everything to him. His position as head of security for Neo had also been a question on his mind lately. Would the weres still respect and follow him?

Regardless of his future position, he still owed it to the weres to fight the upcoming war as if he were still their Alpha. Jumping up from the large bed he'd been given, Gunnar parted the heavy canopy drapes. There was research to be done if they were to have any hope of defeating Morwyn. His personal issues could wait.

He was on his way down to the palace vault when he spotted Ramiro. Gunnar did his best to duck around a corner before the vampire saw him. After their earlier kiss, the last thing he wanted was to tempt his body again so soon. He had no doubt it was the changes in his genetic makeup that wanted Ramiro and nothing more.

"We need to talk," Ramiro said, still hidden from view.

"I'm on my way to the vault. There are things more important than whether or not I can retain my wolf." Gunnar refused to cling to a dream he knew was unattainable. He'd had numerous discussions with Audric over the possibility that his wolf could survive the change. When Ramiro had mentioned the book, it had given Gunnar a spark of hope, but the kiss had quickly put things into perspective. He was a vampire.

Ramiro turned the corner and stared at Gunnar. "I'll go with you."

Gunnar took a step back before he realised what he was doing. He stopped and squared his shoulders. Had his Alpha been driven so deeply inside himself that a vampire intimidated him? No. Gunnar knew exactly why he'd retreated. How long would the battle rage between his body and his mind?

"Whatever," Gunnar finally said, continuing down the hall. He wove his way through the maze-like corridors with Ramiro right on his heels. Reaching the library, Gunnar nodded at the two guards and waited for them to open the massive doors.

Once the doors were shut behind him, he walked over to the statue of Zeus and pressed the small button on the underside of its beard. The floor opened to a spiral staircase that would take them to the vault.

As they descended the steps, Gunnar heard a noise from below. He stopped and glanced up at Ramiro. "There's someone already down here."

Ramiro nodded. "Probably Neo. He wants to get back to the vineyard as much as you do."

Mention of his home caused an ache in Gunnar's chest. He needed to speak to Neo about his job, but the upcoming war was more important. Continuing down the steps, he walked into the dimly lit vault. He'd been told the massive room was kept at a constant sixteen degrees celsius, eliciting a momentary body-shiver from Gunnar.

Neo glanced up from the book on the table in front of him. The expression on his face was grave. "Morwyn's drawing the underworld powers of the Titans."

"What?" Ramiro stopped beside Gunnar. "That's not possible."

Neo pointed to the book. "It is if he has this."

Gunnar exchanged glances with Ramiro before continuing to the table. He peered over Neo's shoulder at an ancient illustration. "Cronus's sickle? But I thought that was destroyed in the war against the Titans and Olympians."

"Not destroyed. Lost." Neo carefully turned the brittle pages of the book to another picture. This one depicted a scene from the Titanomachy, the great war of the Gods, Zeus charging Cronus and the sickle falling from Cronus's hand towards Earth below. "I think Juniper Cavanaugh somehow found it, whether he was already communicating with Morwyn or what, I don't know." Neo tapped the picture. "This has to be what rescued Morwyn from the bowels of Tartarus."

Gunnar started to ask how Neo had figured it out, but Neo stopped him.

"This is the only thing in existence other than my father's lightning bolts that have the power to unlock the door to Tartarus." Neo rose out of his chair. "There's something else."

Gunnar glanced at Ramiro before following Neo. "Are you telling us we have to get the sickle back if we want to banish Morwyn?"

"That's one way," Neo said absently. He continued to walk through the rows and rows of ancient texts until he reached the art area. "I can't find anything that confirms my suspicions, but there's a picture in here that's given me an idea."

Neo turned on a small lamp before opening one of the large, flat drawers used to house the original paintings. He turned and shifted his gaze between Gunnar and Ramiro. "You are two of the few who have ever been allowed in this area. What you see is for your eyes only. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," Gunnar answered immediately. He'd sworn allegiance to Neo long ago and, although he may lose his position once the war was over, his loyalties would always stand true.

After Ramiro had also agreed, Neo stepped back. "This is a depiction of the battle between Uranus and Cronus."

Gunnar wasn't sure what he was supposed to see. It was Ramiro who commented. "Just before his balls were lopped off, I gather."

Neo chuckled. "Yes." Neo moved over several rows before opening another drawer. "Now this one is of Morwyn's war with Nialo and the dragons. Notice anything?"

Gunnar reached out to touch the ancient canvas but quickly pulled his hand back. "The sword. It's the same."

"Yes. And according to history, the sword was never far from Morwyn's side. It's the same weapon he used to separate himself from Nialo." Neo pointed towards the canvas. "I believe Morwyn's looking for that sword. I think it's the reason he's assembling an army."

There was something in the way Neo said it that prompted a shiver to race up Gunnar's spine. A warm hand on his lower back told Gunnar that Ramiro sensed his unease. "Do you know where the sword is?"

"Hanging in a heavily-warded case over the fireplace in King Kildare's bedroom," Ramiro supplied.

Gunnar span around and stared into Ramiro's dark eyes, a spark of jealousy rising within him. Gods, he could easily get lost in those dark chocolate depths. He managed to find his voice, despite his body's reaction to the nearness of the vampire. "Why does he have it?"

"I don't know," Ramiro said, his focus on Gunnar's lips.

Dammit! Gunnar's cock hardened before he could turn away.

"Would you ask him?" Neo asked.

Ramiro glanced over Gunnar's shoulder at Neo. "Would you like me to set up a meeting?"

"Tomorrow evening, seven o' clock. I'll make sure Spiro's there as well." Neo shut the drawers before turning off the lamp. "We're running out of time. With each day, Juniper's army grows in size and strength."

* * * *

Just before dawn, Ramiro knocked on Ian's bedchamber door from his adjoining room. He was taking a risk by seeking audience with Ian at this time of the morning. Not only did Ian have a tendency to become crabby when he was forced to leave his playmates for a day of sleep, but he more than likely had a donor in his room for an early morning snack before bed.

When the door opened almost immediately, it was a surprise. "Come in," Ian beckoned.

Ramiro followed the totally nude King into his extravagant quarters. The sight of his firm ass didn't hold the appeal it once had for Ramiro, but it was still quite a work of art. He glanced towards the large fireplace, making sure it was, in fact, the same sword seen in the portraits.

Ian sat on the couch in front of the fireplace. He lifted his splayed legs and rested his heels on the sofa cushions, proudly exposing his hole to Ramiro's eyes. "What can I do for you?" he asked, his fingers circling the seldom-fucked pucker.

The erotic scene in front of him was almost more than Ramiro could ignore. For centuries Ian had played with Ramiro's affections, pulling him into bed before unceremoniously kicking him out again. It seemed Ian was in the mood to be taken, something he didn't allow anyone but Ramiro to do.

Before falling for Gunnar, Ramiro would've jumped at the chance to bury his cock in the King's ass again, but it no longer felt right. However, because of Ian's position, declining the apparent offer would mean the end of his career. Perhaps if he riled the King, Ian's attention would focus elsewhere. "Neo would like a meeting with you. He wants to discuss how you came about acquiring Morwyn's sword."

Ian jumped off the sofa and went to stand between Ramiro and the fireplace. "It's not Morwyn's sword! It belonged to Faelan. Morwyn stole it from him, and Faelan got it back when Morwyn was sentenced for his crimes."

Ramiro rubbed the back of his neck with his palm, trying to smooth the hairs that had begun to prickle. The vehement way Ian defended Faelan was unsettling. As far as Ramiro knew, Faelan had deserted Ian and the rest of the fae and vampires at around the same time Morwyn was exiled to Tartarus. "If Faelan feels so strongly for the sword, why do you have it?"

"It was a gift," Ian said defensively. "Not that I need to explain myself to you." Ian sniffed indignantly. "Tell Neo to forget the sword. It has nothing to do with this mess."

Ramiro's eyes narrowed. Was he being given an order? He'd sworn allegiance to Ian long ago, but how could he try and convince Neo of something he didn't believe himself? Better to think about it, he told himself. He bowed in respect for his king. "What shall I tell Neo about the meeting he's requested?"

"If you assure him about the sword, there will be no need for a meeting. Am I right?"

"Very well. I'll do my best." Ramiro turned and left the room before Ian's ardour returned. *Fuck!* He shut the door between rooms, unsure of what to do. *Faelan.* What part did the Creator's sword play in the upcoming war, or did it?

* * * *

Gunnar was in bed, asleep, when a touch to his chest woke him. His fangs slid from their sheaths as he lunged towards the threat.

"Control yourself!" Ramiro yelled as Gunnar knocked him to the floor, landing on top of him.

Blinking, Gunnar stared down at Ramiro. He released the hold he had on Ramiro's neck. "What're you doing sneaking up on me?"

"I needed to talk to you," Ramiro whispered.

The confused expression on Ramiro's face said it all. Gunnar swallowed around the lump in his throat. "What happened?" He slid off Ramiro to sit on the floor next to him.

"I'm worried."

Although Gunnar hadn't known Ramiro for long, he'd never seen the vampire so unsettled. "What about?"

Ramiro sat up and rested his forearms on his bent knees. "I'm being put in the middle of two leaders. One I've sworn allegiance to, and another I have the utmost respect for."

"Neo and Ian?" Gunnar knew Ramiro was supposed to set up a meeting between the two.

"Ian won't discuss the sword. He said it was a gift from Faelan and had nothing to do with Morwyn."

"But you don't believe him?" Gunnar ducked his head, trying to make eye contact with Ramiro. He wanted to reach out and offer comfort, but knew it would only lead to trouble.

"I don't know what to believe. Faelen's like this God of mystery. He hasn't even been seen or heard from since vampires came into existence. So it begs the question, is Ian telling the truth or is he lying to me because he knows I can't verify his answer?"

Out of nowhere, Ramiro growled and reached for the bed. He pulled a blanket to the floor before throwing it over Gunnar's lap.

Gunnar settled the blanket around his waist. His state of undress had been the least of his worries since Ramiro woke him. Although he refused to apologise, it was nice to know his nudity affected Ramiro even at a time of obvious distress. "Well, you'll have to tell Neo Ian refuses to meet with him."

"That's why I feel stuck in the middle. Ian didn't out-and-out refuse. He just told me to assure Neo the sword had nothing to do with Morwyn. I've sworn my allegiance to Ian, but if I do what he ordered me to do and it turns out he's lying, Neo will have my head."

"Why didn't you just ask Ian point-blank if he was planning to meet with Neo?" Gunnar asked.

"Because I had to get the hell out of his room before he made me fuck him, alright?" Ramiro barked.

Gunnar leant forwards, nose to nose with Ramiro. "He makes you fuck him?"

"I... He..." Ramiro sputtered. He took a deep breath. "Several times a year he wants me to fuck him. It was never an issue before..."

"Before?" Gunnar prompted.

"Before I met you." Ramiro stood. "I'll figure it out. Go on back to bed. Hell, I've got another four hours before the sun sets, and I have to face Neo."

The thought of Ramiro returning to Ian's palace didn't sit well with Gunnar. "You might as well sleep here—just stay on your side of the bed," he grumbled.

Ramiro actually chuckled, although it sounded strained. "Your generosity is overwhelming, but I brought my cape."

"Stay," Gunnar growled, holding the blanket around him as he stood.

Ramiro stepped forwards and pulled the blanket out of Gunnar's grasp. He stared into Gunnar's eyes as he reached down to run his hand over Gunnar's half-hard cock. "If I stay, there's no way in Hades I'll stick to my side of the bed."

"Would you rather be in Ian's?" Gunnar asked, jealousy coursing through his veins.

Ramiro's eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Don't push me. You've got me riding the edge of control right now. One more word and I'll bend you over the mattress and shove my dick up your ass."

The image of Ramiro fucking him flashed through Gunnar's mind. Conflicted, he turned his back towards Ramiro. "I guess you'd better go, then, because I'm no one's pussy-boy."

Ramiro bumped his chest against Gunnar's back hard enough to throw Gunnar off balance. Landing on the mattress, Gunnar quickly rolled over. His protest at the treatment was silenced by Ramiro's tongue thrusting into his mouth. Oh, Gods, the taste of Ramiro's kiss conjured images Gunnar was too proud to acknowledge. He opened further, accepting with pleasure the kiss that threatened to turn him from an Alpha to a beta. The thought shocked him. Gunnar pushed against Ramiro's shoulders, breaking the kiss. "You may not see me as an Alpha, but I do."

Ramiro grabbed the hair on the back of Gunnar's head, holding him in place. "Labels have no place in my bed," he growled. He released Gunnar before turning to stalk from the room.

Gunnar stared at the canopy overhead as he licked the last of Ramiro's flavour from his lips. He didn't expect Ramiro to understand. Vampires didn't think the same way weres did. But Gunnar had been labelled an Alpha at the young age of sixteen when he'd fought and killed his own father before walking away from the pack who'd never given him a damn thing except contempt.

"I earned that label, damn it!" he shouted to the empty room.

* * * *

Instead of going back to Ian's palace, Ramiro ended up in the vault once again, doing research. Hours into his labours he heard footsteps on the stairs. "Who's there?"

"Michael," a soft voice replied. "The guard told me you were down here."

Michael stepped into the room. His sleep-tousled blond curls and big, blue eyes made him look more like an angel than anyone Ramiro had ever seen. "Is it evening already?"

"Not quite." Michael rubbed his hands over his face as he sat across from Ramiro. "I like a few hours to myself before Neo's up for the night. What're you doing down here at this time of day?"

Despite Michael's young age, Ramiro had grown to respect the man's sensitivity and wisdom. "I'm trying to find information about Faelan," he admitted.

Michael's eyebrows shot up under the mop of blond hair. "Faelan? The only time I've even heard anyone talk about him was when I was still a boy. I'd asked Spiro where vampires came from and he told me the King of the Fae was afraid of the dark so he created vampires to watch over him while he slept."

Ramiro nodded. He'd heard a similar story, with a few differences. "I heard he was afraid of someone trying to kill him while he slept, but I guess you wouldn't tell a boy that."

Michael chuckled. "Especially not Spiro. He's always tried to protect me." Michael rested his cheek on his palm and yawned. "So what're you trying to find out about Faelan?"

"Where he is. His history." Ramiro shrugged. "I find it strange that he's barely mentioned." Ramiro did a broad sweep with his hands at the rows of books. "There are volumes of information about Blessed Creatures, Gods and demi-Gods in here, but I haven't managed to find a single book that pertains to Faelan. Why do you think that is?"

"Magic? Maybe Faelan doesn't want anyone to know his history. His powers must be extraordinary. I wouldn't think omitting his name from a few books would be hard with that kind of magic on his side."

"Possibly." Ramiro stared at the open book in front of him. "Do you think Spiro knows more about him?"

"He's half fae, so maybe," Michael supplied. He dropped his hands to the table and leant forwards. "Why is finding out about Faelan so important to you?"

“Because I don’t think this war will be won on the battlefield. If we try to go hand-to-hand with those monsters Morwyn has created, not only will Blessed Creatures die, but the human population could easily be decimated. Especially if the Gods step in to the fight.”

Ramiro didn’t tell Michael he needed to know whether or not Ian was being honest with him. His doubts about the King he’d sworn allegiance to were his to prove or disprove.

“Neo said Zeus offered to go to battle with Morwyn, but the other Gods forbade it, knowing the toll such a battle would take on Earth.”

Ramiro chuckled. “I don’t see Zeus as the kind of God to take orders easily.”

“That’s exactly what I said to Neo. He told me that even though his father was a supreme asshole, he did seem to have a soft spot for Earth.” Michael sighed. “It’s the only thing either of us could come up with.”

It had been Zeus’ idea to house The Realm on Earth. Ramiro wondered if it was Earth itself, or its inhabitants Zeus was fond of. He yawned, his need for sleep apparent.

Michael chuckled and gestured to the back of the room. “There’s a small bed I had brought down for Neo for his long days spent in here. Why don’t you try to get a few hours in before the meeting?”

“There won’t be a meeting. At least not with Ian,” Ramiro admitted.

Michael bit his bottom lip. “Ooh, ouch. In that case, maybe I’d better go back up to bed, and make sure Neo’s in a good mood before you tell him.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Ramiro said with a grin. “I’ll try to catch a few hours of sleep.”

After Michael had left the vault, Ramiro found his way to the double bed at the back of the room. With everything on his mind, he doubted sleep would come. There were too many unanswered questions, and his gut told him the truth lay at Ian’s feet.

Finally, Ramiro felt the pull of sleep settle his overactive body and mind.

Chapter Three

Fresh from the shower, Gunnar answered the door without bothering with a towel. "Hey." He stepped back and allowed his visitor entrance.

Grinning, Audric came into the room. "You'd better dress before we're joined by two overly-jealous werewolves."

Nudity was commonplace in the were culture. Gunnar had seen Haig and Kern naked on numerous occasions, but he assumed it was different if their mate was in the room. He grabbed a pair of jeans out of the dresser and pulled them on. Rarely, if ever, did he wear underwear. It was a habit born from the need to shift at a moment's notice. "What brings you by?" he asked, pulling a T-shirt over his head.

"Just wondering if Ramiro talked to you last night." Audric kept his gaze on the landscape outside the window.

"Why would you ask that?" Had Ramiro gone to Audric after he'd left Gunnar's room?

Typical Audric—the vampire refused to look Gunnar in the eyes as he spoke. Gunnar knew Haig and Kern were trying to help the once-abused vampire gain confidence, but Gunnar could tell they had a long way to go.

"Ramiro told me outside The Frenzy about his desire to help you hold on to your wolf. You should probably know, I argued against it."

"Turn around and look at me." Gunnar couldn't stand the defeated posture of such a strong Blessed Creature.

Audric eventually did as asked. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have stuck my nose into your business, but I've only just started to remember what I went through, and I don't want that for you."

Gunnar decided to sit down. Perhaps a less defensive posture would help put Audric at ease. Rubbing his hands together, Gunnar decided to be completely honest. "I'm having more trouble relinquishing my hold on my Alpha status than my wolf. Does that make sense?"

"No, and do you know why?" Audric asked, looking Gunnar in the eyes for the first time since he'd entered the room.

"Because my wolf has been with me longer than my status?" Gunnar offered.

Audric snorted. "No. Because being Alpha has nothing to do with your wolf." He shook his head. "Weres are so fucking conceited. Being an Alpha isn't exclusive to your wolf. It's who you are. It's about being the best in your particular group. I consider Ramiro an Alpha. If you'd put your heart into what you've become instead of what you were, no one would be able to take the title away from you. But you have to *want* it, and you have to *accept* who you are in order to get it."

Gunnar had never heard a vampire refer to himself as 'Alpha'. Was Audric right? Was he so conceited he'd discounted every other species of Blessed Creature?

Audric walked over and placed his palm over Gunnar's heart. "This is where a true Alpha lives." He moved to tap Gunnar's temple. "Not here. Because even in were form, your heart is always your own. It may be what drives the animal inside of you to excel in battle, but pure strength can't win the war."

No one had ever put it so directly and eloquently before. Given his new situation, Audric's words spoke directly to Gunnar's soul. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Audric smiled. "Now you'd better change your shirt before Haig and Kern detect my scent on you."

* * * *

Gunnar purposely sat across the table and several chairs down from Ramiro as he waited for the meeting to start. He had noticed upon entering the conference room how agitated Ramiro seemed, and wondered whether Ian's Chief of Security was still pissed off with him.

The door opened and Haig ushered Galena into the room. He spoke softly to his sister before guiding her to a chair beside Kern. Although Gunnar had not taken part in Galena's rescue, he'd heard Ramiro mention the deplorable living conditions the mate of Juniper Cavanaugh had lived in.

As soon as she was seated, Galena lifted her feet onto the chair and curled her arms around her legs, rolling her body into a ball. Gunnar made eye contact with Haig, asking silently if the meeting was too much for the traumatised were.

Haig leant over and whispered in Galena's ear once more. Several moments later, Galena put her feet on the floor.

Before Gunnar had a chance to examine the situation further, Neo and Michael stepped into the room, followed by Spiro. When Spiro turned to shut the door, Sema head-butted the wood until he was allowed entrance. Spiro shook his head at the large black jaguar and pointed towards the corner of the room behind his chair. Sema went dutifully to the indicated spot and lay down.

"May I speak to you?" Ramiro asked Neo.

"No need. Michael already told me Ian isn't coming." Neo's restraint was visible. "I'll speak to Ian after the meeting. I'd like you to be there."

"Yes, sir," Ramiro answered.

"Would you like me there as well?" Gunnar asked. As Neo's head of security, it was customary.

"That won't be necessary." Neo returned his attention to Ramiro. "Tell me exactly what King Kildare said when you asked him about the sword."

Ramiro shifted in his chair. "He said the sword had never belonged to Morwyn. That Morwyn stole it from Faelan, but he managed to get it back when Morwyn was exiled to Tartarus. Faelan, in turn, gave it to Ian. According to Ian, the sword has nothing to do with the war."

Gunnar was still reeling from Neo's dismissal. Had he already been replaced? His gaze slid to Haig. They appeared cool and confident, as usual.

"Gunnar," Neo prompted.

Gunnar looked away from Haig to find the entire table of Blessed Creatures staring at him. "Sorry. Did you ask me something?"

Neo's lips thinned with unspoken anger. He stood and indicated the door. "I need to talk to you out in the hall."

Fuck! Gunnar rose before following Neo out of the conference room. "I'm sorry," he said as soon as they were alone.

Neo's expression softened. "What's going on with you lately, besides the obvious?"

Gunnar stuck his hands in his pockets. Should he lay everything out for Neo or hold back? "Are you going to replace me?" he blurted out.

"I hadn't planned on it, but I'm suddenly questioning your commitment."

"Then why aren't you taking me to your meeting with King Kildare?" Did he think Ramiro was enough protection? *Surely not*. Ramiro may be working with Neo but he'd sworn allegiance to Kildare.

"I need answers from Ian, and if I show up with you, he'll immediately get defensive. Besides, I need you to gather your best men to surround the pack land in Galway. There's been a lot of traffic lately in and out, and I want to know why."

Neo's answers helped to soothe Gunnar's ego. "Will we be allowed to engage them should they step out of the ward?"

"No, not unless they attack first. I want Morwyn and Juniper to know they're being watched. You'll report everything back to me, Spiro or Ramiro."

"Why Ramiro?" Despite what Neo had told him only a few seconds earlier, it sounded to Gunnar as if Ramiro was Neo's new confidant.

Neo crossed his arms over his chest. "What's your problem with Ramiro? He's gone above and beyond anything I've ever asked of him. Damn, Gunnar, the man got you through the transition without even being asked. He's done more for you than probably anyone in your entire life. So why the disdain?"

Why indeed? "It seems as though he's trying to take my place, I guess."

With a heavy sigh, Neo uncrossed his arms before putting his hands on Gunnar's shoulders. "I can see why you think that, but honestly, I think he's just trying to pick up some of your slack. You have to admit you haven't been one hundred percent on your game lately. We all know the transition's been hard for you so we've given you time and space. Ramiro's trying to help you. Don't hate him for it. Thank him."

Gunnar's spine stiffened. He squared his shoulders and looked Neo in the eyes. "I don't need someone else to do my job. I'll have my men ready as soon as you give the word." He reached for the doorknob, but Neo stopped him.

"On a personal note, I have information that Rafi's been seen in Gort, a town just south of Galway. I can't talk about it in the meeting for obvious reasons, but I need you to find out what the hell he's doing there. I would never expect Juniper to work with a weretiger, but stranger things have happened."

Gunnar understood the personal nature of the request. The last time anyone had seen Neo's long-time lover, Rafi had physically attacked Michael. Before running off, the

weretiger had sworn that one day Neo and Michael would be sorry for the way he'd been treated. "I'll poke around, and see what I can find."

"Thanks," Neo said before opening the door.

Gunnar noticed Ramiro watching him when he pulled out his chair to resume his seat. He met Ramiro's gaze and held it for several moments. A wealth of emotions coursed through him. When the corner of Ramiro's mouth turned up in a grin, Gunnar's cock hardened. Careful not to give his condition away, Gunnar broke eye contact and returned his attention to Neo.

Thirty minutes later, Haig ended his initial report on the years of abuse his sister had suffered during her marriage to Juniper. Numbed by all that he had heard, Gunnar noticed the way Galena failed to make eye contact with anyone at the table.

It was obvious by the silence in the room that Gunnar wasn't the only one affected by the horrific details. It was Spiro who spoke first, using a soft, non-threatening tone of voice. "Galena? Can you tell me if you've ever seen this?" he asked, before passing a copy of Cronus's sickle across the table.

Galena's gaze scanned the photo before shaking her head.

"Use your words, sweetheart," Haig encouraged with an arm around his sister.

"No," she eventually answered.

Gunnar noticed the brief, unspoken exchange between Spiro and Neo. Spiro drew back the picture and returned it to the folder. "Did Juniper ever mention Morwyn by name?"

Galena's blonde eyebrows drew together. "No." She glanced at Haig. "Although he sometimes talked about his Master. Right before Juniper put me in the cage, I came into the bedroom and Juniper was lying in bed talking to someone in a language I didn't know." Galena shook her head. "But there was no one else in the room. When I asked him who he was talking to, he told me the Master. The next day he had my cage built."

"The Master," Neo said aloud. "Is that the only name Juniper used?"

Galena nodded. "Yes."

The meeting ended shortly afterwards. Neo stopped Gunnar on the way out. "Michael's getting the supplies ready for you and your men. Spiro will accompany you long enough to place protective wards around your campsites."

"Do you want just the weres or should I call in some of the vamps from The Realm army?"

Neo scratched his jaw as he entered the hallway. "I'll leave that up to you." Neo pounded Gunnar on the back. "Despite what you seem to think, I still believe in your abilities to head this up for me."

"Thank you." It was the first positive reinforcement Gunnar had received since being kidnapped. "I won't let you down."

With a final nod, Neo turned the corner and disappeared.

"How long before you leave?" Ramiro asked, coming up behind Gunnar.

"As soon as I can muster the guards and brief them on the mission. Why?"

"I'm accompanying Spiro. Just wondered how long I had." Ramiro leant his hip against the wall. "I'd also like the chance to speak to you in private."

Gunnar knew Ramiro would need to leave soon for his meeting with Neo and Kildare. He motioned for Ramiro to follow him back into the conference room. Once Ramiro was in and the door was shut, Gunnar turned to face the gorgeous vampire. He had a few questions of his own. "Why'd you stay with me after Richard turned me?"

"Because you needed someone to help you through the transition, and I was the only one strong enough to control you."

"Really? That's the only reason?" Gunnar prodded. It wasn't just Neo who seemed to enjoy reminding Gunnar of everything Ramiro had done for him in those early days. Michael loved to wax poetic about how it was Ramiro's constant vigilance that had kept Gunnar from going insane during his transformation.

"What else are you willing to hear, Gunnar? So far every time I try to tell you something, you just push me away."

Gunnar realised Ramiro was right. "I don't mean to."

"Liar," Ramiro said, taking several steps towards him.

"You make me feel weak," Gunnar admitted.

Ramiro slowly shook his head. "No I don't. It's not weakness you feel. It's loss of control." Ramiro put his hand on Gunnar's hip, before sliding it around to rest on the small of his back. "Guess what?" he whispered against Gunnar's mouth.

Mesmerised by the dark eyes staring into his own, Gunnar could barely speak. "What?"

"Losing control isn't a bad thing when it's done with someone you trust." Ramiro kissed Gunnar's bottom lip, sucking the tingling flesh for several moments before releasing it. "I have no desire to control you. I just want to be with you."

Hard and aching, Gunnar ground his erection against Ramiro's. It felt much different from grinding against his hand or the mattress. He opened his mouth for Ramiro's kiss and tried to concentrate on the moment, pushing aside any lingering doubts. *I can do this.*

Ramiro must have sensed the moment Gunnar gave in, because suddenly the sexy vampire took things to the next level. Gunnar groaned into the deep kiss as Ramiro's strong hands began to squeeze his ass. "Want you," Ramiro growled, breaking the kiss to bite and suck Gunnar's lips.

Never had Gunnar experienced such passion in a lover. Of course his experiences were limited to quick fucks in the forest back in Norway. He'd not even had that since he'd killed his father. *Shit!* He quickly tried to push the memories away.

Once again, Ramiro seemed to sense his mood. He pulled back and stared into Gunnar's eyes. "Something wrong?"

Gunnar shook his head. He was so fucking mad at himself he didn't know what to say.

Ramiro kissed his way to Gunnar's ear. "Let me in," he whispered.

"There are dark places inside of me," Gunnar mumbled. How could he possibly admit to Ramiro that he'd murdered his own father?

"Darkness lives in all of us." Ramiro kissed Gunnar's neck while he lowered the zip on Gunnar's jeans. "Let me hold you in the dark."

Gunnar's eyes closed as he pressed his cheek against Ramiro's. Gods, he wanted to believe. The first touch of Ramiro's hand on his bare cock almost tipped Gunnar over the edge. *No!* He wouldn't let it end with him coming in Ramiro's palm. Spurred into action, he managed to open the fancy slide-hook on Ramiro's dress slacks before lowering the zipper. "I want to feel you wrapped around me when I come."

Ramiro's nostrils flared. He spat into the palm of his hand and reached behind his back. "Let me show you what trust really means."

Gunnar followed Ramiro's lead and slicked his aching cock with saliva. He was ashamed to admit he hadn't thought of lube. In wolf form, such niceties weren't a consideration when natural instincts called.

After several moments, Ramiro turned around. He braced his hands on the table before glancing over his shoulder. "Fuck me."

Gunnar swallowed around the lump in his throat as he stepped close enough to press the head of his cock against Ramiro's stretched hole. Should he say anything or just do it? It was yet another difference between fucking in fur versus flesh.

"Just do it. You won't hurt me," Ramiro encouraged, leaning farther over the table.

Gunnar held the base of his cock and pushed the crown of his erection through the outer ring of muscles. He gasped when Ramiro's body seemed to suck his cock deeper. Nothing in all his life had felt so good. Once his length was fully inside Ramiro, Gunnar placed one hand on top of Ramiro's shoulder while he rested the other on the vampire's hip. The urge to thrust soon became overwhelming. "Can I?"

"Please," Ramiro pleaded.

Gunnar pulled out until just the head remained inside before surging forwards. His stomach turned over at the sheer pleasure coursing through his body as he did it again. Soon he had a steady rhythm set. He gave up control to his instincts, aware that this part of fucking was the same no matter what form he was in. On each inward thrust, he began to grunt, and found he enjoyed the sound of his own voice taking pleasure in Ramiro's body.

"So good... So much better," Ramiro mumbled, reaching back to touch Gunnar's hip.

The phone in Ramiro's pants' pocket began to ring, interrupting Gunnar's rhythm. "Don't stop," Ramiro growled.

Gunnar picked up his pace once again, and tried to ignore the phone. It was Neo, no doubt. The thought of his time with Ramiro coming to an end before they both came was unthinkable. He released his hold on Ramiro's hip and wrapped his hand around the fat cock sliding across the tabletop.

Ramiro's body responded by squeezing Gunnar's cock on each thrust. "Can't hold it any longer," Gunnar warned, moments before the first strand of seed shot from his cock. Before he realised what he was doing, his fangs slid from their sheaths and sank into the soft flesh of Ramiro's neck. The blood that poured into his mouth was bitter, old tasting, pulling him back to his senses. He automatically licked the wound and waited for Ramiro to start yelling at him.

Ramiro's chest was flat on the table, and Gunnar realised his hand was not only sandwiched under his lover, but covered in cum.

"Sorry," Gunnar mumbled.

"Shhh," Ramiro said, trying to regain his breath.

It had been the first time Gunnar had actually bitten someone. He hoped biting a fellow vampire wasn't considered taboo. The thought froze Gunnar in place. *Fellow vampire.*

Acknowledgment of his realisation was on the tip of his tongue when Ramiro's phone began to ring. *Saved by the bell.* Gunnar pulled out of Ramiro's body and took a step back. "It's probably time for your meeting."

Ramiro turned around and pulled Gunnar into his arms. "Promise me you won't run away."

"I've got to get to Galway," Gunnar answered.

"You know what I mean." Ramiro pulled Gunnar in for a deep kiss. When his cell phone rang for a third time, Ramiro groaned and pulled away. "I'll be there in two minutes." He set the phone on the table and reached down for his pants. "Get your guards gathered while I take care of this issue with Ian."

"Have you decided whether or not Ian's telling the truth?" Gunnar asked, adjusting his clothes.

"No. I'm hoping Neo can draw out the truth." Ramiro opened the door. "Should I ask Ian about sending some of my guys with you?"

"I'll use vamps from The Realm detail. I'd rather not get too involved with Ian until we know where he stands." He started to pass, but Ramiro stepped in front of him.

"My guards are good men and loyal to *me*, first and foremost. If you need them let me know."

With one last peck on the lips, Ramiro was off, disappearing in front of Gunnar's eyes. He'd yet to learn that particular trick, but Ramiro had assured him it would come in time, once he'd fully embraced who he was. Gunnar wasn't at all sure it was worth it.

* * * *

Neo was waiting for Ramiro at Ian's palace gate. "It's about time."

"Sorry." Ramiro took a step forward and waited for the gate to open.

"So what's going on between you two?" Neo asked.

Ramiro didn't bother to play ignorant. "Gunnar's stubborn, but I think I'm wearing him down."

Neo glanced at Ramiro and grinned. "Shouldn't be too tough—I don't think he's had sex in centuries."

Ramiro pulled Neo to a stop before they reached the palace doors. Had he known, he'd have waited until they could spend more time together. "You're kidding me, right?"

Neo shook his head. "He's been at the vineyard for nearly two-hundred and sixty years and has a very strict rule about not sleeping with the weres who report to him. So unless he's sneaking off into the woods with one of the strays from town, he's celibate."

Not anymore. Ramiro knew that nugget of information would continue to nag at him until he spoke to Gunnar about it. He couldn't imagine a life without the touch of another male. Even the touch of a donor was enough to remind him he'd once been human. "I guess that could explain his growly disposition," he mumbled.

The doors opened and Neo and Ramiro were ushered inside. Ramiro greeted Ian's house steward, Allister. "Will you ask the King if he'll see us?" He could have gone to ask Ian on his own, but with an unannounced visitor in tow, Ramiro felt it was best to follow protocol.

"He hasn't come down yet this evening, but I shall see if he's available," Allister answered before going off in search of King Kildare.

While they waited, Neo walked around the reception room with his hands clasped behind his back. "Quite a place," he commented, staring at the gilded columns.

Ramiro smiled. Neo's vineyard home was vastly different from Ian's over-the-top decorating style. "Yeah, it's not for everyone, but I think it makes Ian happy."

"Well that's the most important thing, I guess." Neo span around when an alarm sounded.

"Ian," Ramiro yelled, before dashing up the winding staircase. In the hallway, just outside Ian's bedroom, Allister was bent over, a pile of vomit at his feet. "Where are the guards?"

Allister pointed towards the open door. "Dead."

Ramiro glanced over his shoulder at Neo before proceeding into the room. He stopped just inside the doorway, sickened by the scene in front of him. No wonder Allister was currently emptying the contents of his stomach.

The nude bodies of the two vampires assigned to guard the King's door were arranged on the bed. "This is all wrong," he mumbled. "Ian didn't fuck vampires." He knew he was

the exception, but his past relationship with Ian wasn't in question. Besides, Ian had never fucked him.

Neo pointed to the two heads positioned on the mantel. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Ramiro glanced at the faces of two of his best guards, Rodrick and Warden. He couldn't help but feel he'd let his men down. His gaze zeroed in on the hooks that had once held the case containing the sword.

Ramiro ventured farther into the room. Other than the headless bodies on the bed, there were no other signs of a struggle. *What the hell are you up to, Ian?* Had the King been taken, or had Ian been the one responsible for the guards' death?

Neo must have been thinking the same thing. "How'd Ian act the last time you saw him?"

"Protective of the sword. I don't think he appreciated being asked about it." Once again, Ramiro chose not to tell Neo about Ian's desire to be fucked. "He seemed adamant the sword wasn't Morwyn's though. What do you know about Faelan?"

Neo chuckled. "What does anyone know about Faelan?" He shook his head. "He's like the Phantom of The Realm. I've heard about him since I was a child, but only his name."

"What about Zeus? Could he tell us anything?"

"No. Now whether he really doesn't know anything about Faelan or just refuses to tell me I don't know, but I did ask."

It didn't make sense to Ramiro. If Faelan had the ability to remove himself from books and paintings, did he also fade memories of himself from the minds of Blessed Creatures? Ramiro turned from the fireplace and headed towards the hallway. He addressed the guards who had gathered. "King Kildare's missing."

"How?" one of the guards asked. "The ward should've stopped anyone trying to get past it without authorisation."

"Exactly," Ramiro mumbled. Did he dare voice his concern that Ian had killed the two vampires and disappeared with the sword? No, better to wait until he knew more. "I'll handle the King's disappearance. Until we find him, there's no need to guard the palace as we have been." Ramiro turned to address Neo, "My men are at your disposal if you need them."

"Thank you, I just might," Neo answered.

After giving orders for the removal of the two bodies, Ramiro followed Neo back to The Realm palace.

"Any ideas?" Neo asked on the way.

"My gut tells me it had to either be someone more powerful than Ian's ward or Ian himself."

"My thoughts exactly. So, that begs the question—who has the ability to get through Ian's ward?" Neo led Ramiro towards the library.

"Faelan or Morwyn, take your pick." The possible motive chilled Ramiro to the bone.

"Why not just take the sword? What would they need Ian for?" Neo pushed the button that revealed the hidden staircase down to the vault.

"You mean you don't know?" Ramiro was confused. He'd thought Neo knew everything about the Blessed Creatures.

"Know what?"

"Ian was the first. Without him, we would be the soulless creatures you see in movies. It's the reason I've dedicated my life to ensuring his safety." Ramiro knew Neo had never fully accepted his vampire side. "None of us asked to become what we are. If my service to Ian can help protect the souls of my brethren, I'll do everything in my power to guarantee his welfare."

Neo bit his bottom lip. It was obvious to Ramiro that Neo was unaware of Ian's importance to the vampire creatures other than being their king. "Then I guess we need to find him."

"Yes. It's possible he'll be used as a bargaining chip at some point. What better way to control a legion of vampires who value their souls?" The outcome, should something happen to Ian, was unthinkable.

"Are you coming down?" Neo asked from the top of the vault's staircase.

"No. I've got to meet up with Spiro. I tend to lose all sense of time when I'm in the vault," Ramiro explained.

Neo stared at Ramiro for several moments. "Will Gunnar be safe from the sunlight in one of the regular tents? I'm ashamed to admit I forget he's not were anymore."

"I've got a tent that's designed especially for vampires. I'll make sure he uses it."

"Good." Neo took several steps down. "I'll see you back here tomorrow evening."

Ramiro was surprised. "Are you sure you don't want me to accompany Spiro back?"

“He’ll be fine once he leaves Galway. I’ll let you know if I find anything out about Ian. For now, just...enjoy the time you have with Gunnar.” It was easy enough to read Neo’s mind. If something did happen to Ian, Ramiro wouldn’t be the only one to lose his soul. “I could say the same thing to you. Why don’t you ask Michael to join you?”

“Oh, I plan to,” Neo chuckled.

Ramiro turned away from the vault’s entrance. He felt like he was standing on the edge of disaster, but what could he possibly do about it other than enjoy the time he had?

Chapter Four

With the night drawing to a close, Gunnar stood beside Haig. "Keep an eye out for Rafi," he told his friend. There was only one road into the pack lands and it divided Gunnar's newly set-up camp from Haig, Kern and Audric's.

Haig nodded. "I heard." He glanced over his shoulder at Kern and Audric who were busy setting up the protective vampire-grade tent. "How much danger do you think we're in? The pack has to know we're here."

"Spiro's trying to finish up the wards around all our campsites. That'll protect us as long as we stay within the perimeter. As of right now, our jobs are to observe and report back to Neo, nothing more." Gunnar knew it was harder for Haig to remain calm while being so close to the were who had tortured his sister for centuries, but they still didn't know what they were up against. "If we're given the go-ahead to engage, believe me, we won't leave you out of the fight."

"I appreciate that."

Spiro appeared with Ramiro at his side. In full protective-mode, Ramiro made Gunnar's mouth water. Gods, he longed to run his hands over the vampire's muscled chest. Gunnar's cock hardened when Ramiro made eye contact. "Finished?" Gunnar asked Spiro.

"Yes, and just in time." He gestured at the horizon. "Sun'll be up soon."

"We need to get you back to your campsite," Ramiro told Gunnar.

Gunnar was slowly getting used to the change in his sleeping schedule. It didn't take long for him to figure out his strength diminished drastically at dawn. He knew Ramiro could go a day or so without sleep, but Ramiro had been a vampire a hell of a lot longer than he had. Gunnar slapped Haig on the shoulder. "Keep your eyes open and log everything you see. I'll check in with you this evening."

Gunnar started towards his campsite, eyes open for any sign of Juniper or his pack of monsters.

"Wait up," Ramiro called, jogging after him.

Gunnar glanced over his shoulder to see Spiro had disappeared. "Don't you have to accompany Spiro?"

"No. I'm here for the day," Ramiro said, falling in stride next to Gunnar.

"The day?" Gunnar's heart began to beat faster at the implication. Would they repeat their earlier actions?

Ramiro brushed his hand against Gunnar's thigh. "Is that okay?"

Gunnar's throat went dry. "More than."

Ramiro grabbed Gunnar's hand and led him inside the tent. He zipped the flaps against the first rays of sunlight, plunging the space into darkness.

"Guess this fancy tent of yours works," Gunnar said. He'd been directing his men on where to set up camp when Ramiro had arrived with the special light-blocking tent. Although he could see, his vision was tinted red. In wolf-form, Gunnar had seen through the darkness in black and white. The red was one more reminder of what he'd become. "Is there a lamp or something in here?"

"You don't need it," Ramiro reminded him, unbuttoning his shirt.

"No, I don't, but I think I'd prefer it." Gunnar watched as Ramiro moved to the corner of the tent and turned on a small battery-operated lantern. "Does that help?"

Gunnar nodded before pulling off his T-shirt. The bed was nothing more than a thick sleeping bag laid out with a blanket on top, but to him it was full of promise. Was he hoping for more than Ramiro was willing to give? *Probably*. But it didn't stop him from secretly wanting it.

Ramiro wasted no time in undressing. He dug a small tube of lube out of his jacket pocket and slipped it under the sleeping bag.

Gunnar could tell Ramiro was trying to be subtle. Knowing Ramiro's motives were to put Gunnar at ease made him trust the hot vampire even more than he already did. Their brief encounter earlier had left him hungry for more. But this time he was anxious to hold Ramiro afterwards. Something he hadn't desired for many years.

"Stop worrying," Ramiro said, pulling Gunnar into his arms. He brushed his lips across Gunnar's temple, ending the gesture with a soft kiss. "Feel me," he whispered in Gunnar's ear.

Gunnar closed his eyes when Ramiro slowly lowered his zipper.

"Lay down and I'll take off your boots," Ramiro instructed.

"I can do it," Gunnar returned.

"Of course you can. You've been doing for yourself for centuries, but now it's my turn to do for you." Ramiro knelt and began to untie Gunnar's military-style boots. "It's been a long time since I had someone to take care of."

Ramiro's voice was so soft, so gentle, Gunnar almost missed the pain in it. He wanted to argue that he didn't need taking care of, but something in that deep cadence stopped him. Who had Ramiro taken care of?

Ramiro stared up at Gunnar. "Lie down. Please," he added.

With his jeans pushed down to mid-thigh, Gunnar fell back onto the sleeping bag. He wanted to ask Ramiro about his past, but decided it wasn't the time.

Soon, Gunnar was naked and accepting a deep kiss. The brush of Ramiro's cock as he fitted himself between Gunnar's legs made him groan. Needing more, Gunnar wrapped his legs around Ramiro's waist. Gods, the press of Ramiro's cock as he ground himself against Gunnar was beyond anything he'd experienced in his short-lived sexual past. "Skin feels so much better than fur," Gunnar said, breaking the kiss.

Ramiro's hips stilled. "You say that like you've never done this before."

Although he hated to admit his lack of experience to someone as sexually active as Ramiro, Gunnar knew it was important to be honest. "Before yesterday, I'd never fucked in human form, and never face to face. Back home, there were a couple of like-minded weres, but it was forbidden. What we did, we did quickly and deep in the forest."

Instead of being disgusted, like Gunnar had assumed, Ramiro smiled. "Man, are you in for a treat."

After another quick kiss, Ramiro began licking his way down Gunnar's neck and chest. He stopped at each nipple to tease and bite before moving on. The attention made Gunnar squirm. It was too much and not enough. He nudged Ramiro's shoulders, hoping to feel that lapping tongue on his cock. "Please," he begged.

Gunnar was on the verge of giving up control, something he'd never done. As Ramiro moved further down his body, Gunnar began to worry. Would he always be at Ramiro's mercy? As Ramiro's tongue swirled around the head of his cock, Gunnar had his answer. Fuck, he could handle being on the receiving end of Ramiro's mouth for a few centuries.

Gunnar buried one hand in Ramiro's thick, black hair while he grabbed the base of his cock with the other. He needed to feel the vampire's throat. Once again, begging was in the forefront of his mind, but Ramiro quickly took the hint and swallowed Gunnar's cock.

"Ahhhh, fuck!" Gunnar yelled, thrusting deeper.

Ramiro released Gunnar's cock and chuckled. "If you plan to fuck me, I'd better back off."

It only took a moment's hesitation before Gunnar shook his head. "I want to know what it feels like to...you know?"

Ramiro smiled. "Yes, I know." He reached over to the hidden tube of lube. "It'll be easier for you on your hands and knees," he explained.

"No," Gunnar said with a shake of his head. "I want to feel like a man, not a wolf."

Ramiro took a deep breath. "Okay." He leant back on his heels and bent Gunnar's legs at the knees, placing his feet flat on the ground. "I'll go slow. Just tell me if you become uncomfortable."

Although Gunnar understood that Ramiro was trying to be gentle with him, the comment made him bristle. "I'm not a fucking kid. I know what's involved."

Ramiro grinned and held up his hands. "Fine." He squirted some lube onto his fingers and ran them down the crease of Gunnar's ass.

The moment the pad of Ramiro's middle finger began circling Gunnar's hole, he knew he was in trouble. Despite what he'd agreed to, Ramiro would no doubt draw the torture out for as long as possible. Gunnar lifted his legs, trying to figure out how to give Ramiro better access to his hole. Maybe Ramiro had been right and he should turn over.

"Hook your arms under your knees and lift them to your chest," Ramiro said, interrupting Gunnar's thoughts.

The moment Gunnar complied, he felt the first finger press against his hole. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out as Ramiro sank in to the second knuckle. It wasn't pain he felt at the intrusion, but the last of his reserve slipping away. He would do anything, be anything, if only he could know what it felt like to truly belong to someone.

Ramiro placed his hand low on Gunnar's stomach and added another finger to his ass. "Feel," he whispered.

Gunnar's hips jerked as Ramiro pressed against his prostate. Of course he'd found that pleasurable spot before, but it felt completely different when nudged by someone else. "Again," he growled.

Laughing, Ramiro prodded his prostate once more before withdrawing his fingers.

"Hey," Gunnar scolded.

One of Ramiro's black eyebrows rose. "Patience." He reached for the lube and slicked his cock, before positioning himself at Gunnar's hole. "I've thought of this. So many mornings I lay in bed and dreamt of this day."

Before entering Gunnar, Ramiro reached up and cupped his cheek. He opened his mouth, but no words were spoken. Closing it, Ramiro gave a slight shake of his head. "Ready?"

Unable to speak around the sudden knot of emotions in his throat, Gunnar nodded. He held on to his legs as Ramiro's cock pushed slowly inside. Although the pain was more than he'd expected, it wasn't the worst he'd ever experienced. Still, he had to wonder... "Does it get easier?" he finally asked.

Ramiro stopped. "It'll take your body a minute to adjust, but I promise it'll be worth it." He rubbed Gunnar's stomach. "Just relax and breathe."

Gunnar's eyes closed as his head fell back to the sleeping bag. He did as instructed and, within moments, the pain seemed to lessen. Sighing, Gunnar grinned. "You were right."

"Of course. Did you doubt me?" Ramiro asked, amusement in his voice.

Opening his eyes, Gunnar scowled. "Stop being smug and fuck me."

Laughing, Ramiro slowly slid in, an inch at a time, until Gunnar felt the vampire's balls press against him. "How's that?"

"Good," Gunnar answered honestly. "Damn good."

Ramiro stretched out, resting his chest against Gunnar's, and kissed him. "Put your legs around me," he whispered after breaking the deep tongue-probe.

Gunnar released his legs and groaned. "I'm too old to be a pretzel anyway."

"No you're not." Ramiro nipped Gunnar's bottom lip. He pulled out before pushing back inside. "But I prefer to feel you wrapped around me." Ramiro stared into Gunnar's eyes as he began thrusting in and out.

There was something unspoken happening between them, and Gunnar wondered whether he'd ever be able to walk away unscathed. Each time Ramiro sank deep into Gunnar's body it felt almost like a brand to Gunnar. Whether Ramiro knew it or not, it seemed vampires were capable of love because in that moment, Gunnar knew he was in love.

Only once before had he thought himself in love, but he now knew the truth. What he had felt for Brandr had been a crush, nothing more. He'd never lain with the older were, had

never been asked. Why would a strong beta like Brandr look twice at a pup like Gunnar when he could have Gunnar's father?

Gunnar gasped at the rush of pain and emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. He'd long ago buried the memories of his life before leaving Norway.

Ramiro slowed his rhythm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just the past trying to break in to the present." He knew he would eventually have to tell Ramiro about the darkness that lived within him, but not yet. If their relationship continued to develop, he would lower his walls. He pulled Ramiro's head down for a kiss. He aggressively probed the interior of Ramiro's mouth with his tongue, hoping to drive away the demons that still haunted him.

Ramiro's thrusts increased in speed and intensity the longer they kissed. Perhaps Ramiro had his own demons to rid himself of?

Gunnar wrapped his legs higher around Ramiro's back, giving himself room to reach his cock. As the erotic tongue duel continued, he began stroking his dick. He was close. He just needed that little bit... Gunnar pinched the sensitive spot just under the head of his cock and erupted. His body jerking with the force of his climax, Gunnar broke the kiss and howled Ramiro's name.

"Fuck! So good," Ramiro yelled, loud enough for the entire region to hear. His body bucked as he filled Gunnar with heat.

Gunnar's eyes popped open at the warmth invading his persistently cold body. For the first time since he'd been kidnapped, he felt something other than the constant chill in his bones. "Heat," he gasped, still trying to catch his breath.

Ramiro chuckled. "Yes." He collapsed on top of Gunnar and kissed his neck. "There are only two things that can give vampires that kind of comfort, fucking and feeding."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Gunnar asked.

When Ramiro remained silent, Gunnar rolled until they lay side by side. "Answer me."

Moving to rest his head on Gunnar's shoulder, Ramiro licked his lips. "I wanted you to want me without incentives. Can you understand that?"

Gunnar nodded. "I needed to be ready," he surmised.

"Yes," Ramiro confirmed.

"But what about feeding? I've tasted your blood and it's obvious vampires aren't meant to feed from each other, so why not at least tell me about feeding from others?"

"Honestly? Same reason. I've seen vampires come to hate themselves for feeding on the living because they were forced into it too early. I wanted you to love it as much as I do, but for the right reason, not just to feel warm."

"Why *do* you love it?" Gunnar asked. He'd watched vampires feed and never understood the draw. It seemed...cheap, like trading sexual favours for money or, in the case of a vampire, blood.

Ramiro's fingers wandered across Gunnar's chest to his right nipple. "According to Ian, vampires were created to be aggressive, ruthless soldiers to protect Zeus and The Realm. After Ian was created, he was sent out to capture and change others, and they in turn brought even more vampires into existence. Unfortunately, once the threat from Morwyn was no longer an issue, there was little use for vampires and they were released into the world. So although vampires were suddenly free, they still had killer instincts."

Ramiro brushed his thumb back and forth over Gunnar's nipple. "LaMont was also one of the first created by Ian, and we both know what kind of vampire he was."

"Sadistic," Gunnar mumbled, thinking of the torture Neo had gone through at LaMont's hands.

"Yes. Some of the vampires were willing to adapt to life among humans. They were quick to discover humans would welcome a bite if they were given pleasure in exchange. For the vampires it was a way to get what they had to have while still fulfilling their need to dominate their prey." Ramiro leant in and kissed Gunnar's collarbone.

Gunnar tilted his head to the side. "Do you have to fuck them though?" he had to ask.

"No, but until you, I didn't have anyone else in particular I wanted to fuck." Ramiro released the skin between his teeth and gazed into Gunnar's eyes. "I like to fuck."

Ramiro's hand travelled from Gunnar's stomach down to his inner thigh. Gunnar held his breath each time Ramiro's thumb grazed his sac. "I'm not here for a one-time thing. I can get that at The Frenzy."

"Don't remind me," Gunnar growled. He grabbed Ramiro by the back of the neck and pulled him forwards until their lips barely touched. "I won't share."

"Outside of what is required to feed, neither will I," Ramiro said before sealing his lips to Gunnar's.

Gunnar accepted Ramiro's tongue. Feeding was necessary, he knew that, but did that mean Ramiro would continue to fuck his food? It would be a problem between them unless

they could come to an arrangement. Gunnar considered himself a fair person, but could he really compromise on something so important to him?

* * * *

Ramiro woke before Gunnar. Although the sun was sinking lower over the horizon, it wouldn't be healthy for Gunnar to emerge from the tent's shelter until it was completely set. He pulled on his wrinkled pants and shirt before venturing outside into the cool rain.

The thought of Gunnar sitting out all night in the cold, wet Irish climate troubled Ramiro. Hands on his hips, he looked around the area. He spotted Haig in the distance and decided to have a quick word with him.

Ramiro closed his eyes and focussed on the signature of Haig's unique energy. He'd learnt to harness his gifts from Ian, and doubted there was another vampire, besides the King himself, who knew exactly what vampires were truly capable of. He felt the wind blow through him as he vanished from Gunnar's campsite to join Haig.

"Damn it! Warn a guy next time," Haig growled.

"Sorry." Ramiro tried to cover his smile by turning his head and glancing back towards Gunnar's camp. He didn't need to ask where Kern was. The erotic sounds coming from the tent made him uncomfortably hard, especially knowing there was a naked vampire only a few hundred yards away.

He turned his attention back to Haig. "Have you seen anything?"

Haig snorted. "Only a small army of those fucking freaks staring at me from the trees."

Ramiro had gone into the Galway camp with Neo to rescue Galena, so he understood why Haig referred to the hybridised weres as freaks. "Did they try to engage you in any way?"

"No. They just stared at us. I gotta tell you, knowing what those bastards did to my sister, it took everything I had not to charge them. Promise me if it ever comes to battle, you'll let me lead the fight."

Ramiro respected Haig's need for vengeance, but he also knew it wouldn't be a wise decision. "How about this? If and when we get the go-ahead to engage, I'll make sure you're with us. However, we both know Neo won't sit back and let us fight without him."

Haig dipped his head. "Juniper?"

"Neo and I already talked about that. We have a few questions for Juniper, but after we're done with him, he's all yours."

"Thanks."

The noise in the tent ended. The silence reminded Ramiro of why he'd come over in the first place. "Do me a favour and keep an eye on Gunnar's camp. I don't like him being alone at night, but I've got to find Ian. I'll be with him during the daylight hours, but he'll be on his own the rest of the time."

"No he won't," Kern said, coming out of the tent. "Gunnar's always been there for me and Haig. We won't let anything happen to him."

Ramiro squeezed Kern's shoulder. "Don't let him know you're watching him."

Haig and Kern both laughed. "We've worked for Gunnar a long time," Kern said. "No need to warn us about his temper."

Ramiro acknowledged the relationship Gunnar had with his guards with a nod of his head. "I'll leave you to it. See you in the morning." He didn't wait for an answer. Within a split second he was inside the tent, standing in front of a half-dressed Gunnar.

"Dammit!" Gunnar shouted.

Ramiro laughed. "That's exactly what Haig said when I popped in to his camp."

"What were you doing over there?" Gunnar asked, pulling on his T-shirt.

"Just checking in. He said Juniper's freaks stared at them all day. Make sure you keep a close eye on the trees."

Gunnar grabbed Ramiro around his waist and pulled him in. "Don't worry about me. I've got to go into town anyway, to try and catch up with Rafi."

"Let me do that," Ramiro offered.

"Neo asked me to do it," Gunnar argued.

"I know, and I'll talk to him about it first, but it's safer for me. The thought of you going all the way into town without the protection of a ward is too much for Neo to ask of you, especially here." Ramiro knew he was taking a chance. His relationship with Gunnar was too new to know how the newly-turned vampire would feel about his protective streak.

Gunnar stared off into space for several moments before answering. "I'll do whatever Neo wants me to do. To be honest, I'm not sure Rafi would give me any information anyway. When he left, he didn't think much of anyone at the vineyard."

Ramiro leant in for a kiss. He would have loved to spend the evening sitting around a fire with Gunnar, but there were too many things to be done. Once the danger was behind them, he hoped they would have a long time to enjoy their nights together.

"I need you to promise me something," Gunnar said, breaking the kiss.

"If I can," Ramiro answered.

"When you get back to The Realm to feed, no fucking."

"Didn't plan on it. I'll be back here in less than twelve hours anyway. I think I can control myself that long." It bothered Ramiro that Gunnar felt the need to ask. It would definitely be something they would have to discuss further.

Chapter Five

Soaked to the bone from the constant light rain, Gunnar continued to watch the treeline. Although he couldn't see anyone, he could definitely smell them. The odour was a combination of raw sewage and rotting meat. "Where are you, you bastards?" he whispered.

Gunnar continued to wait, bored out of his mind. He'd already spent the first couple of hours thinking about Ramiro. If it hadn't been for the eyes he knew were watching him, he would have taken out his aching cock to relieve himself.

Movement in the trees brought Gunnar to his feet. All at once, the trees seemed to step closer. "Fuck!" It wasn't the trees, it was Juniper's freaks. Shoulder to shoulder, a line of freaks began to march towards him.

Suddenly, Audric appeared inside the protective ward of Gunnar's camp. "Thought you might need some backup."

"Do you see the size of those bastards? I don't think backup is going to help me much if they've figured out a way to get past Spiro's magic."

"There must be at least a hundred of them," Audric mumbled. "Should I wake Kern and Haig?"

Gunnar glanced towards Audric's camp to see the two weres scrambling out of their tent, half-dressed. "No need. I think they smelt them coming."

"Shit. Be right back."

In an instant, Audric was gone. Gunnar was beginning to see the upside to being a vampire. He really needed to learn that particular talent. Pulling out his phone, he called Ramiro.

"Hey," Ramiro answered.

"Something's happening. I've got about a hundred freaks coming my way."

"Shit. I'll call Neo and be right there."

Gunnar shoved the phone back into his pocket just as Audric appeared with Kern and Haig. "Ramiro's on the way."

"Good. He's the only one of us who knows what Juniper looks like," Haig said, stepping to the edge of the ward.

"They don't look like they're out for our blood," Audric commented.

"No, they don't. As a matter of fact, they look more like zombies than living creatures. Look at their eyes. There seems to be nothing behind them." Gunnar felt a hand on his lower back and turned to find Ramiro standing just behind him.

Ramiro ran his hand down Gunnar's ass. "Neo's on his way, despite Michael's very vocal protests."

Gunnar felt his cock begin to harden at the brief touch. No. It wasn't the time. He tried to focus on the threat marching their way. "What's wrong with them?"

"They have no soul," Neo answered.

Gunnar turned to face his boss. "How is that possible?"

"Evidently it's the price they've paid for their increased size and strength." Neo moved to stand beside Haig. "Under no circumstances are you to step outside this ward, you understand?"

Haig's hands fisted at his sides but he eventually nodded his acceptance of the order.

Gunnar leant against Ramiro and whispered in his ear. "Do you see Juniper?"

"No." Ramiro flicked Gunnar's earlobe with his tongue before pulling back.

When the freaks were a mere ten yards from the ward, they stopped, as if by silent command. One of the biggest men Gunnar had ever seen took a step forward. "Why are you here?"

"To watch you," Neo said, suddenly appearing beside Gunnar. "Where's Morwyn?" he asked the freak.

"You are being asked to leave. I suggest you heed the warning."

"Or what?" Neo asked. "What is it Morwyn wants?"

The spokesman took a step back into line. As one, the army did an about-face and began to march back to the trees.

"You tell Juniper Cavanaugh to get his sissy ass down here and talk to us!" Haig shouted.

"So we've been warned." Neo rested his fists on his hips. "Gods! I wish we could get another look inside their operation."

"Maybe we can," Ramiro said. "When Gunnar called, I had just started my conversation with Rafi."

Gunnar watched as Neo's spine seemed to stiffen. "Did you find out what he's doing here?" Neo asked.

"According to him, he wants to help us," Ramiro answered.

"Do you believe him?" Gunnar asked.

"I don't know. I mean, I don't know him. He sounded earnest, but he said he wants to speak with Neo."

Gunnar's protective instincts kicked in. It suddenly didn't matter that his boss and friend was the son of a God. No good could come of a meeting between Neo and his ex-lover. "You can't. Not only is it too dangerous, but Michael would never understand," he said, his gaze on the army melting into the darkness of the trees.

All at once, the empty camp where Audric, Kern and Haig had been moments before exploded. Thrown to the ground by the force of the blast, Gunnar shielded his eyes from the bright fireball that climbed towards the clouds.

One moment, Ramiro was on the ground beside him, and the next he had thrown himself on top of Gunnar. Although Gunnar enjoyed the feeling of the vampire against him, he didn't appreciate the gesture. Pushing against Ramiro's chest, he tried to get the muscled security chief off him. "I don't need your protection," he growled.

Ramiro rolled off Gunnar. "I didn't...," he sputtered, getting to his feet. He held out his hand and helped Gunnar up. "I acted without thinking. I apologise."

Neo walked over. "You two okay?"

"Yeah," Gunnar answered. "What the hell was that?"

"Morwyn letting me know he means business. Ramiro, find Rafi and bring him to The Realm. I'll deal with Michael if he has a problem with it." He looked over his shoulder at the obliterated campsite before addressing Gunnar. "We need to get the guards back to The Realm. Now. We'll have to figure out another way to keep an eye on Juniper. Perhaps it's time to bring my father into this."

* * * *

Ramiro stared at the handsome weretiger across the conference table. It had taken a good deal of convincing for Rafi to allow Gunnar and Ramiro in the room when he spoke to Neo. The one concession he wouldn't relent to was having Michael in the room.

"What do you know about what's going on in Juniper's pack?" Neo asked.

"Not much. One of Juniper's men talked to me at the bar in Gort a couple of days ago. Said they were looking for other Blessed Creatures to join them. I played it cool, didn't want to seem too eager. I asked the guy what was in it for me, and he told me they'd been promised free reign on Earth if they were victorious in battle."

Ramiro leant forward, bracing his forearms on the table. "Did he tell you anything about the sword?"

"No. He didn't mention a sword." Rafi reached across the table towards Neo. "I'll join them and find out everything I can if you ask me to."

Neo pulled his hand back out of Rafi's reach. "I'm sorry, but I can't ask you to do something when I'm not willing to give you what you want in return."

"All I want is to do whatever's necessary to keep you safe. I know you don't want me, but I still..." Rafi shook his head. "I'll help. I've got nothing else to believe in."

Neo glanced up from his clasped hands. "Gunnar, would you and Ramiro give me a moment alone with Rafi?"

"Alone with him? No, I don't think it would be wise," Gunnar returned.

Neo narrowed his eyes. "I can assure you, I know how to take care of myself." His head tilted to the side. "Or have you forgotten who I am?"

Gunnar's head jerked back as if he'd been punched. "No." Gunnar stood without another word and strode from the room.

Standing, Ramiro stared down at Neo. He wanted to give Neo a piece of his mind for the words that had obviously hurt the man he loved, but he knew he couldn't. However... "I realise Gunnar is your employee, but I believe he was speaking out of what he believed was friendship."

"Not that I need to explain myself to you, but I didn't mean what I said the way he took it," Neo tried to explain.

"Yeah, well, tell him that." Ramiro walked out into the hall just in time to see Gunnar round the corner. "Fuck." The last several days had gone a long way in restoring Gunnar's self-confidence. Ramiro feared Neo's hasty words had set Gunnar back everything he'd gained.

He took off at a jog, catching up with Gunnar before he reached the palace doors. "Gunner."

Gunner slowed his pace. "I need to get out of here for a while."

"Okay. Mind if I join you?"

Gunnar shrugged. "I won't be good company."

"I'm used to it," Ramiro said, hoping to lighten Gunnar's mood.

With a smirk on his face, Gunnar waited for the guard to open the door. Once outside, he headed in the direction of the park.

Ramiro reached for Gunnar's hand and was pleasantly surprised when Gunnar offered no resistance. As they walked, Ramiro could feel the tension draining from Gunnar's body. Although he hadn't planned to talk to Gunnar about his feelings quite so early in their relationship, something told him it was the right time.

When Gunnar started down the main path, Ramiro gave his hand a tug. "I've got something I want to show you." Ramiro led Gunnar over the barricade and onto the soft grass.

"You're going to get us in trouble," Gunnar mumbled.

Ramiro stopped and pulled Gunnar into his arms. He leant in and rimmed Gunnar's lips with the tip of his tongue. "I am trouble." He ended the statement with a deep, probing kiss, ready to shout to the universe his intention of keeping the vampire in his arms. *Gods, when did I become such a fucking sap?*

Breaking the kiss, Ramiro smiled. "Come on, it's through the trees."

Once they had reached the small copse of trees, Gunnar pulled Ramiro to a stop. "Give me a second." He tilted his head back and let the moonlight filtering through the leaves bathe his face. Again, the longing of his old life came back in full force. He missed roaming the forest in his wolf skin, the feel of the ground under his paws.

"This wasn't where I was taking you, but you look rather content. Let's go sit on that rock," Ramiro offered.

Gunnar would rather have wallowed in the dirt and leaves at his feet, but decided if Ramiro could compromise, so could he. At least the boulder was flat and smooth. Gunnar wasted no time in spreading out on the rock with his arms out to the sides. "I love that smell," he mumbled.

"Dirt?" Ramiro questioned.

"Dirt...leaves...all of it." He rolled his head to the side to stare at Ramiro. "Once all this is over, I don't think I care to ever see another city. I dream of buying a piece of wooded land and building a house." He grinned at the mortified expression on Ramiro's handsome face. "What, that doesn't appeal to you?"

Ramiro seemed to school his expression. "What about the vineyard?"

Gunnar shrugged. "I'm not sure that's an option any longer."

"You should talk to Neo. He said he didn't mean what you think he did." Ramiro moved to curl up against Gunnar's side.

"He's my boss. I think he made his position quite clear," Gunnar stated, remembering the reprimand he'd received earlier.

"I've had time to think about it, and I believe he meant he was the son of Zeus. He was telling you he had no reason to be afraid of Rafi, because he was stronger."

"You really think so?" A large part of him wanted to believe Ramiro.

"I do." Ramiro kissed Gunnar's neck.

"He was right, you know. Sometimes I do forget who he really is. I guess I just get complacent in our relationship. I tend to think of him as a friend, not a demi-God."

"I know. I felt the same way about Ian. I hate that I don't know why he left or where he is." Ramiro rested his forehead against Gunnar's chest, curling himself around Gunnar's body.

Gunnar stroked Ramiro's back, hoping to give the vampire comfort. He decided to ask the question that had been on his mind since he learnt of Ian's sudden departure. "What if it turns out he's working with Morwyn?"

"I don't know. Ian's no saint. I've always known that, but I protected him anyway. I've seen him create and then kill vampires on a whim, but I had to believe there was more good in him than bad."

"Why would you risk your life for someone like that?" It didn't make sense to Gunnar. Sure Neo had faults, but Gunnar rarely questioned his friend's ethics.

"Because we're all tied to him. If keeping Ian alive means all vampires keep their souls, it's worth it. None of us asked for what we've become. Risking my life to ensure his safety is the least I can do for the rest of you."

"Do you really believe our souls are tied to him? What if he's lying?" Gunnar had heard a lot of stories about the Blessed Creatures over the years but that didn't make them all true.

"Why would he do that?"

"Can you think of a better way for him to gain our loyalty?" Still wrapped in Gunnar's arms, Ramiro went perfectly still. Gunnar knew it wasn't easy to think of a friend as a liar, especially about something as important as one's soul.

"I need to find him," Ramiro finally said.

"Do you have any idea where he may have gone?" Gunnar asked.

"No, but maybe with Spiro and Neo's permission, there's a way."

"How?"

"The Royal Donors are tied to Ian. The reason it's forbidden for any vampire to share a donor with the King is because of those ties. If I feed from one of them I'll be able to locate him."

"So why didn't you do that earlier when you first found the bodies of those guards?"

Ramiro began kissing Gunnar's neck and for a few delightful moments, Gunnar assumed he didn't plan to answer the question. When Ramiro's hand travelled down to lower Gunnar's zipper, Gunnar couldn't have cared less whether he received an answer or not.

With his cock free, Gunnar pulled Ramiro on top of him. "Need to feel you," he moaned, thrusting up against the hard bulge in Ramiro's suit pants.

Ramiro reached between them and within moments his bare cock rubbed against Gunnar's. "That what you needed?"

"Hell, yes." When the boulder under him started to scratch as his flesh, Gunnar stilled and allowed Ramiro to rub and grind against him. "You feel so good."

"Mmmm, so do you," Ramiro said right before he thrust his tongue in Gunnar's open mouth.

Because Ramiro hadn't pushed his pants out of the way, the fine wool material continually rubbed against the underside of Gunnar's sac. Gunnar grabbed Ramiro's butt and squeezed. His middle fingers delved into the crack of Ramiro's ass and brushed the sweet hole he was becoming addicted to.

When Gunnar pressed the tip of one finger against the hole, Ramiro's body bucked against him. Breaking the kiss, Ramiro actually whimpered as he shot his seed between them. It was the erotic aroma of his lover's cum mixed with the forest's natural scent that pushed Gunnar over the edge. "Fuck!" he ground out.

After several moments, Ramiro groaned and rolled off Gunnar. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped Gunnar clean before taking care of himself. "I need to talk to Neo before dawn. If I'm going to find Ian, I'll need to feed at dusk."

"Why do you need Neo's permission to feed?" Gunnar asked.

"Feeding from Ian's Royal Donors is punishable by death. If I do this, I'm going to need some kind of protection."

Gunnar's skin broke out in gooseflesh. He'd long ago made the decision to put his life on the line for what he believed, but to hear Ramiro say he'd do the same fuelled a protective instinct in Gunnar like he'd never known. "No. I can't let you do that."

"Yes you can." Ramiro leant down and placed a quick kiss on Gunnar's lips. "I'm damn good at my job, and Ian is my responsibility."

Gunnar couldn't argue the necessity of what Ramiro felt he had to do. His protest was completely personal. He simply wasn't ready to let Ramiro go yet. There were so many things he wanted to know and experience with Ramiro. "Can I go with you when you talk to Neo and Spiro?"

"Yes. You need to get a few things straight with Neo anyway."

"I consider Neo a friend worth fighting for so I've no doubt we'll work out our problems. It's you I want to be there for. Right now ensuring your safety means everything to me," Gunnar admitted.

Ramiro cupped the side of Gunnar's face. "And I feel the same way about you. I want to spend the rest of my days sleeping at your side."

Gunnar leant in to Ramiro's gentle touch. "I'd like that."

* * * *

Gunnar stood in the corner of the conference room with his arms crossed. It hadn't taken long for Neo and Spiro to agree to Ramiro's plan. Although they had promised his safety for the act itself, they could not promise a safe return if he decided to go after Ian after learning all he could from the Royal Donor's blood.

When the donor was brought in, Gunnar ground his teeth. The slim man draped in a red, sheer robe was breathtaking. He knew Ramiro had specifically requested the man because he was one of Ian's favourite food sources. Protests were on the tip of Gunnar's

tongue, but he managed to hold his words at bay. Understanding Ramiro's reasoning behind the chosen donor didn't mean he had to like it.

A chuckle from beside him got his attention. Spiro was openly watching Gunnar and had obviously read Gunnar's emotions. "Relax," Spiro whispered. "It is but a single bite."

"Easy for you to say," Gunnar returned without thinking. Spiro had never had a special someone in his life. Only a select few knew Nialo, Morwyn's twin, was to be Spiro's mate.

With his left hand slowly stroking Sema's black fur, Spiro sobered immediately. "Yes, you're right, of course."

"Please excuse my hasty reply," Gunnar apologised.

Spiro shook his head. "It is I who should apologise. I spoke without knowledge."

Sema took the opportunity to nuzzle against Spiro's hip. It seemed even a black jaguar could sense Spiro's unhappiness.

Gunnar returned his attention to the ongoing activity in the room. Ramiro had explained the need to bring the Royal Donor to orgasm at the precise moment he inflicted the bite. It wasn't something Gunnar was unaware of, but hearing Ramiro describe step by step the process he would use to bring the donor's fulfilment was much easier than actually watching it take place.

Ramiro turned his head and made eye contact with Gunnar as he continued to jerk the donor's cock through the robe's opening. "Feel my hand," Ramiro mouthed silently.

Gunnar felt an unseen hand wrap around his own cock. As his cock hardened, Gunnar wondered how many tricks Ian had taught Ramiro over the years. More importantly, he seethed over where the lessons had no doubt taken place.

A deep, rumbling noise came from Ramiro's throat as the unseen hold on Gunnar's cock tightened. The sound and action drew Gunnar out of his head to focus squarely on the pleasure his beautiful vampire was providing.

"Aahhh." Gunnar let the moan slip from between his lips.

Suddenly aware of what was happening, Neo turned himself and Michael around to face the wall. He whispered something in Michael's ear and his mate nodded, draping an arm around Neo's waist.

Gunnar leant against the corner at his back and thrust his hips, pressing his cock against the unseen hands. He couldn't stop his body's reaction to Ramiro's touch. He quickly unzipped his jeans, afraid of coming in his clothes. He pulled the handkerchief, Ramiro had

handed him earlier, out of his front pocket, understanding suddenly dawning on him. Ramiro had known exactly what he'd planned to do. He'd also known what Gunnar's reaction would be.

When his release came, it was the Royal Donor whose cries were heard echoing in the room. Gunnar caught the majority of his seed in the soft, white material and stared as Ramiro's sharp fangs slid with ease into the donor's artery.

What happened next surprised everyone in the room. Ramiro's body began to jerk as he fed. Sweat, something unseen on vampires, began to run from his pores.

"Enough!" Gunnar yelled, running forward. He pulled Ramiro away from the donor heedless that his lover's teeth would rip the donor's throat open if not extracted properly. Pulling Ramiro into his arms, Gunnar held his love who continued to suffer the mysterious effects of the donor's blood.

Neo rushed forward and quickly licked the Royal Donor's neck in an effort to save the man's life. Callous or not, Gunnar cared only for Ramiro's welfare. He lowered Ramiro to the floor and looked up at Spiro. "What's wrong with him?"

Spiro knelt beside them and put a hand to Ramiro's forehead. He closed his eyes and did whatever it was Gunnar had seen him to in the past. When Spiro opened his eyes, he transferred his hand from Ramiro's head to Gunnar's shoulder. "He's in no physical pain. Whatever he's going through is mental, but he seems to be coming down from it."

Gunnar continued to rock back and forth with Ramiro held against his chest. He glanced up long enough to see the Royal Donor alive but understandably weak. "I didn't mean to hurt him," he told Neo.

"I know." Neo put a hand on Michael's arm. "Get one of the guards to take the donor back to Ian's palace." He turned to the donor. "Thank you for your gift. Hopefully it will allow us to find your Master."

Gunnar's chest tightened at the term Master. As soon as the donor was out of the room, he vocalised his thoughts. "Galena said Juniper referred to whoever is behind this as Master. Do you know anyone else who requires their subordinates to call them that?"

Neo shook his head. He turned his focus to Ramiro, whose breathing had begun to return to normal. Squatting beside Gunnar, Neo tapped Ramiro's cheek. "Ramiro? Can you hear me?"

It took several moments, but eventually Ramiro's eyelids fluttered a few times before opening. He stared at Neo. "Did you know?"

"Know what?" Neo asked.

"Faelan's trapped inside Ian's body."

In an uncharacteristic move, Neo reared back, throwing himself off balance. Ass on the floor, Neo shook his head. "How's that possible? Faelen created Ian."

"No. Gaia created Ian, sealing Faelen forever into the body of a vampire."

Sema chose that moment to walk over and begin bathing Ramiro's face with his tongue. Ramiro sputtered and tried to push the jaguar away, but Sema wouldn't budge. "Back," Spiro commanded.

Although Sema stopped licking Ramiro and glanced back at Spiro, he still refused to do as he was told.

"What the hell his wrong with him?" Neo asked.

"I have no idea. I've never seen him like this before." Spiro moved to wrap his arms around Sema's neck in an attempt to physically move the jaguar away from Ramiro. Sema turned his head and nuzzled his face against Spiro's neck, but refused to remove himself from his position.

Before Gunnar could stop him, Ramiro lurched forward and buried his teeth in Sema's neck, just above Spiro's hold. Spiro released Sema and began trying to pull the vampire off the beloved pet.

"He's gone mad," Spiro claimed.

Ramiro released the jaguar and wiped the blood from his cheek. "I'm not mad, but you may be when I tell you what I know."

Sema gave Ramiro one last look before backing up to settle against Spiro's lap. Before returning his attention to Ramiro, Spiro thoroughly checked Sema's neck for injuries. "Why did you do that?"

"I had a feeling he was trying to tell me something," Ramiro admitted. "And I was right." Ramiro smoothed his hair away from his face. "Whatever magic holds Faelan inside Ian is also holding Nialo inside Sema."

Gunnar's jaw dropped. For hundreds of years he'd played with and talked to Neo's pet without realising Sema probably understood every word that had come out of Gunnar's

mouth. He couldn't help but to think of his own wolf being trapped inside a body he could no longer shift from. The thought of Nialo being trapped broke Gunnar's heart.

Spiro appeared to be in shock at the news. Gunnar reached out and placed a hand on his friend's lean back. "Spiro?"

Without warning, Spiro jumped to his feet, upsetting Sema onto the floor. In the blink of an eye, Spiro was gone, leaving the rest of them to wonder where he'd gone. Sema let out a pained roar and ran from the room.

Neo stood. "I'm going to get some answers," he announced before disappearing.

After his mate and his surrogate father vanished, Michael broke into tears. "I don't understand what's going on. Nialo's a God. Who has that kind of power?"

Gunnar shuddered at the idea.

Chapter Six

Lying beside Gunnar, Ramiro couldn't get the images of Ian out of his head. The person he'd sworn to protect with his life was creating soulless freaks in Galway, right under Ramiro's nose. The chaos caused by Ian's actions would have severe repercussions if Zeus and the other Gods stepped into the fight. What would happen to vampires if Ian was found guilty and exiled to Tartarus.

He rolled to his side and watched Gunnar sleep. He'd waited too long to experience the kind of love he felt for Gunnar to give up without a fight. Gunnar's theory that Ian was lying about vampire souls being connected to his life was just that, a theory. Ramiro simply couldn't take the chance that Ian was telling the truth.

Throwing off the covers, Ramiro kissed Gunnar's temple before getting out of bed. He dressed quickly in a simple pair of jeans, something he rarely wore, but were more appropriate for what he had in mind.

He eased the door open and slipped into the hallway. Although Neo and Spiro had both returned just before dawn, they had refused to speak with anyone, choosing instead to lock themselves in the vault.

Ramiro headed towards the library, knowing he was taking a risk. He was surprised to find Sema asleep outside the library doors, flanked on either side by one of The Realm's guards. Ramiro wasn't sure if the guards were there to protect Sema or keep him from entering the library. "I need to speak with either Spiro or Neo."

"They asked not to be disturbed," one of the guards replied, looking straight ahead.

"I'm planning to locate and join King Kildare. Do you really believe they would want me to do that without at least talking to me first?"

The guards exchanged glances. "One moment." The smaller of the two ducked inside the library, leaving Ramiro outside.

Ramiro took the opportunity to squat and make eye contact with Sema. "If you can hear me, Nialo, I'll find a way to release you," he promised.

Sema's head butted against his arm in reply.

Ramiro stood when the library door opened. "They'll see you now," the guard said.

Ramiro didn't waste time getting inside and down the vault steps. Spiro and Neo were sitting next to each other at the table. "Thank you for seeing me," he said upon entering the room.

"What choice did we have? Malcolm said you were on your way to find Ian." Neo sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

"He's with Juniper. I think if I follow his signal, I can get by the ward," Ramiro stated.

"It's too dangerous," Spiro argued.

"Maybe, but it's better than waiting for him to make his next move."

Spiro swept his long white hair over his shoulder. "That won't be necessary. Zeus has finally agreed to handle the situation."

The statement left Ramiro with a sinking feeling. "Where does that leave the vampires?"

"Excuse me?" Spiro questioned. "Is your loyalty to Ian so deep you would follow him to his death?"

"Absolutely not. Ian fooled everyone, including me. I would hope the two of you know that."

"We do," Neo growled, sneering at his brother. "We don't believe Ian told you the truth about his link to vampire souls."

"How can you be sure? Look at the creatures he's created in Galway. You yourself determined they were without souls. Would you condemn an entire species to the same fate without being one hundred percent sure? My goal was to bring Ian back for trial before the Gods in the hope that his life would be spared."

Neo's eyebrows drew together. "After everything he's done you wish to spare him?"

"No. I wish to spare my brethren. What exactly has Ian done? He created a species of monsters, yes, but they haven't done any damage. He blew up a campsite that held no one. I don't know what Ian's after, but I don't believe vengeance for what he's done is worth risking the souls of many."

"Zeus believes it was Gaia who cast the spell on Sema," Spiro said.

"Why? Did he say?" Ramiro knew he was overstepping his position by asking such a personal and high-level question, but he needed to understand.

"No, but according to Zeus, Gaia is the only one with enough power to contain a God in such a way."

"Can he ask?"

Neo chuckled. "Even Zeus is not allowed to speak to Gaia directly. He can put the question out into the universe, but it's Gaia's choice whether or not to answer. Zeus suggested we find out from Ian."

"I can find him, so let me bring him here for questioning," Ramiro pleaded.

Neo shook his head. "Zeus already knows where he is."

Ramiro took a deep breath. Defeat wasn't something he accepted easily, but Neo and Spiro obviously didn't want his help. "You don't need me at all then. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Neo closed the book in front of him. "The situation has gone beyond what you're capable of helping us with. Quite frankly, Ian's more powerful than you are. If we were to send you after him, we'd be sending you to your death."

"And we're not prepared to do that," Spiro added.

"So I'm just supposed to sit back and hope you don't end up killing him? Because I don't think I can do that. I'd rather risk my own life than the souls of thousands." The tension in the room rose dramatically, but Ramiro stood his ground, shoulders squared.

Neo stood, his anger evident by not only his expression but his body language. Ramiro knew the demi-God wasn't used to being challenged. Before Neo spoke a word, Spiro stepped between them to address Neo.

"Perhaps Ramiro could be in the room when we question Ian." Spiro glanced over his shoulder at Ramiro. "Would you leave us to apprehend Ian if such a promise was made?"

"We don't need his permission," Neo barked. "We're trying to save his life!"

"And I'm trying to preserve my soul!" Ramiro fired back. He returned his attention to Spiro. "I accept your offer with gratitude."

Spiro put a hand on Neo's chest. It was rare the brothers touched, so the significance of the gesture wasn't lost on Ramiro. "Ramiro may not have your power, but he has your heart. You both need to recognise what's at stake should we fail to procure Ian safely."

Neo stared into his brother's eyes, his body visibly more relaxed at Spiro's touch. "Yet another reason you're better at governing the Blessed Creatures. Where my instincts are to fight yours are to understand."

Spiro removed his hand. "I've had many years of practice. It'll come to you, my brother." He stepped out from between Ramiro and Neo. "Ramiro will back off in his pursuit

to capture Ian, and you will get special concession for him to attend Ian's trial on Olympus. Are we agreed?"

"I agree to try. Zeus isn't someone who often makes deals with Blessed Creatures," Neo said. "Maybe it'll help if I tell him you're my choice to become the new Vampire King."

The announcement broadsided Ramiro. "No. I've learnt a lot in the past few months, primarily that Blessed Creatures are better off under a single ruler, or in your case, rulers. Dividing loyalties doesn't work."

Neo's held tilted to the side. "Most vampires would've jumped at the chance to become king. The fact that you put what's best for your brethren first and not your own ambitions only cements my decision."

Ramiro shook his head. "Although I'm extremely flattered, again, I must decline the position." His thoughts strayed to Gunnar. "Can you imagine Gunnar living in a palace, attending formal functions?"

Neo smiled. "So it's like that is it?"

"Yes. If he'll have me," Ramiro confessed. "His dream is to live in the forest. I intend to do whatever it takes to give him what he desires."

Neo slapped Ramiro on the shoulder. "Then you'll be living at the vineyard, because I don't plan on letting my head of security leave Le Uve del Regno any time soon."

"That's up to Gunnar. I know he hasn't felt secure in his position lately."

"I know. That's my fault, something I intend to remedy as soon as the current crisis is resolved." Neo lifted the book from the table. "If you'll excuse us, we're due for a meeting on Olympus."

Ramiro was left not knowing what to do. Should he follow Neo's advice and take a few hours off? He thought of the man upstairs nestled in a nice warm bed and grinned. Perhaps taking a break wouldn't be so bad after all.

* * * *

"Tell me again why you enjoy this?" Ramiro asked.

Gunnar chuckled. Night fishing wasn't nearly as fun as spreading out next to a pond in the sunshine, but it was something he needed to get used to. "I like to fish. You're the one who said we could do whatever I wanted."

"Yes, but I thought you'd chose something a little less...dirty." Ramiro brushed bits of grass off his suit pants.

Gunnar bumped his shoulder against Ramiro's. "As long as we can stay here on the vineyard, I don't care what we do." Gunnar took a deep breath. The grapes had started to ripen, and although Neo had hired labourers from town to tend the vines in his absence, they weren't doing a very good job. He wondered what Neo's reaction to his beloved Le Uve del Regno would be upon his return.

"Take me for a walk," Ramiro suggested.

"Okay. Where do you want to go?" Gunnar asked, reeling in his line.

"Show me your favourite spot."

Gunnar set his pole down before standing. "That's an easy one." He glanced down at Ramiro's expensive leather shoes. "You might get those dirty."

Ramiro rose and began to thoroughly brush off his clothes. "Guess I'll be forced to buy some hiking boots and overalls if I'm going to continue to spend time here," he mumbled.

Gunnar took Ramiro's hand and led him towards the trees. Growly or not, he liked the idea of Ramiro spending time at the vineyard.

The moment they stepped into the forest, Gunnar sighed. "Feels good to be home."

"Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"Being here and not being able to shift?"

Gunnar stopped in a small clearing and thought about the question. If it were anyone else, he would downplay his physical reaction to his old running ground, but Ramiro deserved so much more. "It's hard to explain. I think more than anything, I miss running with a pack. Even though I tried not to pal around with the men I work with, when we were in wolf form, I felt part of the group." He shrugged. "So, yeah, I guess I miss it, although my body doesn't ache to change like it did in the beginning, my heart longs for that sense of belonging."

Ramiro stepped in front of Gunnar and wrapped his arms around his waist. "You belong with me now. The big question is will I be enough for you?"

Once again, Gunnar gave it some serious thought before answering. "I need to tell you something before I can answer that." Gunnar stepped back and took Ramiro by the hand once more. "But first I want to take you to my spot."

Gunnar led Ramiro down a winding path. "Not much further," he said over his shoulder.

"Thank the Gods," Ramiro mumbled.

Deep in the timber was a small clearing with a rock-lined fire circle in the centre. "Here it is," he said, pulling Ramiro down to sit beside him on the smooth wooden bench he'd made nearly a hundred years earlier. "This is where I spend most of my time when I'm not working."

Ramiro looked up, but the majority of the night sky was hidden behind the tree canopy. "You know, in another hundred years or so, you'll be able to sit out here in the daylight hours for small stretches of time."

Gunnar had grudgingly given up hope of ever stepping outside during the day. "Really?"

"Yes." Ramiro turned sideways to straddle the bench. "Maybe sooner if you wear a strong sun block." He rested his chin on Gunnar's shoulder. "Is this where you'd like to build a house?"

"Hell, I'd give anything for that, but this is Neo's land and he won't allow it." Gunnar had even mentioned to Neo not long after he started work for him that someday he'd like to build a house in the woods. Neo hadn't agreed. He'd explained to Gunnar the importance of leaving the forest intact.

Ramiro brushed a kiss across Gunnar's cheek. "Maybe we can change his mind." He sucked Gunnar's earlobe into his mouth. "Neo wants something from me. Perhaps I'll use this piece of land as my bargaining chip."

Gunnar's spine stiffened as jealousy crept into his mind. "What does he want from you?"

"He wants me to be the new Vampire King. I told him no, and I don't plan to change my mind on that, but perhaps with the right incentive, I could be persuaded to retain my position as security chief."

It was a reminder of Neo's obvious respect for Ramiro. "Where will that leave me?" Gunnar asked.

"Right here where you belong." Ramiro turned Gunnar around until they faced each other. "With me," he whispered against Gunnar's lips.

"Neo won't need two heads of security on Le Uve del Regno."

"I won't be working for the vineyard. I'll probably be overseeing vampire affairs, but I can just as easily do that from here." Ramiro suddenly jerked back. "Unless, of course, you don't want me here."

Gunnar sighed. It seemed he wasn't the only one feeling insecure. He tried to think of a way to make Ramiro understand. Gods, he wished he was better at saying what he felt. "I want you here. I'm just not sure that I deserve you."

"Does this have something to do with the darkness that you claim lives inside of you?" Ramiro asked.

Gunnar knew the time had come. "Yes." Gunnar turned away, unable to look Ramiro in the eyes. "My father was the Alpha of my pack. Things happened, and I killed him."

When Gunnar said nothing more, Ramiro prompted him. "You can't just stop there. I know you wouldn't have killed someone for no reason. What did he do?"

"He had an affair with his Second-in-Command, Brandr." Gunnar took a deep breath. "Evidently Brandr wanted to more than a side fuck for my father because he cornered my mother while out on a hunt and killed her. When my father found out, he tore Brandr to shreds. I was young, but I thought I was in love with Brandr despite what he'd done, so I challenged my father and won." Gunnar shrugged. "I walked away from the pack that night and haven't been back since."

Ramiro's hand began to rub the small of Gunnar's back. "We've all done things we're ashamed of. It's hard to live for centuries and not have a few skeletons in your closet. Right or wrong, what you did was a long time ago. I think you've more than made up for it."

Gunnar couldn't help but feel relieved. "Are you always so damn optimistic?"

"I learned the hard way what guilt can do to a person. Believe me, you have to learn to let it go or it'll continue to fuck up your life."

Gunnar wondered what skeletons Ramiro had in his closet, but the mood had been heavy enough for one night. "We'd better get back to The Realm."

"We still have another hour or so before dawn," Ramiro said, pulling Gunnar's T-shirt over his head.

"Can you do that little transporting thing straight to bed when we're done?" Gunnar asked, lifting his hips so Ramiro could remove his jeans.

"I think you're ready to learn how to do it on your own." Ramiro knelt between Gunnar's legs and ran his tongue up the length of Gunnar's cock.

"Mmm, I'd rather learn my lesson tomorrow," Gunnar said with a groan.

Ramiro's mouth captured Gunnar's crown. Gunnar braced his hands by gripping the back side of the bench and thrust his hips, burying more of his length in Ramiro's mouth. The squeeze of Ramiro's throat as he swallowed more of Gunnar's erection was just what Gunnar needed. The only thing missing... "Do that mind thing with my hole." For someone who didn't think he'd ever let his guard down long enough to feel a cock breach his hole, Gunnar had quickly become addicted.

Ramiro released Gunnar's cock. "I'd rather touch you the old-fashioned way."

"Then get naked," Gunnar instructed.

While Ramiro removed his clothing piece by piece and laid it carefully on the bench, Gunnar slid to the ground. The small clearing had little grass due to the decreased amount of sunlight it received, which didn't bother Gunnar a bit. He enjoyed the soil and leaves as much as a patch of soft grass. He tossed several small sticks towards the fire-pit before spreading out on his back.

"You don't really expect me to get down there with you, do you?" Ramiro asked.

"You can stretch out on top of me when the time comes. Wouldn't want you to get dirty or anything." Gunnar grinned up at Ramiro and spread his legs. He was certain he looked like a wanton slut, but at the moment, that's exactly how he felt. Gone was the Alpha who'd always felt he had to posture. At least with Ramiro, Gunnar knew he didn't have to prove his position as a warrior.

Gunnar stretched his arms out to the sides, burying his fingers in the soft soil. The contact seemed to make his skin tingle. Was it just his imagination or could he truly feel the presence of his wolf? It had been too long since he'd felt that part of himself.

"What's wrong?" Ramiro asked, kneeling between Gunnar's spread thighs.

Gunnar shook his head. The talk he'd had with Ramiro and Audric came immediately to mind. If he admitted he still longed for his wolf and actually felt his presence, Ramiro would probably insist on taking him back to The Realm right away. He buried his hands further into the Earth. "Nothing. Just need you."

Ramiro stared at Gunnar for several moments before pulling a small tube of lube from his pants' pocket. "You really are happy here, aren't you?"

"Yes." Gunnar's fingertips began to ache, but he refused to remove them from the home they'd found in the dirt.

Ramiro's lubed fingers skated over Gunnar's hole several times before settling where Gunnar needed them most. "You're so damn sex..." Ramiro cut himself off midsentence and jumped to his feet. "Someone's here."

Gunnar was about to tell his lover to relax when he heard the rustling of the leaves. The smell hit him next. "Smell that?" he asked, sitting up. When he pulled his hands from the ground, he noticed the claws where his fingernails should be. "Shit!"

Ramiro glanced away from the forest. "What's? Oh, fuck!" he exclaimed upon seeing Gunnar's hands.

"Something like that," Gunnar agreed. He reached down and scooped up handfuls of dirt and began rubbing it on his chest, neck and face.

"What're you doing?" Ramiro asked.

Gunnar noticed Ramiro's fangs had slid from their sheaths at the incoming threat. "If it worked for my hands, maybe it'll work its magic on the rest of me. Right now we need all the help we can get."

"I should get you back to The Realm."

"Don't you dare. I don't need you to whisk me off to safety. We've waited too long for Juniper to make a move like this." When his chest began to tingle, Gunnar knew his wolf was fighting like hell to shift. Dropping to the ground, he began burrowing under the fallen leaves, rubbing his entire nude body against the soil.

Ramiro raced back to the bench and found his phone amongst the pile of clothes. "We've got company," he said into the phone before tossing it back to the bench.

Thoroughly covered from head to toe in dirt, Gunnar resumed his position next to Ramiro. "How many do you think there are?"

"Too many. We don't know how to kill them." Ramiro glanced at Gunnar. "If something happens, know that I love you."

"You picked a hell of a time to tell me that," Gunnar said as pain shot through his body. He doubled over before falling to his hands and knees. He could hear Ramiro's voice but the pain was too intense to make out the words. Fuck, what had he got himself into? Gunnar began to wonder whether he'd survive the transformation.

"Juniper!" Ramiro shouted.

Gunnar opened his eyes in time to see a group of monsters enter the clearing. He tried to get to his feet, but his body wouldn't cooperate. It was a cry of pain from Ramiro that

allowed Gunnar's wolf to push to the forefront. All at once, hair sprouted through the pores on Gunnar's body as the crunch of shifting bone grew louder.

Staring down at his hands, Gunnar took a deep breath. He hadn't fully changed. Two-inch talons sprouted through the flesh of elongated, hairy human hands. An unexpected blow to his side knocked him over.

Instinct kicked in and Gunnar jumped to his feet, or what could pass as feet. They, too, seemed to have suffered through the partial shift. He swiped at the monster that had charged him and ripped easily through the freak's leathery flesh.

The monster charged once again as blood ran from the gaping wound on its chest. Gunnar hadn't noticed it at first, but he stood eye to eye with the thing. With the freak's size taken out of the equation, it was down to a battle of skill.

Although Gunnar received a bite to the forearm, he pushed through the pain to plunge his sharp claws through the hybrid's chest and into its beating heart. Before the freak fell to the ground, a searing pain ripped down Gunnar's back. He span around and lashed out at another of Juniper's hybrids.

All around him, the battle between Juniper's freaks and guards from The Realm raged on. Dodging blows and delivering lethal blows, Gunnar worked his way towards Ramiro. By some miracle, his wolf had come out to help protect the handsome vampire, and unless he hurried, it would all have been for nothing.

On the ground, Ramiro's muscles strained in his effort to hold a hybrid from ripping his throat open. Gunnar ended the lives of two more monsters before he reached the man he loved. One hard kick to a freak's head managed to get him off Ramiro. Gunnar charged towards the hybrid, ready to end his life as easily as he had the others.

"Stop!" Ramiro yelled. "It's Juniper," he informed Gunnar.

Gunnar barely heard Ramiro as he hoisted the freak that had dared to attack Ramiro off the ground.

"Gunnar, stop!" A deep voice ordered.

Seconds away from ending Juniper's life, Gunnar paused long enough to glance over his shoulder at Neo. Despite Gunnar's agitated state, an order from his boss had the ability to get through to him.

With Neo at his side, Spiro rushed forward. "Drop him," Spiro said.

Gunnar threw Juniper to the ground as hard as he could. Although it seemed he wouldn't be allowed to kill Juniper, the wolf inside him wanted to inflict more pain on the threat to its mate.

Juniper landed with a satisfying sound of breaking bones. Spiro shoved Gunnar out of the way and began a furious chant, moving his hands back and forth above Juniper's body. In the blink of an eye, Juniper was gone along, with Spiro.

"Where'd they go?" Gunnar asked, as clearly as his elongated muzzle would allow.

"To a holding cell," Neo explained.

"You're hurt," Ramiro said, turning Gunnar around to examine his back. "I need to get him out of here," he told Neo.

Neo glanced around the clearing, littered with bodies. "Sure, there's nothing left to do here but clean up the mess."

Once the immediate threat was handled, Gunnar's body began to change. Shame filled him at the reminder of what he must look like. He tried to walk away, but Ramiro stopped him.

"Are you okay?" Ramiro asked.

Gunnar shook his head. "Don't look at me." Although he couldn't tell for sure, Gunnar had a feeling he bore a striking resemblance to the dead hybrids.

"Close your eyes and hang on." Ramiro wrapped his arms around Gunnar.

When Gunnar opened his eyes, they were in his palace bedroom. "Stretch out on your stomach while I find Spiro."

Although his body felt like it was back to normal, his shame remained. He shook his head. "I'll be fine. There's still enough were in me to heal."

Ramiro reached for Gunnar's hand and pulled him towards the bed. "Don't do this. What happened out there was a fucking miracle. Don't let your pride turn it into something to be ashamed of."

Gunnar sat next to Ramiro. "I looked like them, didn't I?"

"Sort of," Ramiro answered. "But if it hadn't been for your wolf coming to my rescue, I'd be dead. So as far as I'm concerned, you never looked more beautiful to me."

Even though Gunnar knew Ramiro was lying through his teeth, the statement warmed him. He realised he hadn't had the chance to return Ramiro's earlier proclamation. "By the way, I love you, too, you handsome little liar."

Chapter Seven

Ramiro rubbed the sleep from his eyes before entering the conference room. Neo had summoned him out of a deep sleep for an emergency meeting. When he'd asked about waking Gunnar, Neo had told him to let Gunnar sleep.

Stepping into the room, Ramiro faced Neo alone. "It's just us?"

"Yes," Neo yawned. It was obvious he hadn't been to bed yet. "The trial is set for this afternoon at three. Zeus wants to get Ian out of the way as soon as possible. He's called upon Gaia, but so far nothing from her."

"So you found him?" Ramiro was surprised at how quickly Neo had apprehended Ian. It didn't gel with what he knew of his the King.

Neo tucked his hair behind his ears. "Zeus, actually. That's the reason I called you here. I got permission for you to sit in the gallery at the trial. I need you to listen for any inconsistencies in Ian's story. I can't get past the idea there's something deeper going on here."

Ramiro nodded. "I have the same feeling. If it was really Ian who constructed the ward around Juniper's pack land, his magic has to be stronger than he's ever let on. If that's the case, why would he let himself be so easily captured?"

"Exactly," Neo agreed. "The magic has to be coming from Faelan, but why is it surfacing now after all these centuries?"

"What does Spiro think?"

Neo shook his head. "We haven't talked much. He's obsessed with the idea that his destined mate is trapped inside Sema. At the moment, he can't seem concentrate on anything else for more than a few minutes at a time. Clasp his hands, Neo leant forward on his forearms. "What exactly did you see or feel when you bit Sema?"

Ramiro thought back to the incident. He'd tried to push the ordeal from his mind and had no desire to repeat it. "Images, mostly. A crying woman with strange green eyes. She was holding a handsome man with long black hair at one moment, and Sema the next." Suddenly a forgotten detail came back to him. Ramiro met Neo's gaze. "It was the same

woman that I saw when I bit the donor. Only she wasn't sad at all, she was furious. The eyes were the same colour but held hatred instead of love."

"Gaia," Neo whispered. "I remember my mother telling me all the shades of green on Earth were the same colour as the flecks in Gaia's eyes."

"So you think it *was* Gaia who imprisoned Nialo inside Sema?" Why would a God with so much love for the man in her arms do such a thing? It didn't make sense to Ramiro. Neo appeared deep in thought. "Is that all?" Ramiro asked, ready to get back to bed.

"How's Gunnar?"

"Ashamed, I think. He doesn't like what he shifted into out there." He'd heard Gunnar crying in the shower earlier, but he hadn't intruded. Gunnar was one of the proudest Alphas Ramiro had ever met, and he knew he wouldn't be welcomed at such a rare emotional moment.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" Neo asked.

"Of course," Ramiro defended Gunnar. "As a matter of fact, I believe he's an even bigger asset to you now."

"I wasn't asking as a boss. He means more to me than that," Neo returned, anger and a touch of hurt in his voice.

Ramiro recognised his mistake too late. "Forgive me." He cleared his throat. "It's been a long time since you've talked to him. He notices, you know? I think it's the reason he doesn't believe you trust him anymore."

"I've been busy."

"I realise that. Perhaps after the trial you could find the time to sit down with him and work things out. I bet he would enjoy taking you fishing."

Neo made a face. "I hate to fish. Never understood the point of it."

"Me neither. I was hoping to get out of future outings."

"Not going to happen. It's the price you'll have to pay for being with him."

Ramiro grinned. "Then I'll gladly put on my overalls and work boots to accompany him."

Neo yawned. "I think I'll try to get a few hours of sleep before the trial. Do you think Gunnar will be upset that he'll not be allowed in Olympus?"

"I don't think so. We talked about it earlier, and he understands why I need to look Ian in the eyes. Besides, three o'clock is too early in the day for him to be out."

"It wasn't easy to get you a seat in the gallery, so do us both a favour and be as discreet as possible." Neo stood and stretched his arms over his head. "I'll talk to Gunnar, I promise."

"Thank you." Ramiro followed Neo out of the room. "Will Michael be accompanying you?"

"No. He's planning to stay here with Sema."

"Would you ask Gunnar to watch over them? He knows how much Michael means to you, so I think it would mean a lot to him."

Neo chuckled. "Have you taken up the job of Gunnar's champion?"

"It's not a job. It's a pleasure."

* * * *

Gunnar wrapped his hand around the base of Ramiro's cock as the gorgeous vampire rode up and down on his dick. There was something about the way Ramiro's muscles bunched and flexed that drove Gunnar wild. As much as he liked Michael, he couldn't imagine fucking someone so small. No. He'd come to enjoy the pleasure of holding a body as powerful as his own.

"Faster," Ramiro panted.

Gunnar began to jerk Ramiro's cock from root to tip, stopping only long enough to rub his thumb across the head before sliding back down the thick length. When Gunnar caught Ramiro glance at the clock on the bedside table, his grip increased.

"Shit! Are you trying to pinch it off?" Ramiro growled.

"Just trying to get your attention back on me instead of the time." He loosened his hold and thrust up into Ramiro's ass.

"As much as my ass loves your cock, I don't think Zeus would accept us fucking as an excuse to be late."

With a roar, Gunnar grabbed Ramiro and flipped him over onto the mattress. "Then I'd better get serious about this," Gunnar said, impaling Ramiro again on his cock.

Ramiro held his legs apart as Gunnar put everything he had into fucking the man. He drove down as deep and hard as he could, hoping to telegraph his passion without having to say it. Although Ramiro was able to put his feelings into words, Gunnar preferred to convey

his love by way of his actions. He hadn't grown up in a house where love was discussed, so the sentiments that came easily to others were uncomfortable to him.

"Look at me," Ramiro whispered.

Gunnar turned his attention from the point where their bodies joined to do as Ramiro asked. His thrusts slowed as he fell into the black abyss of Ramiro's gaze. Although he'd heard Ramiro's words of love, it was at that moment that he truly believed them. It was still hard to accept, but for whatever reason, Ramiro truly seemed to love him.

Gunnar's cock erupted, filling the one person he was meant to be with. As he rode out his climax, he realised not all the changes in his life were a curse. He hadn't asked to be turned into a vampire, but without his transformation he would've never given Ramiro the chance to get close to him. The change hadn't made him into an evil species. It had allowed him the common ground he needed for a life with Ramiro.

"Gunnar!" Ramiro shouted to the ceiling as he came, splashing seed between them.

With the sudden onslaught of understanding, Gunnar's chest began to ache. Trying to catch a breath, he fell to the mattress beside Ramiro.

"What's wrong?" Ramiro sat up and cupped Gunnar's face.

Gunnar couldn't speak. An overwhelming sadness descended upon him as he felt his wolf slowly retreat into the darkest depths of his soul. He could've been angry at the abandonment by his wolf, but Gunnar understood it was necessary. *Goodbye old friend.* He swallowed around the lump in his throat as oxygen once again began to move in and out of his lungs.

"He's gone," Gunnar whispered, making eye contact with Ramiro.

Ramiro's dark eyebrows drew together in apparent confusion.

"My wolf," Gunnar clarified.

Concern creased Ramiro's handsome face. "I'm sorry," he whispered, kissing Gunnar's forehead.

"It was necessary. We both knew it needed to happen for me to move on with my life." Although Gunnar would miss his wolf, he already felt more at peace with who he had become. His internal battle over, Gunnar pulled Ramiro into a deep, all-consuming kiss. He still had obstacles to overcome, but for the first time he was ready to tackle his fears head-on, as long as Ramiro was by his side.

* * * *

Shrouded in his heavy cape, Ramiro sat in the back of the gallery surrounded by demi-Gods he'd only ever read about. When the Gods entered the room, Ramiro was forced to pull the hood lower over his face or take the risk of being burned by the sheer energy of their emanating powers.

"We are here today to decide the fate of Ian Kildare. Charged with creating a soulless species for his own gain," Zeus announced to the gathered Gods. "I have chosen Athena to question Ian Kildare. Objections?"

Ramiro had no doubt the Goddess of Wisdom would be fair, but he'd secretly hoped he would be given a chance to speak to Ian. Remembering Neo's warning, he remained silent.

When no objections were raised, Ramiro heard Athena's voice for the first time. "Bring in the accused."

Ramiro tried to block the sunlight coming from Hemera, Goddess of daylight, as he struggled to peek at Ian as he entered the room. Ian appeared indifferent to his surroundings, like being in the presence of deities was an everyday occurrence. It made Ramiro wonder how close to the surface Faelan was hiding.

"Ian Kildare, you are charged with creating the soulless creatures currently contained within County Galway, Ireland. How do you plead?" Athena began.

"Not guilty," Ian stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Were you not apprehended within the warded protection of the Galway pack lands?"

"Yes. I pretended to befriend the Pack Alpha, Juniper Cavanaugh, to gain entrance, nothing more," Ian stated.

"Why did you seek entrance to the pack land?"

"Because I knew Morwyn would show up eventually."

Whispered words filled the room at the mention of Morwyn. Ramiro couldn't blame the apparent unease of those around him.

"How is that possible?" Athena asked. "Morwyn has been exiled to Tartarus."

"Yes, but Juniper Cavanaugh practices the dark arts. He discovered a God can be released from Tartarus if he has a following of a thousand soulless warriors ready to follow him."

"If that were the case, Tartarus would be empty," Zeus added with a chuckle. "Blind followers are not hard to find in the world today."

"Yes, but Morwyn also holds the sickle once owned by Cronus. It was located by Cavanaugh several centuries ago."

"How do you know this?" Athena asked.

"As I've told you, I pretended to befriend Cavanaugh. Amazing what loose lips Morwyn's followers have, isn't it?" Ian crossed his arms in front of his chest and sat back in his chair with a smug smile on his face.

"Please tell the court why you failed to inform Zeus of this development earlier?" Athena continued.

"Because I knew Zeus would put an end to Juniper Cavanaugh's plans and I couldn't have that," Ian explained.

"Why is that?" Zeus butted in once again.

For the first time since entering the room, Ian shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I planned to kill Morwyn when he surfaced once again."

"Why?" Zeus asked before Athena had the chance.

"I'm not allowed to discuss my reasons," Ian answered.

"You're not allowed? By whom?" Zeus' voice grew angry.

"It's forbidden."

"Gaia," Spiro said, getting to his feet.

Gasps filled the cavernous marble room at the announcement.

"Be seated," Athena ordered Spiro.

Spiro turned to address Zeus. "Tell them what you know."

"Remove him from the proceedings," Zeus ordered.

Neo held up his hand to hold off the demi-Gods who approached Spiro. He spoke into Spiro's ear and within seconds, Spiro was gone. "Spiro has returned to The Realm," Neo announced.

"There will be no more disruptions of these proceedings," Zeus announced.

"Calm down, you overzealous tyrant," a voice said from out of nowhere.

Zeus bowed his head. "Gaia."

Ramiro studied the room but could not tell where the voice was coming from.

"You will release Ian Kildare and give him back his sword or face Morwyn with no other way to kill him. It was the decision of many members of this court, including you, that exiled Morwyn to Tartarus instead of choosing to put an end to him all those years ago. Now is the time to right your wrong."

"Are you asking us to release Morwyn into the world on the off-chance that Ian Kildare can get close enough to kill him?" Zeus asked.

"Don't play dumb with me, Zeus!" Gaia shouted, knocking several chunks of marble loose from the ceiling. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. The time has come for you to make it right. Make it happen, or I will."

"Clear the gallery!" Zeus yelled.

Ramiro glanced at Neo, wondering if Neo would also be removed. Neo made a gesture with his head for Ramiro to leave. Ramiro wasted no time following orders. He had the feeling Olympus was about to get very loud.

* * * *

A knock at the door interrupted Spiro's telling of the events. Gunnar rose from the chair before striding towards the door of Neo's palace apartment. "Yes?" he asked through the heavily-warded door.

"It's me," Ramiro answered.

Gunnar opened the door and pulled Ramiro into his arms. He hadn't said it before Ramiro left, but Gunnar didn't like the man he loved travelling to Olympus. He'd heard nothing but bad things about the home of the Gods. "I'm glad you're back."

"It wasn't by choice," Ramiro said, kissing Gunnar.

Gunnar released Ramiro and led him to the gathering area in front of the fireplace. "What happened?"

Ramiro sat next to Gunnar on the sofa. "Gaia made an appearance. Well, her voice did, but I couldn't see her."

"You wouldn't have been able to. Only Gods have the strength to behold her image in person," Spiro explained. "What did she say?"

"Basically that she wanted Ian to kill Morwyn with the sword. She also hinted that Zeus knew."

Spiro jumped up, unsettling Sema who was resting his head in Spiro's lap. "I knew it! I told Neo I didn't trust his father. What did Zeus say to Gaia?" Spiro asked, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace.

"Nothing much. Gaia issued Zeus the ultimatum that if he didn't take care of it she would. Then he issued the order to clear the gallery. As far as I know Neo's still there."

"Will he be okay?" Michael asked Spiro.

"Yes." Spiro resumed his seat, accepting Sema's presence in his lap once more. He gazed down into the golden eyes of the jaguar. "If only you could talk to me," he whispered.

The exchange tore at Gunnar's heart. Even before Spiro had discovered his mate was trapped inside the jaguar, there had been an obvious connection between the pair. In the last several months, rarely had Gunnar seen Spiro without Sema at his side.

"It'll be over soon," Neo announced, appearing just behind Michael. "Zeus has already begun the process to send Ian to Tartarus."

"And Ian agreed to that?" Ramiro asked.

"He had little choice after Zeus retrieved the sickle from Juniper's cabin. And since Zeus refused to allow Morwyn out of his cell, the only way for Ian to get close enough to kill him was to join him. At least Zeus has promised Ian a retrial once Morwyn is dead."

"So what now?" Spiro asked. "Did you find out why Ian needs to kill Morwyn?"

"It's the only way to break Gaia's spell that holds Faelan within Ian's body. I assume the same goes for Nialo. Zeus refused to enlighten the Gods as to why Gaia cast the spell in the first place, but I think it has something to do with Morwyn being exiled instead of put to death."

Spiro scratched Sema behind the ears. "Will you be able to tell us one day?"

Sema lifted his head and licked Spiro's chin. Whether or not Sema understood the question was anyone's guess.

The biggest question in Gunnar's mind was whether or not Nialo had truly survived intact throughout the years.

"What about the hybrids? What happens to them?" Ramiro asked.

"They've already been destroyed. Well, all of them with the exception of Juniper. Galena asked for him to be caged for a while before his execution," Neo explained. "The Galway pack lands are being awarded to Galena and Flick who have decided to stay in

Ireland." Neo moved around the chair and picked Michael up before depositing the smaller man on his lap.

"Haig ought to be happy about that," Gunnar remarked.

"Yes, he is. He's actually planning to take Kern and Audric with him to help Galena rebuild their village."

"Haig and Kern quit?" Both weres were damn good guards, but more than that, they were Gunnar's friends.

"Not for good. Just long enough to help Galena get back on her feet. I told them their job at the vineyard would be waiting for them when they were ready." Neo kissed the side of Michael's head. "You ready to go home, baby?"

Michael started to nod, but stopped after the first dip of his head. "What about Sema? Can we leave him here?"

Neo turned his attention to Sema. "I have a feeling this is where he belongs."

"You're right," Spiro agreed. "Whether it takes Ian an hour or a decade to kill Morwyn, I want to be with Nialo when the spell is broken."

Gunnar noticed the unspoken exchange between Michael and Neo. Evidently Gunnar wasn't the only one worried about Nialo's mental or physical health once he was released. Gunnar stared at the big black jaguar. Even knowing a God was inside Sema, Gunnar felt a great deal of sadness that his old friend would most likely cease to exist once Nialo emerged. Sema had become part of the landscape at the vineyard. What would it be like without him around, sunning himself on the patio or following Neo up and down the rows of grapes?

Ramiro chose that moment to squeeze Gunnar's hand, reminding him that he wouldn't be alone once they returned to Le uve del Regno. He smiled at the man he loved. Spiro deserved the kind of love Gunnar had found even if it meant saying goodbye to his old friend Sema.

Epilogue

"You wanted to see me?" Gunnar asked, stepping into the familiar office.

"Have a seat." Neo gestured to the wingback chair beside him.

Since returning to the vineyard the week before, Neo had been splitting his time between home and The Realm. Gunnar knew Spiro was in a state of extreme irritation as he continued to count the days until the battle between Ian and Morwyn ended. Neo had had little choice but to step in and help his brother with the running of The Realm. Although Gunnar understood, it had left him on edge.

"I have something for you." Neo dug into his suit jacket pocket and retrieved a business-sized envelope before passing it to Gunnar. "I know we haven't had a chance to talk about the future, but I wanted to make sure you got this before I'm called away again."

Gunnar prayed for good news as he carefully opened the envelope. It contained a single sheet of paper, a deed by the look of it. "What's this?"

"Ramiro told me you had your eyes on a spot of land in the woods. That's the deed. It's yours to do with what you want."

Gunnar couldn't believe it. "Thank you."

Neo leant forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Don't thank me. It's a bribe of sorts."

"A bribe?"

"I hope by giving you that piece of land you'll stick around even though I've been a complete ass lately. I need you to know I can't imagine trusting Michael's safety with anyone but you in charge."

Gunnar was overwhelmed by the gesture. He cleared his throat. "I'm a vampire now. What if the men don't respect me enough to listen to me?"

"Then fire them, but I doubt that's the case. They didn't follow you because you were a werewolf. They followed you because you're a natural-born leader. That hasn't changed. Believe me, it took me a hell of a long time to come to grips with what happened to me. It was Michael who finally taught me to accept who I'd become."

"As Ramiro has done for me," Gunnar acknowledged.

"Yes. We will need to make a few changes, however. You're still too young to function during the daylight hours, so I would like to put Haig as your second in charge."

"Haig would be my choice, as well. What about Ramiro? Will you allow him to live here with me and still keep his security position for the vampire species?"

"Of course. As long as you understand there will be times when he'll be called away on business." Neo sat back and reached for a glass of Liquid Crimson. "Would you care for a glass?"

"No, thank you. I've promised Ramiro we'd go into town for dinner."

Neo grinned. "Have you grown to enjoy the taste of human blood from the source?"

Embarrassed that he'd refused for so long, Gunnar nodded. "It was never the blood I had a problem with. More like the way it was obtained, but Ramiro and I've worked out a good system."

"I won't keep you then. I have a dinner date myself waiting for me." Neo emptied his wine glass before following Gunnar out of the office. "Perhaps once things settle down we'll have a chance to go fishing."

"You don't fish," Gunnar reminded Neo.

"No, I don't, but I'd welcome an evening spent with an old friend."

Gunnar left the house with his future in his hand and warmth in his heart.

* * * *

Ramiro felt the hard length of Gunnar's erection as it pressed against his hip. "What about that one? He looks like he could handle both of us," he suggested.

"You think he's into guys?" Gunnar asked, fishing Ramiro's cock out of his pants.

"By the way he's watching us, I'd say his answer is a big 'hell yeah'." Ramiro smiled at the muscular man across the room, giving him the signal to approach.

The man wasted no time making his way through the crowd. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Ramiro returned, eyeing the man up and down. It wasn't easy to find a donor large enough to feed two vampires at the same time, but occasionally they got lucky. "What's your name?"

"Alec," the man said, his eyes on Ramiro's cock.

Ramiro glanced down and watched Gunnar manipulate his erection for several moments before returning his attention to the menu. "Think you can handle both of us?"

Alec's Adams apple bobbed several times before he answered. "I've never done two at a time, but I'd sure as hell like to try."

"We hoped you'd say that." Gunnar released Ramiro's cock and motioned to the back corner of the bar. "Let's head over there out of the way."

Ramiro rolled his eyes and whispered in Alec's ear. "Gunnar's still a little shy."

Alec moaned when Ramiro's lips caressed his ear. "That's okay."

Once they reached the corner, Ramiro pressed himself against Alec's back as Gunnar pulled Alec against his chest. Sandwiched between the two vampires, Alec's heart began to pound loud enough for Ramiro to hear. Gods he loved that sound. Their work was half done before they even really touched the man.

Again, Ramiro whispered in Alec's ear. "I'm going to jack you off while my friend and I kiss. Is that acceptable?"

Alec nodded, moving to quickly unzip his jeans.

Ramiro stared into Gunnar's eyes. "Make his blood sweet as candy," he instructed Gunnar.

Gunnar grunted before leaning his head over Alec's shoulder to capture Ramiro's mouth in an erotic game of tongue play.

Ramiro flicked his tongue in and out of Gunnar's mouth, teasing the man he loved. He'd offered to jack their chosen donor, but Gunnar had refused. According to Gunnar, the only way he felt in control of the situation was if he did the required touching. Since it hadn't mattered either way to Ramiro, he gave in without a fuss.

Gunnar grunted again, and shook his head when Ramiro mentally plunged a finger into his lover's hole. Gunnar broke the kiss. "Not here. He's almost done."

By the sound of Alec's beating heart, Ramiro knew Gunnar was right. Only once had they lost themselves enough to fuck in the bar, and it hadn't ended well. Gunnar was still too possessive to allow anyone to witness their lovemaking. Ramiro had no doubt Gunnar would eventually change his mind, but he knew baby steps were required. Allowing Gunnar to reach the conclusion that all vampires reached eventually needed to be at his own pace.

Soon, hopefully, Gunnar would see the beauty in watching and being watched, but until then, Ramiro would happily take the two of them home to bed after dinner. He felt

Alec's body began to buck, obviously on the verge of climax. "Dinner time," he whispered to Gunnar.

Gunnar's fangs slid from their sheathes. Ramiro watched Gunnar sink his teeth into Alec's neck before moving to the other side to enjoy his meal. He felt Gunnar's free hand knead his ass and Ramiro let his eyes drift shut.

Everything was better with Gunnar. Life had taken on a completely new dimension for Ramiro since he'd found the love of the strong Alpha. He let out a sigh, content with the knowledge that he'd never again have to walk the Earth alone.

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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