



# **Tainted Blood**

## ***The Dark Element Book One***

**By**

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## **Dedication**

For my gal, Gina Gordon, who loves chatting about books as much as I do!

# Chapter One

Blood dripped off white fangs, dark eyes clouded with bloodlust as the vampire dropped the woman he'd killed to the ground. The room consisted of blank walls, large windows covered with beige blinds and typical office cubicles, all empty. Yet, whimpers of fear echoed through the space indicating the woman would not be his last victim. He turned toward his next target, the corners of the vampire's mouth lifted, and hard cold cruelty danced across his features.

A woman stood on the other side of the office, terror filling her expression as she stared at the end of her life. "Please don't do this." Fear froze her in place, her body trembled, but she didn't move or run for help, only stood, waiting for death to take her.

"No!" Sabi shouted, mirroring the woman's plea. "Leave her alone." If she had the ability to kill the vampire, take his life as he unmercifully took the lives here, she'd do so. But she held no power—could only watch in horror as the scene unfolded.

The vampire grinned, the smile cruel. "Sorry, luv, the choice isn't yours." With speed no human could match, he lunged toward her, grabbed her blonde hair in his hand, and angled her head for his attack. "Try not to take it personally." His fangs penetrated her skin and her soul-crushing screams echoed through the air.

Sabi shuddered as she heard the deep gulps of blood drawn from the wounds, and it sickened her to see the life drain from the woman. She ached to call on her magic, conjure Earth to do something to help the woman, free her from the fate forced upon her, but she had no power here. Not even her abilities as an Earth Witch could stop the horror from happening.

In mere minutes, the fear in the woman's eyes diminished with the loss of her life—no spark, blank and empty. The vampire released her and she crumpled to the floor. He wiped the blood off his lips then smiled, displaying crimson-coated fangs. "Like I said, it's not personal, but damn woman, you tasted delicious."

A small squeal erupted, and the vampire's gaze locked on the woman who hid under a desk across the room. She sobbed—never glanced to him as if the idea of hiding would save her. The vampire lunged a second later and took her life, ignoring her pleas to God to save her.

Sabi watched the murders and listened to the horrified sounds of lives being lost around her. One by one, men and women had been slaughtered in nothing less than a blood bath. She couldn't help any of those being murdered, no matter how much she wanted to. She stayed focused on the disbelief and dismay in each of the human's eyes as their life ended. Sabi tried to concentrate to have a better understanding to the reasons behind these killings, a way to locate the rampage vampire in time, yet her focus couldn't be swayed from the emotions as she watched these humans die.

She experienced their sadness, rage, and utter desperation because they were helpless to fight against the evil picking them off as though they were nothing more than livestock.

If only she could center herself away from the death, steady herself on the images around her to find out where they were to offer them aid. To stop the event before it became present time, but she couldn't will herself to let go of *her* pain she suffered watching this.

Right then, a hazy fog drifted over Sabi's vision as the vampire took the last victim's life, and relief flooded her. She'd soon be removed from this tragedy and return to her body where violence so gruesome only existed in nightmares.

*Her nightmares.*

"Sabi," a voice roared through the horror. "Come back to me!" The urgent tone came again—this time, more—forceful.

The scene dissolved, and reality snapped back in full force. Sabi blinked once before she found herself staring into gorgeous, yet commanding blue eyes shaded with concern. Ryker's thick body of muscles should have gave her comfort, but her rattled emotions were too strong. She drew in a deep breath to stabilize herself before she dared to speak, and noticed the clay teakettle smashed into a hundred pieces on the ground with a puddle of water around her.

Ryker nudged her thigh, commanding her attention—patience had never been his best attribute. Resolved to just get this over with, and sure she could speak without stuttering, she glanced back to him. "I had a vision."

He nodded and gave her a knowing glance. "A tough one by the looks of it. What happened?"

Sabi wiped the sweat off her forehead, released a long, deep breath, and forced her thoughts back to the memory that haunted her. "I came in here to make some tea and a vision hit—hard." They weren't always so intense, but since the demise of the Underworld, her visions had become harder to deal with. Before then they'd only consisted of Black Magic rituals—events she shared with the four Masters of the Otherworld.

Since all Black Magic Supernaturals had been sent to hell forever, her visions had intensified—innocent lives ripped away in complete bloodshed. The horror had weighed on her as of late and dealing with what she saw hadn't come easy. She could've hidden away from it all, but Ryker always pushed her to face it. Instead of prolonging the inevitable, she dug down deep and found bravery. "Something bad is going to happen."

"What did you see?" Ryker asked.

"A vampire killing..." she gulped. "Lots of killings."

He gripped her arms as an offering of support, which she didn't mind. He could hold her like that for as long as he wanted, she had a hard time grasping onto anything right then, and having him there gave her stability. "Did you make anything out?"

She shook her head and hated how her body still trembled in fear. "Just their sadness."

His brows furrowed in unhappiness. "A hard thing to watch, yes?"

"So hard."

He quieted a moment, studying her before he finally asked, "Only one vampire had been there?"

"I think so. The room appeared to be an office or something like it, but once the murders began..." She paused to collect herself, "I couldn't make out anything after that." Humiliation settled in as the realization of what she had done hit her, and she suspected her expression went straight from terrified to a full out pout. "I've failed again."

"I thought we already went over this." He frowned. "You're doing your best, and you're not used to these powerful images being thrust upon you. Cut yourself a break and give yourself time to grow into this new ability. No one expects anything from you, you know this."

Yes, she did know, but it didn't help her any. Her visions would steal her mind daily—if not, twice a day. No point lying to Ryker. Seeing so much death did affect her, and he'd see her lies a mile away. "It's just..." She couldn't even find the words to explain.

He sighed and brushed his fingers across her cheek. "I realize this has been hard for you. The transition from seeing premonitions of Black Magic to now facing the cruelty of a life being taken cannot be easy, but we need to find a way for you to deal with it. You have to put a wall up and remain distant. You can't be responsible for all those lives lost. You're only one Witch."

A Witch who had been granted the gift of foresight by the Earth Element, which she had yet to decide should be called a gift or a curse. Before dealing with her abilities came easier, Black Magic showed her dark spells being conjured, never deaths of humans. Nowadays, her visions were harsh, with horrible images she couldn't sort out.

Ryker's empathic gaze said he understood all too well how it troubled her and that knowledge should please her, however, it didn't. She hated to appear weak and frightened, so she let go of the lingering fear, not wanting to be babied. "It's over now—I'm fine." She wiggled out of his arms to stand then approached the stove to grab a tea towel.

She hadn't heard Ryker stand behind her, but he grabbed her wrist. "Sabi."

He had a gentle expression on his face. Not a typical look for Ryker. His tough attitude had been one of the reasons she found herself attracted to him at first. Only months had passed since he'd returned to the Otherworld from being a shield for Mistress Thalia, but the heat between them had been instant. His unbreakable attitude set her aflame, and once the initial spark had ignited, things soared between them. However, the sweet side of Ryker didn't show itself often, so she it made her curious to hear what he had to say. "Yes?"

"You don't have to do this alone."

"I know I don't." She leaned up to give him a passionate kiss, eager to end the conversation. She didn't want to be lectured or worried over, and needed to figure things out before she explained herself. The images of those bodies still bore heavy in her heart, and even though she did her best to ignore them, she remembered every single detail.

Kissing him, making his mind travel to other places, always ended conversations she didn't want to have. Ryker could be so predictable and easy to manipulate if she set her mind to it. His lips crushed against hers as he parted her mouth to deepen the kiss. She let him lead the way so she could get lost in happy thoughts for a little while. Her hands travelled up his bare chest, ran over the strap holding his sword in place, before she moved down his sides to touch the top of his armor kilt.

After a swirl of his tongue against hers, Ryker backed away and she wobbled. Lord, the man could kiss like a damn god. "As much as I want to continue this conversation with you, and I realize your diversion technique, I've been called out on an assignment with Kyden." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to come and tell you."

Sabi gripped the handle of the stove behind her in order to regain her composure. Arousal burned in her blood, yet at the same time, her heart warmed because he'd shared the information with her. They weren't committed, or he hadn't declared his intentions. Maybe their relationship had been more serious than a friend with benefits type of thing, but she wasn't too convinced, it was Ryker, after all. The Guardian's bedpost had many notches.

Realizing where her thoughts were headed, she quickly refocused—struck by something he said. “You and Kyden are going out on an assignment.” The two had never paired up before, and she worried what the outcome would be. “Are you two going to play nice?”

Kyden, another Guardian, had been one Ryker tended to knock heads with, and often. Nexi—a mixed supernatural, being Fae, Guardian and Witch—and also Kyden’s mate, attributed it to the fact they were so alike. Sabi found the feud amusing, even if she didn’t get the meaning behind it.

“We shall see, won’t we?” Ryker’s smile showed arrogance and only burned more heat in the areas Sabi attempted to cool off. He leaned forward, about to kiss her goodbye before he stiffened his back and cleared his throat again. “Right, I’ll catch up with you later.” After a wink, he spun on his heels and left her standing alone in the kitchen.

To get her mind back on the present, she cleaned up the spilled water on the floor and put the shattered pieces of clay into the garbage. If Earth had granted her the magic most witches received, she could have simply cleaned up the mess and repaired the teakettle, but no such luck. Her abilities were to see darkness within her light world.

Not only did she carry the unique talent, but she also held defensive magic, as all witches did. Earth could be used to devise a distraction. She could make the ground rumble, use vines to wrap around someone to hold them, all sorts of defensive techniques. But compared to most, her talents were weak except for the visions. They came powerful and yes, no one else in either the Otherworld or the Earthworld held the ability. Yet no one had ever said they wanted her gifts, had never considered her special, and she sure as heck didn’t think that way of herself—seeing into the pits of hell was not a great way to spend a night.

Before, she had a purpose, saw evil and acted to stop it, and now, the images haunted her. She couldn’t get anything out of the visions she needed, too distraught to focus on what mattered—the scenes shook her soul and left her incapacitated.

Most times, she only had minutes to work with once the vision hit. If the Council didn’t act immediately, it’d be too late, and so far, she’d proved to be useless since she couldn’t focus on anything but the death around her. Yes, she had to get past this, she just didn’t know how.

## Chapter Two

Ryker closed the door behind him and released the breath stuck in his throat. His distress didn't come because he'd witnessed Sabi lying on the floor, but came from the pain and dismay he'd seen in the depths of her cat-like, amber eyes. He wanted to gather her in his arms, run a hand through her long, dark hair and ease her worries. However, it wouldn't do her any good. She needed to embrace her gift, see past the gruesome scenes, and coddling her would get her nowhere.

He made his way through the Witches House, passing through the gothic architecture of the Otherworld's castle, and headed into the Council's foyer where Kyden leaned against the stone wall appearing impatient as he always did. Tonight however, a tinge of concern filled his gaze.

Ryker studied him. A typical vampire in bloodlust had not been something to be anxious over. "What's got you all put out?"

"Nothing." Kyden pushed away from the wall and approached the portal. A plain wooden door to most, but for all the supernaturals here in the Otherworld, it was a way for quick travel into the Earthworld.

"Tell me then, why do you seem nervous?" A chance to poke fun at Kyden hadn't been something Ryker would let slide. He may outrank Ryker in the Otherworld as the elite Guardian, but Ryker would never let him forget he came in a serious, close second. If Ryker hadn't spent his time protecting Mistress Thalia, the leader to the vampires in the Mid-West for as long as he had, he'd outrank him now, or at least he sure as hell would try to.

Thinking of seconds, however, brought a sudden thought to mind. He glanced around, curious as to Kyden's second half and interested to learn why the Council had paired him up with Kyden on this assignment. "What's this all about anyway? Where's Nexi, and why do you need me to go with you?"

"Nexi is...Haven..." Kyden stumbled, before he straightened his shoulders as if to dignify himself. "Nexi and I may have had an argument a few moments ago."

"Which is different from any other day, because...?"

Kyden scowled. "Leave it alone, Ryker." He strode toward the door. "Let's just get this over with so I can deal with Nexi and the lashing I expect to receive when I return."

Once, Ryker held an interest in Nexi, not because he had an attraction to her, but more so to get a rise out of Kyden. Nexi was a beautiful woman, and quite powerful in her magic, but too sassy for his liking. He didn't mind a woman with a bit of heat—and Nexi had heaps of it.

Times had settled, and he and Kyden seemed to come to an understanding, maybe a forced one, but nonetheless a kinship developed, and he found a certain peace with Sabi.

Kyden opened the portal's door and Ryker rested a hand on his shoulder to allow the gateway to carry them to San Francisco. There, trouble brewed, and the Council had ordered them to handle the problem before it got out of hand.

The air breezed around Ryker's body as they stepped through and darkness filled his vision. Seconds passed before his feet connected with the ground again. He blinked once to gain clarity and when his vision cleared, a row of Victorian houses, all painted in bright colors, stood before him. He



recognized the area as Alamo Square in the heart of San Francisco. They stood in the park across the street, which faced the *Painted Ladies*.

He'd been to the area before and assumed whoever had lost their life tonight had been wealthy—no one owned one of those Victorian homes unless they came from old money. He glanced back to Kyden. "Let's go find out what we've got ourselves into."

"By all means." Kyden grinned.

Ryker approached the home where a vampire waited by the steps. A Detective, Ryker assumed, since a gun sat on the vampire's hip. "Took you longer to get here than I expected." He offered his hand to Ryker. "I'm Detective Myles."

"Ryker." He waited as Kyden offered the same pleasantries before he continued, "What have you got for us tonight?"

"An unusual case, that's what," Myles briskly replied.

Ryker's adrenaline spiked—he loved the mystery, the hunt, and the result of seeing evil destroyed. "Let's go see then, shall we?"

"Of course." Myles opened the door and gestured them in.

Ryker stepped through the threshold and the scent of death filled his nose. He stifled it with a cough and proceeded to follow Myles through the main hallway and into the back of the house.

Past the dining room, he strode into the living room to see a historical room—dark wood paneling, old fireplace which appeared unused and Victorian-inspired furniture decorated the space. Not his typical style, but nonetheless pleasant.

The dead body on the ground was not. Penetration marks littered the human's body from head to toe. Clearly, she—and he only recognized that fact because of her long blondish hair with highlights—had been attacked by either a starving vampire who couldn't choose a vein, or more than one had attacked her. "What happened to her?"

Myles opened his mouth to speak, but had been cut off when Zia came running into the living room. "I have to be quick here, so no talking, just watch."

Before any of them had a chance to respond, she raised her hands high above her, and called to her magic to reenact the crime. As a Spirit Witch, Zia held the ability to manipulate time and bring a moment back for all to see. As always, present time stopped and they were drawn back into the moment the murder occurred.

Ryker had no preconceived notions about what might have happened since the scene had been by far the most unusual one he'd ever seen. Yet, when the vampire appeared to stalk the woman, it did surprise him that only one had inflicted these wounds on her.

Mere seconds passed before the vamp lunged, attacked the woman, and showed Ryker what he needed to know. "He's newly awakened." He'd seen this many times when he worked for the Mistress—new vampires in complete bloodlust after they'd awoken. The difference being, they always had other vampires who cared for them and made sure they received the blood they needed. This vampire had been left alone, and had no idea how to feed properly.

As he attacked, he bit the victim all over as he tried to locate a vein, but kept missing. The woman screamed, punched out in the fight for her life, but her attempt had been pointless. Even a

new vampire held more strength than a human did, and a hungry, uneducated vampire was about as dangerous as they came.

As the woman's life drained away, the vision froze, and Zia glanced at Ryker then to Kyden. "Examine him quickly, I have to go."

Ryker almost asked what had her in such a hurry, but refrained and studied the vampire before him. A young kid, eighteen at the most. Ryker's adrenaline left him in a flash—nothing about hunting this kid appealed to him.

"Done?" Zia asked in haste. Ryker nodded, and Kyden followed suit. "Good." Without a moment's pause, she ran from the room and vanished from sight.

"I have to be missing something," Ryker steeled his gaze on Kyden. "What is going on with all of you?"

"Never mind." Kyden waved the remark away and focused on Myles. "Have you discussed the situation with your Mistress?"

Myles nodded. "When we discovered the body, I immediately contacted Mistress Ellery to advise her that a vampire in the area had committed a murder. If you had gotten here sooner, you would have seen her."

Ryker had no guilt, being there or with Sabi after she awoke from her vision had not been a hard choice to make. "Did Ellery have anything to say on the matter?"

"She said the vampire who committed this is not one of ours."

"How can she be so sure of that?" Kyden scoffed.

"Because Mistress Ellery runs a strict territory and any vampires wanting to turn another, need to ask permission."

"But rules can be broken," Ryker countered.

"Yes, I realize this, but Mistress Ellery had one of her shields with her—a werewolf in fact—and given this vampire had been born not long ago, the maker's blood would have still coursed through the vamp's veins, and he didn't recognize the scent."

Ryker mulled it over—something didn't add up. "Why would a vampire turn a kid as young as this one and dump him in a town which didn't belong to him?"

"And why leave him to fend for himself?" Kyden added.

"I'm coming up blank on this one as well." Myles confirmed the unusualness of it all. "Can't find any logic whatsoever."

Neither could Ryker. The kid had been caught in pure bloodlust and had no one to help him. No wonder he had such trouble finding a vein and took too much blood, causing the woman's death.

Still, as much as the kid couldn't help what he'd done, a life had been lost—that fact couldn't be ignored. "What does the Mistress want done here?"

Myles lifted an eyebrow. "In what means?"

Ryker knew enough about the Mistresses from his time with Thalia to know they could be kindhearted. "If we find him, is she willing to take him in?"

"The question came up," Myles responded. "But no, she will not foster a new vampire who has experienced bloodlust and is not from our territory."

“I’ll return to the Otherworld and get a wolf to help here,” Kyden interjected. “I’d suspect the vampire is still drenched in her blood, not knowing better. It’ll be the quickest way to find him.”

Ryker noticed the tension set in Kyden’s shoulders, which led him to believe Kyden had been equally as troubled over the assignment. He enjoyed protecting humans from danger, but when they were mixed up in the supernatural world, and had not willingly sought it out, he held no desire to destroy them. No, he didn’t enjoy this.

Kyden left the room, and Ryker glanced back toward the dead woman—two innocent lives lost tonight, only stirring the razor sharp edge in him to find the one responsible for creating the new vampire.

“We’ve got this one labeled a missing person—they’ll search for a while, but eventually the public will forget, as they always do,” Myles said, heading for the hallway. “I’d best head back to the station and get the paperwork written up.”

Ryker followed Myles out of the house. “Normally, I’d say something here about you having the shitty end of the job, but tonight, I’d much rather be facing paperwork than setting out to end this kid’s life.”

“And here is where I get to tell you—you’ve got the shitty end of this deal.” Myles smiled, with no amount of warmth in it.

No one took pride in this kind of duty.

## Chapter Three

The garden in the Otherworld was eerily quiet, the colorful fish splashed in the pond as Sabi walked along the stone path. She inhaled, titillated by the lush scents around her—to be surrounded by the natural elements that gave strength to her magic refreshed her. It provided her with the strength to release the memory of the murders from her mind.

However, as the warm glow of relaxation touched her, the reprieve ended with a loud shout through the night skies. “Sabi, oh, thank God. You...need...to...help...me,” Nexi panted.

Nexi needed *her* help? That could only mean danger. “What is it?”

“No...time...” Nexi latched onto Sabi’s hand and dragged her along. “Kyden left me high and dry because he is a complete ass and wanted no part of this—please, you just need to come.”

Nexi made her way through the gardens back to the Witches House with Sabi in tow. The gothic castle stood high and picturesque with the night sky as its backdrop. She slammed open the door of the Witches House and hurried in—all the while keeping Sabi’s hand tight and yanking her along. “Oh, frig. Holy shit.” The endless profanities poured from her mouth as their journey through the castle continued.

“What’s going on?” Sabi’s impatience rose. She hadn’t been opposed to helping, but it’d be nice to have some details so she could prepare herself for whatever awaited her.

Nexi stopped at Haven’s residence—a fellow witch and good friend to both Sabi and Nexi—and flung the door open. “It’s Haven...the baby.”

Complete understanding filled Sabi as the door widened to expose Haven on the floor, hugging her stomach as she screamed. Then she understood what Nexi meant about Kyden leaving. He apparently wanted no part in watching Haven birth a youngling, and she could understand why since she didn’t think herself capable of watching. Instead of deciding, and in turn, maybe running out of there, she focused on Haven. “Is she all right?”

“Does she seem all right?” Nexi snapped. “We just need more help here. I. Cannot. Do. This. Alone.”

The statement confused Sabi—Nexi hadn’t been alone. Finn, a Guardian and the father of Haven’s youngling, sat in a chair in front of Haven. But as Sabi examined him, she realized what Nexi meant—he bowed his head between his knees as he took long deep breaths. “What is he doing?”

“He’s not dealing with this well,” Zia said, rushing through the front door. “Now, girls get over here and help me take her into the bedroom.”

Sense smacked Sabi back into focusing on the situation at hand. Finn had been about to faint, Nexi appeared beside herself, and a similar wave of sickness washed over Sabi, but Haven needed her and Zia asked for help. She drew in a deep breath to center herself. “Okay, what can I do?”

Zia gave her a firm, but grateful look. “Come, we must hurry, she’s going to deliver soon.”

Sabi helped Haven up, who cried out on pain, and Nexi supported her on the other side. Awkwardly, they made it into the bedroom, where Zia laid out some thick blankets on the bed. “Get her undressed.” Zia headed for the door. “I need to get supplies.”

“What!” Nexi exclaimed.

“What?” Sabi repeated.

Zia glanced over her shoulder and gave them a stern stare. “Now.”

As she left the room, Nexi glanced wide-eyed at Sabi, and all Sabi laughed nervously.

“You’re her soul-sister,” Sabi pointed out. A bond much like mates, but without the romantic connection—two witches who were as close as twins and could sense each other’s emotions. “That qualifies you to do her bottom half.”

“Using that one on me, are you?” Nexi snorted.

Sabi nodded then unbutton Haven’s blouse. Haven eyes were filled with so much pain, the sight unsettled Sabi. Haven had been always a complete ray of sunshine, and to see her in that condition horrified her.

“Make the pain stop,” Haven sobbed. “Can’t you just get it out?”

“Shhh...” Nexi said. “It’ll be over soon, Haven.”

“I can’t do this anymore,” she wailed.

“Don’t think you have a choice,” Sabi countered, trying to be supportive, but not wanting to lie to Haven either. “It’s coming and you *can* do this.”

“You’re right, it *is* coming,” Nexi said, holding Haven’s panties in hand, while she stared at Haven’s southern region.

Sabi leaned down, and it took all of one second for her to realize what Nexi meant. “Zia.”

“Zia!” Nexi followed with her own bellow.

The youngling’s head crowned and Sabi did not want to catch the slippery little sucker. No way. No how. Not ever!

Zia stormed back into the room, but Sabi didn’t dare look at her. She couldn’t remove her gaze from Haven’s...the youngling’s head.

“Would you two help me?” Zia said.

Sabi shook her head to snap herself out of her daze and focused on Zia. “Right, okay, what do you want me to do?”

“Take one of her legs,” Zia instructed. “Nexi, you take the other and pull them back.”

“Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit.” Nexi continued to curse as they both brought Haven into the right position to birth the youngling.

Haven screamed a loud, piercing sound right before her mouth shut and she released a deep grunt.

“Yes Haven, push,” Zia urged her on.

Sabi gripped Haven’s thigh and held it back against her body. When she woke up that night, never in her wildest dreams had she expected to be staring at Haven’s coochie, but part of was compelled to see the birth through to the end. Haven needed her—she would not disappoint. “Go on, Haven, push—push.”

Finn had been nowhere to be found, and Sabi assumed he still sat in the other room, head between his knees in an attempt not to pass out.

“Last one!” Zia exclaimed. “Push hard.”

The head was fully out—only the shoulders needed to come. Haven gripped onto her legs, gave a deep groan and pushed harder. A loud scream erupted from Haven’s mouth and the sound of a soft cry echoed it.

Finn rushed into the room. “My...” He glanced at the blood on the bed and he crumbled to the floor.

“Some Guardian,” Nexi snorted. “He can fight and kill vampires, but *this* he can’t handle.”

Sabi giggled, just as Haven panted, “What is it?”

Zia held the baby in her hands and smiled. “It’s a girl.” She handed the youngling to Haven. “A little witch.”

“A girl...” Haven glanced away from the baby to Nexi with a tired smile. “I told Finn as much.”

“Mom’s intuition.” Nexi leaned down, kissed Haven’s cheek then smiled. “What are you going to name her?”

“Litzy.”

Sabi lowered Haven’s leg, and glanced at the youngling. Litzy was sweet—bald with clear blue eyes, wide open to see the world she’d entered. “Aw, she’s such a dolly, Haven.”

“Thank you, Sabi.” Haven’s breath came out deep as she lowered her head against the pillow. “Thank you for helping me.”

Nexi beamed as she met Sabi’s gaze, as did Zia.

For all the visions, which tore at Sabi’s soul, one moment like that rejuvenated her. In the dark, there had been light, and that’s what she needed to hold onto.

Finn jumped to his feet, wobbled a minute, yet eventually made his way to Haven. “Is...are you...is everyone all right?”

“She’s perfect.” Haven smiled. “I’m perfect.”

The moment had become incredibly private and Sabi didn’t want to intrude. She retreated toward the bedroom door and Nexi followed her. Haven and Finn were so wrapped up in Litzy, and Zia tended to Haven, no one noticed their departure—definitely a good time to escape.

Sabi made a beeline for the front door. Once outside their residence, she exhaled deeply. “That was certainly the craziest thing I’ve ever done.”

“I’d say.” Nexi closed the door behind her then linked her arm in Sabi’s. “Come on, the garden seemed nice before, let’s go back there. I could use some downtime to settle my jumping nerves.”

An understatement.

They made quick work leaving the Witches House behind them, and journeyed back outside the castle. Soon, they stood in the garden and Sabi let the calmness engulf her once again. They walked along the path until they came to the bench sitting off to the side.

“I have to admit,” Nexi gestured toward the bench. “I’m glad the kid is out. Haven has been nuts.”

Sabi laughed and took a seat beside her. “Who would have ever guessed that Haven would have turned into Mommy-zilla.” Haven had always been a sweet loveable witch, but pregnant, her fuse was entirely too short. The past few months had been trying ones, mostly for Finn.

Nexi laughed too, before sighing it away. “So, how are things with Ryker?”

“Good, I guess.” What else could she say? Confusing, frustrating, fantastic...

“Just good?” Nexi probed.

“Well...” Sabi questioned how honest to be. Nexi had proved to be a good friend to her and Sabi knew she wouldn’t judge her, she deserved the truth. “I like Ryker, but I’m not sure where we are headed.”

Nexi’s eyes widened. “Why do you say that?”

A thousand reasons, but that’d only start a conversation she didn’t want to have. Sticking to the most obvious reasons had been the best choice. “Because, you know Ryker, he’s not the type who commits.”

“Until he met you,” Nexi interjected.

Sabi smiled. “A nice thought, but who knows what’s going on in his head? He’s so hard to read.”

“He’s a Guardian—they are born that way.”

Sabi nodded, well aware of that fact. All Guardians tended to be tough in nature and didn’t have a soft bone in their body—emotions were hard to find in the heart of a Guardian. “It seems like he cares for me, yet he won’t declare it.”

“Do you need him to?”

Sabi shrugged. “I guess I do. It’s hard for me to tell if he’s just being nice or if he wants something more.” She needed him to say the words because of his history. How could she believe they were serious when he’d never been known to offer that before?

Nexi laughed boisterously. “Sabi, I’ve never heard of or seen Ryker spend any amount of time with anyone. Don’t you think that’s a dead giveaway?”

“It could be, but what if he just feels bad for me and that’s why he’s sticking around?” The one thing she couldn’t figure out—did Ryker stay with her because he wanted to, or had been extra sweet to her because of her instability?

Nexi’s expression became perplexed, and after a long pause, she voiced her thoughts. “Why exactly would he feel bad for you?”

“Cause of the visions.” Her chin trembled, and Sabi cleared her throat to stop her emotions from taking hold. No, she wouldn’t cry about that. To do so would be silly. As long as she kept trying to be strong, in the end, she would be.

“Oh,” Nexi responded, softly.

“Yeah, *oh*.”

He seemed happy, appeared to enjoy her, but why had he not said anything about them being exclusive, or even used the love word yet? Nexi appeared to ponder it all before her gaze shifted to curious. “But, he could feel bad for you because he *loves* you. That makes sense too.”

Sabi supposed she could be right. “The thing is, until he declares how he feels or says something that makes me believe he wants more, I’m just not quite sure of his intentions.”

“Want me to ask him?”

Sabi stared at Nexi pointedly. “Don’t you dare!” If Nexi said a word about it, Sabi would never be able to look at Ryker again. Definitely not what she wanted.

“I know, just kidding.” Nexi laughed. “He wouldn’t tell me anyway.”

She doubted he would either, but knew Nexi would be bold enough to ask him such a question. No, she needed to ask him herself. The problem though had been simple...she didn’t have the strength to do it.

“Well, I think I see *love* written all over Ryker’s face. I witnessed it the first time I saw you guys together. It’s the small things, the way he always touches you, and is always near you. I’ve never seen him act like that before.”

“He does do those things, but maybe his reasons behind them are because he thinks I’m totally insane and he’s afraid to make it worse.” Sabi’s eyes burned and if she would have let her tears fall, they’d come heavy.

“I think you’re being way too hard on yourself,” Nexi scoffed. “You’re not crazy.”

Of course, Nexi hadn’t seen how Sabi’s visions affected her. Only Ryker knew how tough things had been. She wouldn’t understand. Instead of responding, Sabi lifted her shoulders in a lazy shrug.

Nexi studied her, then after a few awkward moments, asked, “Do you love him?”

The million-dollar question. If she let herself be honest, she’d have an easy answer for her, but it would let Ryker in to hurt her. No, she couldn’t allow that. “I care for him a great deal.”

Nexi’s gaze turned sly. “Seems like Ryker isn’t the only one having trouble admitting things.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” Sabi shot back. She’d had enough of this conversation and didn’t like the direction it had gone, and proceeded to change the subject. “So, how do you think Ryker and Kyden are getting along on their assignment?”

Nexi grinned knowingly. “If they come back without killing each other, it’ll be a damn miracle.”



## Chapter Four

Ryker sat on the front steps of the Victorian home in an attempt to stay in the shadows. Of course, humans couldn't see his sword strapped to his back due to the magic used, but his gear couldn't be hidden. They'd take notice of a man wearing an armor kilt and nothing else.

In some cities, their gear could be overlooked. If he wore his kilt in Las Vegas most would think he had been a part of a theatrical show. Here though, he thought it best to stay hidden.

A scuffle on the road drew his gaze up to see that Kyden returned with Dante by his side. The son of the Patriarch of the Wolves stood proud, looking everything a werewolf should—strong with a body that could match any Guardian in strength, yet Dante always offered a kind smile.

"What brings you to the neighborhood?" Ryker joked. Despite his good humor, curiosity hit why Kyden had returned with Dante. He lived a busy life within the Utah pack, working for his father Valor, who led the Alphas in the Earthworld, and usually had no part in Otherworld troubles.

Dante stopped in front of him and offered his hand. "I got suckered in."

"Not enough trouble at home that you need to seek some out here?" Ryker asked in a playful tone as he shook Dante's hand.

"He was visiting Zennah." Kyden smiled.

"Ah, I see," Ryker commented. "So that's what suckered you in."

Dante rolled his eyes. "Kyden said you needed me to a scent out a vampire?"

"The woman is still in there." Ryker gestured toward the front door. "It's a bloody mess."

"Let me get a whiff of her and I'll track him."

Ryker followed Dante as he trotted up the front steps with Kyden on his heels. As they entered back into the living room, the goriness of the scene hadn't lessened, and apparently Dante was just as affected. He glanced over his shoulder with a troubled gaze. "What in the hell happened to her?"

"Newly made vampire," Ryker replied.

Dante's gaze shifted with awareness. "Best we find him quick then." He knelt down to the woman, placed his hand on her head and drew in a long deep breath. A few breaths later, he stood and wiped the blood from his hand onto his jeans. "Right, I've got her scent."

Ryker drew his sword from his back, stepped forward and slammed the blade down into the woman's body to send her back to the Otherworld, along with every speck of her blood. His hope, somewhere along the way, that she'd find the peace she deserved.

The house returned to a blank slate and Ryker gestured to Dante. "Go ahead, we'll follow you."

"Try your best to stay hidden," Kyden added. "We don't need the police on us trying to tranquilize a wolf running through downtown San Francisco."

"No, we don't." Dante laughed, before he shifted, his wolf form a remarkable display, black fur with one white paw, and he stood high, coming up to Ryker's hip. He nodded his head toward the hallway and trotted out of the room.

Ryker matched his gait and at the front door, opened it for him to pass through. "Lead the way."

Dante growled in response then rushed through. Once outside, he raised his nose to the air and inhaled deeply before he glanced back at Ryker with a focused stare. He snorted through his nose and ran down the front steps, and Ryker stayed right behind him, as did Kyden.

Continuing down the street, hidden on the dark side of the road that had fewer streetlights, Ryker looked quickly at Kyden. "How do you want to handle this one?"

"Let's see what were up against. I talked to Zade when I went back. If the kid isn't too far gone, he has offered to aid him."

The extended offer should have eased Ryker's tension, but it didn't. The vampire he'd seen attack the woman had been so gone in bloodlust, he doubted there would be anything salvageable to aid. Ryker only hoped the vampire had fed enough to sedate his hunger and maybe they could get him to see reason. If he attacked them, they'd be left with no choice but to end his life.

Dante carried on, weaved his way through the streets of San Francisco. Being so late at night, about two in the morning, stillness welcomed them. The exact reasons they stuck to vampire time. Trouble stirred in the darkness and they needed to be ready, not exhausted from lack of sleep.

A few minutes later, Dante slowed to a mere trot then stopped. He took a quick look around the quiet streets and shifted. "He's here."

Ryker glanced toward the Starbucks that had been long closed for the night. "Where exactly?"

"His scent is strong in there. I suspect he's inside."

"Inside the coffee shop?" Kyden asked.

"If my nose is correct, yes." Dante took another long sniff. "But I suspect that..." he glanced down at his feet, "he's in a basement or something. His scent is beneath me."

"Wonderful," Ryker groaned. How in the hell were they going to get into the building? If they broke in, the alarms would sound. Mortal cops getting into the mix wasn't something they needed. "He must have gotten in somehow. Best we find the spot and go in the same way."

Kyden nodded. "I agree."

"It's been fun and all, but I..." Dante trailed off.

Ryker gave him a firm smack on the back. "You've got a woman to get back to."

"Yes, I do." Dante grinned before he took off in the opposite direction toward the house in order to return to the portal. The gateway stayed open wherever a supe entered the Earthworld, and the only way to return to the Otherworld was through the portal. Judging by how fast Dante ran, urgency spurred him on.

When Dante faded into the shadows, Kyden said, "I'm trying to understand what he sees in Zennah."

Ryker snorted. Kyden and Zennah had history, nothing serious, but history nonetheless. "You were with her once. I'd imagine he sees what you did."

"Once is the key word there, Zennah's personality..."

"Compares to a child who has been spoiled."

Kyden laughed. "Well said." He strode forward. "Come on, let's go find this vamp and hopefully not get bit in the process."

Ryker made his way around the coffee shop, which sat on the corner of the street. Nothing stood out as an entrance point—no broken windows or doors ajar. They approached the back alley and the stench of death hit him tenfold.

He stopped dead in his tracks and his gaze drifted to Kyden's. "Looks like he has himself a midnight snack."

Kyden's nose wrinkled. "Indeed he has."

The back alley had large garbage cans, a small parking lot, and the area was too dark. Ryker's tension grew. Not being able to see left them in a precarious position. But as Dante said, the vampire stayed underground.

He took a step forward as something on the ground caught his eye. In the dark, it appeared shiny against the pavement. Ryker bent down, touched it and when he raised his finger, blood dripped off it. "I think we found the trail to our killer." He stood, kept his focus on the blood and walked forward. Only a few steps in, he saw the small broken window located at the back of the coffee shop.

Kyden stepped up next to him and groaned. "Of course, what else did I bloody expect?"

He could understand Kyden's frustration. How were they going to fit through the damn window? It surprised him the vampire even managed, but remembered the kid had been quite young. He also knew, if they went in any other way, they'd alert the authorities. More humans near this vampire was not an ideal situation—it left only one choice. "In we go?"

Kyden nodded.

Ryker knelt down to the window and brushed away the remaining glass shards covered in blood, unsure of whom it belonged to. Could be the vampire or the victim—or victims—Ryker suspected he had. After he'd cleared the window of the debris, he stuck his head into darkness. Near the back of the room however, a simple dull bulb glowed, giving off some light, but not as much as he would have liked. He leaned back out of the window. "Got a flashlight handy?"

"No." Kyden jabbed him on the shoulder. "Would you just get in there?"

Ryker groaned, put his head back in and attempted to enter, only to get stuck. He pushed, but to no avail, he didn't budge. His shoulders would not fit through the small space of the window. Kyden gave him a hard shove from behind.

"Ow," Ryker groaned. "Piss off."

"Just get in there." Kyden laughed.

Ryker tried again, angled his shoulders to put one in first and eased the other through the small space. Just as he pushed through, Kyden gave a hard shove and sent Ryker soaring through the window headfirst to land hard on the cold, cement floor.

Kyden's laughter filled the air, while Ryker groaned. "You could have warned me, dipshit," he spat.

"Just helping out a friend in need, is all." Kyden climbed through the window.

Ryker kept a close eye on him and the moment Kyden's shoulder cleared the window, he jumped to his feet, grabbed onto the scabbard strapped to Kyden's chest and yanked him in.

"You..." Kyden gasped, but as he fell, the words were lost to him. He landed face first on his stomach with a loud bang.

“And I’m returning the friendly gesture.” Ryker chortled.

“Let’s just get this over with.” Kyden jumped to his feet, wiped the blood from his nose and shot Ryker a disgruntled look, which he just grinned at.

A low growl however wiped the smile off Ryker’s face. He spun around as he heard a splatter hit the wall. There in the corner of the room the vampire sat, hidden within the shadows, but the light in the room created an outline of him.

“Well, well, we’ve found you.” He took a step toward him, squinted in an effort to see through the darkness. A moment passed before his vision adjusted and what he found clenched his stomach.

Three bodies, all dead, their skin covered with an endless number of fang marks, surrounded the vampire. So captivated in his kills and overwhelmed by his bloodlust, he hadn’t even noticed their arrival.

Not good.

Ryker glanced at Kyden, who approached the vampire cautiously. “Guess the decision has been made.”

“Clearly.”

As cruel as it seemed, he could do nothing for him. Once bloodlust took a vampire to that point, his mind would be lost to all but one need—to feed. The path the kid’s life had taken couldn’t be undone —too much of a liability now.

The vampire had been so consumed with bloodlust, he continued to bite the woman repeatedly, not caring for a moment she had already died. He searched for a vein, but had been unable to find one that would give him his fix since he hadn’t learned the necessary skills to feed.

Ryker had enough of the disgusting display. “Release her.” The vampire’s gaze shot to his and he dropped the woman to the ground. He leaned forward, brought his face out of the shadows—blood dripped off his fangs as he pulled his lip up and snarled.

Feral, crazed in his need for blood, but even with all that, Ryker could still see the innocent kid, and held no enjoyment about ending his life.

In his midst of heartache for the new vampire, his senses were off and he didn’t expect the kid to lunge at him. In a second, Ryker found himself on his back, gripping the vamp’s face as he attempted to make a chew toy out of him.

Ryker needed to use all of his strength to keep him away as the vamps fangs snapped out at him. “Kyden, you could help.”

“But you seem to be doing so well.” Kyden chuckled, but did step forward, wrapped his hand around the kid’s throat to tear him away, then slammed him to the ground and landed on top of him. He groaned as the vamp struggled beneath him. Vampires were not usually that strong, nor were they so quick, but a new vampire in the throes of bloodlust could overpower them. If they allowed it, of course.

Ryker lunged to his feet and stuck a knee to the vampire’s chest to help in the hold. “Are you in there, kid?” The vampire snarled like a savage animal. “I take that as a no.” The decision had been made and Ryker would not take the chance again to be thrown off guard. He pulled his sword from his back to finish the vampire off, but as he did, the kid bucked, sending Ryker and Kyden soaring back.

“You need to distract him,” Ryker said, holding his sword out in front of him while the vampire prepared to attack.

“And just how do you expect me to do that?” Kyden replied.

The vampire lunged then, so quick Ryker didn’t see it and found himself on his back again with the vampire snapping at his neck. He shoved him off and jumped to his feet as the vampire paced in rapid speeds in front of him, preparing to lunge. “I don’t know, be creative.”

Ryker heard Kyden’s sword swish from its scabbard, followed by his deep groan. Whatever he had done, it caught the vampire’s attention, his gaze locked onto Kyden as his eyes went wild. Seconds later, he pounced in a speed Ryker couldn’t process.

But, Ryker had been ready. He stepped in behind him, he raised his sword and swung. A crack, followed by a splatter then a loud thump sounded as the vampire’s head hit the floor and rolled away. Ryker raised his gaze to Kyden’s and saw he held his arm as blood dripped from a wound. He couldn’t believe the sight before him. “You cut yourself?”

“A Nexi trick, and a damn good one, worked like a charm.” He winced. “Clean this mess up and let’s get back before I attract any other unwanted guests. I’ll be useless in a fight in this condition.”

Ryker grinned sheepishly. “You wouldn’t be saying I’m the stronger one, would you?”

“Get over yourself, Ryker. Hurry up, will you?”

“Yes, I’ll clean up the dirty work since you’re incapable.” How he enjoyed the moment. The mighty Guardian didn’t seem so strong now, did he? Ah, sweet satisfaction.

## Chapter Five

Sabi sprinkled the apples with brown sugar and cinnamon before placing the dessert into the oven. When Ryker went out on an assignment, she always liked to reward him with something sweet after he got home.

She started the timer on the oven for an hour and got to work on the mess. Making apple crisp had been an easy dessert, but her cooking always amounted to lots of dishes. She didn't mind, though, cleaning dishes relaxed her. The warm water, the lemony scent of the soap, always eased her.

As she finished drying the last mixing bowl, a warm body pressed up against hers. Ryker swiped her hair over to her other shoulder, leaned down, and kissed her nape. "Smells delicious."

Sabi pressed against him and smiled. "Of course it does. It's your favorite."

He continued to lay soft, butterfly kisses across her skin, and she placed the bowl on the counter, stepping away to give him a stern glance. "You're not going to burn another one of my desserts because we got preoccupied elsewhere."

"But why do I need anything sweet when I've got you standing right in front of me?"

"Hey, no charming me." She glared. "I mean it."

He chuckled, and leaned against the counter. "All right, tell me then, how's your night been?"

"Oh, it's been pretty quiet, except for when I watched Haven give birth."

Ryker's eyes went huge. "She had the babe?"

"A little witch. Her name is Litzy."

A knowing expression flashed across his face, which Sabi couldn't quite understand. "I'm taking it Nexi had been there too?"

"Yeah, a good thing, too. Finn had been of no help at all and Nexi was well...Nexi."

"Now it all makes sense," Ryker laughed. "Kyden acted odd on the assignment. I'm guessing this explains why."

Sabi folded the tea towel and placed it back on the stove door handle. "How did the assignment go?"

"We dealt with the matter appropriately." Ryker's expression turned inquisitive, yet his gaze appeared troubled. "This vision you had earlier, did it involve a young chap?"

"No, he didn't look young. Why?"

"Tonight, we found a vampire who had been turned recently, in full bloodlust. He took four lives, seemed to have no control over himself, as if he'd been birthed then left to fend for himself. I wondered if your vision involved him."

Sabi shook her head. "No, the vampire seemed immortal age." Could have been around thirty years old, but seeing that aging stopped then, who really knew how old he was?

As much as she hated it, the reminder of the memory awakened the emotions she'd done her best to forget. Ryker must have seen the trepidation pass across her face, because he reached out to her. "Sorry."

She stepped away in order to avoid contact with him. His mind clearly lingered in a naughty place, even if he had been being sweet right then, and she didn't want to go down that road. She'd

slaved over making the dessert and wanted him to enjoy the treat. "I'm fine. Honestly, I'm over it now."

His expression said he didn't believe her, but then his gaze changed into something else entirely. He took another step toward her, but she raised her hand to stop him. "Don't give me that smoldering look. I mean it, if my dessert goes in the garbage again, there will be hell to pay."

"I'm only interested in comforting you."

"Sure you are." She continued to step away from him. Her stare focused on his, and good heavens, they burned with desire. The one part of their relationship that had never been an issue was the spectacular passion between them.

"Now come on, I only want to hug you."

She knew him all too well. "A hug will lead to nakedness, and the dessert will be forgotten."

He continued to approach her, moved her out of the kitchen as she backed away from him while he gave her his sexy grin. "You think so little of my restraint?"

"I know you don't have any," she retorted, suddenly aware her legs were stopped by something. She glanced back to find he had herded her into the bedroom. "I mean it, Ryker. You've ruined too many of the treats I've made for you."

He pinned her, leaning his body against hers, and his gaze said he enjoyed the position he put her in. "May I remind you, I've said to stop all this baking and let me just enjoy the taste of you."

Classic Ryker—bold, yet somehow charming. He could say something dirty and make it sound endearing. He closed the distance between them, raised his hand and ran a finger down her cheek. "What if I touched you here, would this change your mind?"

"No," she said, determined. Oh, she would fight him, and ignore how sexy he looked in his Guardian gear—all warrior—all man. She enjoyed baking for him, liked doing nice things for him, and he'd made it a habit to let her efforts burn to a crisp. No, she would hold her ground and refuse him. They needed to wait forty-five minutes, if that, and then they could play.

"What if I did this?"

He ran his thumb over her lips, and on instinct, her lips parted as her breath followed in a whoosh. "No, my mind would not be changed."

He grinned, and she almost succumbed to him. The confidence oozing from him, the pure sex appeal emanating from him, plus his gorgeous face—she was screwed. "If I do this..." He ran his index finger along her jaw, down her neck and traced the V-neck of her cotton blouse, "will your mind be changed?"

"Ahhh..." she stumbled as his finger slipped beneath the ridge of her shirt and ran over the swell of her breast. He dipped his finger deeper and ran over her taut nipple, and she moaned.

"Now why were you opposed to this?" he purred.

What had been the problem? "My dessert," she squeaked.

"Hmmm...I see I need to try harder to sway you." He pulled her top down, along with her bra, to expose her breasts and he paid her nipples the attention they deserved.

She arched her back, latching onto his head to hold him closer. His mouth, so warm and wet against her sensitive skin, made all thoughts vanish from her mind. She struggled to keep her guard

up, but when his teeth took a nibble at her flesh, she decided she didn't much care. She sank against him and her head fell back as a moan escaped her mouth.

"There you go," Ryker approved as he took her breasts in her hands and squeezed them.

Her clothes restricted her, she needed them gone, and squirmed. Ryker took the hint and removed her top and bra. He pressed his warm chest against her bare breasts. Her hands trailed up his muscular arms and they flexed beneath her fingers. "Mmm..." she hummed. "You have the most amazing body."

"I could say the same about you." He undid the zipper on her skirt and let the garment pool at her feet.

Not about to miss the opportunity, she assisted him with his kilt, leaving him in his silver shorts to expose his hardened bulge. She reached out, ran her hand down his erection and he groaned. "Needy are we?" Sure, she teased him, but that's the kind of thing that fuelled Ryker. He teased beyond what the mind could hold and enjoyed the same treatment back.

Leaving her pink panties in place, he cradled her bottom, lifted her off the ground and placed her on the bed. His mouth came against hers in an endearing kiss that left no doubt he'd been craving her body.

Her soul rejoiced. Being wanted by a man like Ryker made her melt. So sexy, such swagger, and all hers.

He left her mouth to trail kisses along her neck, nibbled her there as he knew she liked. Heat soared into every molecule of her body as he made her burn. She squirmed and moaned out as he went lower. His hands paved the way as his mouth followed in behind. Above her pubic line, he glanced up, and grinned, leaving her breathless. He tucked a finger into her lace panties, pulled them down to expose her warmed flesh.

Her hips thrust upward as the cool air danced across her heated skin. Ryker chuckled. "It appears I'm not the only needy one."

She might have responded, if he hadn't lowered his head and with the lightest of touches, he licked out and made contact with her body. Her eyes rolled back as a strangled moan tore from her throat. "More Ryker, please, I need more."

He licked out again, still so light it created a burn in her she doubted she could control. "Aw, babe, I'm not about to waste seeing you this way." His tongue connected with her little nub, but gave no pressure. "Seeing you writhing in hard desire—no, this I will enjoy." He licked out now along the outsides of her warmth. She shuddered, her body throbbing for more, for him.

Of course, he enjoyed doing that, bringing her to a point of madness before he indulged her. She never minded, not really anyway, she had the best sex of her life with him. He continually brought her to edge of euphoria, only to withdraw it and prolong the sensation.

He never rushed their lovemaking, slow and eager, Ryker's way. It drove her wild, and did exactly that then. She clenched the bed sheets with her hands, angled her hips up high and Ryker applied pressure to her stomach to lower her back down, and gave a firm hard lick along her sensitive flesh.

"Oh my," she exhaled.



He groaned and repeated the move. Lick after lick, he gave her body the glorious treatment of his mouth, and she lost her mind.

By the time he delivered his last round of swirls against her nub, she was left a shuddering witch. Released from her intense climax, her body trembled and passion swept through her, leaving her blind.

She blinked a couple times in an effort to shake off her daze and glanced down her body to find a grinning Ryker. "You're so damn good." She smiled herself, pushed him away and squirmed off the bed to lower herself onto her knees in front of him.

Ryker's gaze burned. "I'm not the only one good with my mouth."

"Let's see just how good I am." She reached for his shorts and lowered them to free his erection. Latching onto him, she gave a few steady strokes, making Ryker groan.

Slowly, she licked up his shaft, keeping her eyes on him, like she knew pleased him. He brushed her cheek with his finger as she applied light licks all over him. Yes, she could tell from the tension that surrounded his body, he wanted her to devour him, but she would give him the same type of torment—tease him until he could take no more. "Do you like me doing this?" She swirled her tongue and his hips thrust forward.

"Yes," he said in a strangled voice.

"What about this?" She cupped his sac in her hands and worked her tongue down to give his testicles some attention.

"I love that," he groaned.

"I can see you do." His erection was so hard, and she might have drawn things out longer just to see him need her beyond measure, but his taste consumed her. She brought her hand back up to his erection and ran her mouth back up to the tip of him, then took him deep into her throat.

"Babe, that's good," he moaned.

She would have smiled if she hadn't been so preoccupied. Her hand followed her mouth's movement to draw out the sensation. She loved to have him teeter on the edge of control, and the tense set of his muscles told her, he hung on the edge now.

Only a few more strokes and he pulled away from her. "If you continue, I'm not going to be able to feel you around me, and what a shame it would be."

"You're right," she responded, playfully. "That would be a travesty."

He smiled as he hooked his hands under her arms to lift her back onto the bed. "A grave travesty." Once settled, he climbed his way toward her, and his molten gaze made her arousal soar to unspeakable limits.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" He settled between her legs. "Do you know how crazy you make me?"

"Yes," she whispered. She wanted to say more, but his hard length touched her center, making her words frozen in her throat.

"Is this what you want? Do you want me to push through and enter you?"

Her hips thrust up in a demand that he take her. "Please Ryker, no more teasing. I need you."

“And so you shall have me.” His lips crushed against hers as he entered her. She gasped out as he gave a few slow steady strokes. He filled her more than anyone else ever had. So perfect. So thick. She could never get enough of him.

“Tell me how you want it...” His voice came deep and full of lust before it trailed off.

Sabi had trouble finding her voice. “Hard,” she managed.

“Is this what you’re after?” He thrust forward.

“Yes.” She screamed as her hands gripped his strong arms. Climaxing with Ryker had never been an issue. His face so handsome, his body thick and muscular, the intensity in his stare—all made her reactions to him explode.

He shifted to lean down against her, placed his hands under her bottom and raised her hips up. With his mouth right beside her ear, she heard his deep breaths while he pumped hard, fast thrusts that had her moaning to the Heavens above. His heavy weight against her body proved his strength—there had been safe, and she relished in the pleasure his body gave to her.

Her breathing deepened, her center clenched around him, and Ryker groaned. The sound of his pleasure, his thickening erection inside of her, all combined with the sensations stealing her mind forced her into climax. She screamed.

He moaned.

Then, together they freed the battle inside of them. Sabi’s mind washed of all things present as she drifted away in bliss, and Ryker indulge in the same type of wonderful release.

Not until she heard Ryker’s chuckle did any sense of reality return. He glanced down and kissed her mouth even as he continued to pant for breath. Backing away, he gave her a stern look. “You’re going to make me a minute man. That could be construed as crippling to a man.”

She laughed. “Maybe if you didn’t tease yourself so much, you’d last longer.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun to me.” He frowned.

“No fun at all.” She lifted her head up to kiss him—sweet, tender kisses. Maybe their relationship began as something sexual, but that had long passed. Her heart belonged to him and she only hoped his heart had been in the same place.

Just as their kiss ended, a scent drifted along the air, disrupting her thoughts. “What is that?” Pushing him away, she took a deep sniff.

Ryker arched an eyebrow. “What is what?”

“That smell—something’s burning.”

He grinned, unashamed, and Sabi cursed. “You did it again! Oh, I’m so never cooking for you again.” She jumped off the bed, ran toward the kitchen and heard his chuckling the entire way.

## Chapter Six

The next night, Ryker and Sabi were summoned to the Council's Hall. The elegant gothic cathedral stood quiet with the four council members in their throne chairs. The only instructions he'd been given had been to wear casual attire. So, he'd clad himself in jeans and a cotton t-shirt, while she wore a tight skirt, knee high boots and a black silk blouse. Ryker's thoughts remained stuck on the image of removing her clothes.

However, judging by the serious faces in the room, his thoughts were far from appropriate. He did his best to rein in his desire for her and focus on his curiosity of why they'd requested his presence. Furthermore, why they'd asked Sabi to join him, since she'd never be asked before.

"We've been contacted by the Houston police squad," Talon, Master of Guardians said. "Three murders have been committed there."

Ryker glanced to each member of the Council. Brax, Master of Weres, appeared humble and proud, as always. Zade, Master of Vampires showed only seriousness in his expression. Ryker even gazed upon Zia for a hint as to why Sabi had been with him to hear this. But, her face revealed nothing.

"We've decided that Sabi will now join you on assignments," Zia said as if reading Ryker's thoughts. He suspected she could see his confusion—the Master of Witches had shown herself to be intuitive.

"I'm going to witness murders..." Sabi's voice drifted off with obvious hesitation.

Ryker glanced toward her and saw reluctance cross her face. He took her hand in his to comfort her. Sabi had never faced that type of thing before, never seen so much death up close and personal, and he didn't like having her subjected to it.

Before he could voice his concerns, Zia said, "We do realize this might come as a challenge for you. But with your visions increasing now, we do believe if you are closer to the scenes, it may provide further knowledge and we can stop these events from happening."

"In what way?" Sabi squeaked.

As much as Ryker wanted to refuse, he also knew Sabi needed a place in the Otherworld. A way to focus herself and make the talents of hers useful—that was where she would find peace.

Zia's expression softened, as did her tone. "It's our hope, when you are faced with the visions up front and personal, the connection will only strengthen your abilities. The more involved you are, the more likely your visions will develop."

"Develop further?" Sabi repeated.

Zia stood from her chair and approached her. She took her free hand as Ryker kept the other firm in his grip. "This is new to you. We all understand you're dealing with these visions and they're quite strong in nature. But, you can provide a great service here, if you only tap into it. Explore this new gift and maybe, just maybe, we can stop things before they even start."

Ryker understood the Council's reasoning, yet he hated that it caused Sabi so much concern. He wanted to reject it and keep her away from the reality she didn't want to face, but his resolve lingered on his want for her to get through with it. He'd stand by her when things got tough and

assist her with the visions, help her learn to distance herself, and he would be there to protect her at all costs.

“It’s all right.” Sabi squeezed his hand and Ryker looked down to her. “I’m not going to lie to anyone and say I’m not having trouble with all this. But maybe Zia’s right, this could help. I can’t stay hidden from the violence forever and maybe dealing with it head on is the best choice.”

Ryker didn’t believe a word she said. To the others she appeared strong in her resolve. However, he saw right through it. She was terrified and her sweaty palms only proved it.

“We’ll all be here to help you through this, Sabi,” Zia went on. “But I agree, the more you don’t face what you’re seeing, the more you’ll suffer because you’re not confronting the visions. In turn, maybe seeing a life saved because of it. I fear you’ll only be afraid instead of using your gifts to stop it.”

Sabi smiled nervously and awakened Ryker’s need to protect her. “I just want to warn you...that I...”

“I’ll be there with you,” Ryker interjected. “Do not fear that. No harm will come to you while I’m there.” He understood her apprehension—Sabi had never been a fighter, and definitely not a witch who ran into danger.

She appeared relieved by his words, and her smile seemed more genuine this time. “Okay.”

“Glad to hear it because you two will need to be strong on this one,” Brax said.

“Why?” Ryker asked.

Talon grinned knowingly. “Go see for yourself.”

Ryker groaned a quiet, “Hrmph,” before taking Sabi’s hand. Talon’s smile only confirmed whatever they faced was going to be challenging. He glanced at Sabi. “Ready?”

She nodded, even if it did come with reluctance. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

Just as Ryker headed out of the room, Zia called out, “Sabi, let your vision guide you, sweetie. I suspect what you’ve been seeing lately is what you’ll be facing tonight. I’ll be along soon to recreate the scene, but I have to check in on Haven and Litzy first. You go ahead without me and get the background information you need.”

Sabi paled. “Okay,” she whispered before she proceeded to walk out of the room.

Ryker’s protective instincts went into full alert as he stayed beside her. He wished he could hide her from the violence, but he knew it’d be wrong to do so. Everyone needed a purpose. If he got stripped of his sword, he’d be lost. This was what he needed to give Sabi—a reason for the visions and a way to save lives. Not render her incapable and afraid.

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Ryker’s chest tightened as he passed through the portal into the Earthworld. When his feet connected with the ground, a vampire appeared before him. Another cop, he guessed, since the tailored suit looked typical attire for a detective. Tall and bulky, but a kind smile rose on his face, and Ryker saw appreciation in his gray eyes.

“About time you all got here.” He stood off to the side of a tall skyscraper. “I’m Destin, Houston PD.”

“Ryker.” He gestured to Sabi and introduced her. After the simple pleasantries, Ryker asked, “What have you got here?”

“Murders—and lots of them. Come on, I’ll take you in.”

Following behind him, Ryker kept his grip on Sabi’s hand and her tension radiated through her. Her palms grew damper and she gripped his fingers with all her might. “I’m with you,” he said, not bothering to whisper since Destin would hear anyway. “Remember that.” Her gaze came to his and her eyes wide with fear. Her mouth parted as if about to say something, then she snapped her lips shut and gave a quick nod.

“The call came in just after nine tonight,” Destin said, focusing Ryker’s mind back on the task at hand. “We responded immediately.” He meandered through the large corridor made entirely of glass, including the ceiling. A modern building, which Ryker suspected had been used as some kind of office space.

Just past the elevators, the sign *DNA Laboratory* appeared. He passed through the waiting room area, entered the main part of the office and unhappiness coursed through his veins. Sabi’s first introduction to the cruelty of the supes in the Earthworld should not have been this.

Bodies were spread throughout the room, draped over chairs as blood pooled on the floor from gaping wounds. A gruesome sight. Ryker snapped out of his thoughts and addressed Destin. “What happened here?”

“We don’t know and hoped you would shed some light on it.”

Ryker released Sabi’s hand and stepped further into the room. His gaze roamed the area, sickened by what he saw. “It’s a blood bath.”

Sabi gasped, bringing Ryker’s gaze to hers and her hands covered her mouth as tears filled her eyes. He went back to her and gathered her in his arms. She trembled in his arms and he had no idea what to tell her to make it all right. A ghastly scene, one even he had trouble processing.

After a few moments in his arms, she backed away, wiped her tears and proceeded to enter the room. “Sabi?” he called out.

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she stepped forward toward a woman draped over a desk with blood dripping from her wounds. She put her hand on the woman’s head. “May your journey to the other side be peaceful and may you find rest there.”

Ryker stood, watching Sabi as she proceeded to repeat the line and touched every dead body. At the last person, she finally met his gaze. “I’m better now, I’ve wished them well.”

Pride filled him. How sweet and kind. Never once had he considered doing what she had, nor had he seen anyone act with such care to the deceased. Her gesture warmed his heart.

Sabi stepped beside him again. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in close to him. Then, he looked to Destin. “What have you found out so far?”

“Not much of anything. The call for help came in and all our forces rushed here. But by the time we arrived, they were already dead.”

“When the person called, what did they say?” Sabi asked.

“A person screaming for help—that’s all.”

Cold ran through Ryker’s blood. *What happened to these people?* Anything capable of creating a force such as that had to be a powerful being. But why? What would be the purpose of killing so many? “What is this place exactly?” he inquired.

“From what we know, it’s a genetic lab. A place where they do DNA testing and scientific research.”

“Do you know anything about this kind of stuff?” Sabi asked Ryker.

He had been well educated in many things, but DNA...no, he had no experience with this. “None in the least.”

“Hello, all,” Zia said, cheerily. Ryker glanced over his shoulder to see her entering the room with a smile that had not been at all an appropriate mood for the circumstances. “So, what do we have tonight?” She glanced around and her smile faded. “My goodness...”

“Ah, yeah,” Sabi responded. “It’s a massacre.”

Zia nodded. “I see that. Let’s see what has happened here.” She stepped to the center of the room, raised her hands, and called on her magic.

The scene formed and loud gasps came from them all. A vampire had done this, but he’d killed so rapidly, making out any distinguishing features were impossible. In a few short minutes, he’d rid the room of life.

When the vision froze, the speed the vampire travelled at made his body blur. From where Ryker stood, he could see further examination would be pointless.

“He’s so blurry,” Sabi said, incredulous. “How is that possible?”

Ryker shook his head. “I have no clue.” He glanced at Zia. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

She approached the hazy vampire and examined him from every angle. “No, this is quite bizarre.”

An understatement. “And even more peculiar is why he would do this?”

“Yes, strange indeed,” Zia replied. She tapped her finger on her lip, clearly pondering the situation. “What to do?”

“I saw him,” Sabi whispered.

Ryker turned her to face him—so Zia had been right. “This had been the vision you saw?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but when I saw it, he wasn’t blurry like this. I saw him, but I couldn’t tell you what he looked like. I’m sorry...I...”

Zia approached her, wearing a stern expression. “Stop right now. You are not to blame for being unable to watch this vision. This is by far the most horrific scene I have seen in a long time.”

Her words seemed to lighten Sabi’s mood, and it pleased him. Yet, he didn’t know how to move forward from there. If they couldn’t identify the killer, how could they search him out? Almost like hunting a ghost. Impossible.

Before Ryker could voice his frustration, Sabi chimed in. “I think the first step is to find out exactly what this place does. He came here for a reason, killed these people over something. Maybe it might lead us to something.”

Ryker nodded. “It’s a place to start. We’ll be running around in circles trying to find him.” *Sabi might be better at this than she even knew.* Before he processed the scene, she’d already thought ahead. He glanced back at Destin. “Is this part of the Police Department lab?” He guessed, since he knew next to nothing about labs, but enough to know some of them did work with the police force.

“From time to time, if needed, we will use this lab. But mostly, this is an independent one used for paternity disputes, blood tests, things such as that.”

What would a vampire want with a lab unrelated to anything criminal? If it had been part of the police force, he could see sense in that—wiping out evidence of some sort, covering up a crime. This though, he couldn’t wrap his head around.

“Leave me with this,” Destin said, interrupting Ryker’s thoughts. “I’ll call in some of my team and we can get forensics specialist in here to go through the lab. There’s no sense in all of us searching for something we know nothing about.”

Ryker nodded, glancing at Sabi, who had many emotions flash across her sweet face. He knew she attempted to reconcile what she saw, and for a few seconds he saw her pain in witnessing it. He could only expect the scene wore on her and she needed rest. He had no doubt being faced with her vision drained her, even if she wouldn’t admit it. He focused his attention back on Destin. “You’ll contact us if you have discovered anything?”

“Of course.”

Sabi made a little sound of unhappiness. “So, what, we do nothing? We don’t start searching for him?”

Ryker shrugged. “Where would we even start? Let them do their work here. We’re not as skilled in this department as they are. Do you even know how to use a computer?” When she glowered at him confirming she didn’t, he continued. “We’ll begin again tomorrow night once we know more. Besides...” He traced the skin beneath her eyes gently. “You’re tired.”

Her mouth parted, no doubt to dispute his thoughts, but she soon closed it tight. She might want to avenge these murders, which he found honorable, but with nothing to go on they would just waste their energy. It pleased him that she saw sense in his suggestion. His concern focused on the victims, but, of course, easing Sabi into it had been first priority in his mind.

## Chapter Seven

The following night, in the west-end of San Francisco, a country charmer of a house sat in a cul-de-sac, with mature landscaping. Ryker could understand why whoever purchased the home held an interest in it. In the busy hustle bustle of San Francisco, the peaceful neighborhood held the appeal of a getaway.

Destin waited by the front door. Not less than half an hour ago, he had made contact and advised them he had a lead—a woman he suspected knew the answers they needed.

“Is she in there?” Ryker asked.

Destin nodded. “I have talked to her a little and...” His gave him a measured look, “she’s not taking the news of her friends’ deaths so well.”

“Of course she’s not,” Sabi retorted.

Ryker glanced toward her. Sadness had found its way into her gaze. He reached out and took her hand—seeing her in distress caused a lump to form in his throat. But he suspected out of anyone, she had been the best one to have in the situation. Maybe he’d been desensitized from witnessing so much violence, but her heart still ached for humans and she could sympathize. “Will you talk with her?”

“Me?” Sabi squeaked.

“Just try and get anything out of her that will help us here. If she is distressed now, having us all bombarding her with questions will only upset her more.”

Sabi pondered a moment then her face firmed up with determination. “Okay, I can do that.” Clearly, she tried her best to be part of their team and Ryker could see the strength had been an act. Yet, she agreed and right then, it was all that mattered.

Satisfied, Ryker glanced back to Destin. “Bring us up to speed on what you have so far.”

“From what Cyan—that’s her name—has told me, the owner of the lab, Nico Sheppard, had been involved in something he’d kept secret from most who worked there.”

“But not from her?” Ryker probed.

“Precisely. She had been brought in because of her knowledge of the genetic code.”

“Brought into what?” Sabi asked.

“Cyan said she didn’t know all the details, but Nico asked her to do some genetic testing on a blood sample. She believed it might be a personal matter, but once she did the profile, something didn’t add up—she’d never seen the genetic make-up before.”

Ryker heard his message loud and clear. “The DNA hadn’t been human?”

“Exactly. She’d been unable to overlook the fact that the blood came from a source which had long been dead, yet still showed signs of life.”

“Vampire,” Sabi gasped.

Destin nodded. “Bingo.”

Sabi glanced up at Ryker with confused eyes. “Why would this Nico want to do genetic testing on a supernatural?”

Ryker shrugged, at a complete loss.



“That’s only the beginning,” Destin continued. “Once she had the genetic fingerprint, Nico suggested they try and alter the DNA.”

“Altering it do what?” Sabi exclaimed. “And just how do you alter someone’s DNA?”

Ryker could understand her confusion. He had no idea about DNA and all the scientific growth the human world had experienced. “Cyan said Nico played around with the DNA, wanted to see if he could manipulate the chromosomes to add strength in places to make the DNA stronger.”

“Am I getting this right?” Sabi interjected. “Are you telling us Nico attempted to make a vampire stronger?”

Destin nodded again, slow and sure. “From what I’ve heard, from the evidence gathered, it’s exactly what he had been trying to do.”

Hearing that worried Ryker. He’d seen the speed of the vampire at the lab, which only left him with one conclusion. “She successfully altered the genetic code, didn’t she?”

Destin’s face became grim. “She told me she’d located the genetic markers in the double helix code and altered them by changing the sequence of the protein bonds.”

“Which means what in English?” Sabi laughed.

“It means Nico has been successful. He has created a new breed of vampires who do not live by *normal rules*.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Sabi squeaked.

“I’m glad you see what you’re up against here,” Destin stated. “We’ve seen it at the lab. The vampire there had been bloody fast and I’d suspect, quite dangerous.”

“Do they not have restrictions on this?” Destin appeared puzzled by Ryker’s question, so he carried on. “Altering DNA in the Earthworld.”

“Of course, but Cyan is a scientist, and the chance Nico gave her had been a once in a lifetime opportunity. Not until she found herself in over her head did she realize her assistance had been a wrong move. I will admit she appears to be naïve.”

Sabi rolled her eyes. “Why do humans always realize they’ve made a mistake, only after and not before?”

Destin ignored Sabi’s frustration and continued on, “Once it became clear that Cyan’s involvement might have led to the deaths of her colleagues, she clammed up.”

Sabi glanced up at Ryker, determination in her gaze. “So, I’m guessing I need to get her to talk more about whomever else could be involved and what they were up to.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Okay, let’s just get this over with.” Sabi drew in a deep breath and approached the house.

Ryker stepped into stride beside her until Destin placed his hand on his shoulder, stopping him. “We need to discuss what to do with the woman.”

“Do with her?” Ryker repeated.

“She’s in grave danger. I suspect the vampire who killed the others did so for a reason. If he learns she is alive, I’m guessing she’ll become a target.”

Ryker hadn’t even considered this, and now realized the problem. His gaze fell to Sabi and he said the only thing that came to his mind. “Fuck.”

“Okay, wait, what am I missing?” Sabi’s brow furrowed. “What’s the problem exactly? Destin could put her under police custody until we sort this out.”

Ryker needed to set her straight so she understood what they were up against because right then. She couldn’t see the bigger picture. “Do we want to put her in a place surrounded by humans, where a vampire of unknown capabilities may come after her?”

“When you say it like that, no.” Sabi snorted. “But what else can we do? We never take humans into the Otherworld.” Ryker raised an eyebrow, not needing to explain, and hoped she understood because she’d just answered her own questions. Understanding immediately dawned on her face. “She won’t come into the Otherworld as a human.”

Ryker nodded.

“So, you’ll what...?”

“Turn her,” Destin cut in.

Sabi’s eyes went wide. “Into a vampire?”

“It’s the only choice. If we leave her, she could be killed. We can’t bring her to a place where this vampire could find her. If humans tried to protect her, they would lose. I don’t have enough supernaturals on the force to provide her the right protection.”

“Okay, this is good and all, but what if she doesn’t agree?”

Ryker ran his thumb over the back of her hand to draw her focus back to him. “It’ll be her choice, she won’t be forced.”

“Well...” Sabi hesitated, nibbling on her bottom lip, before she continued, “as long as it’s her choice, I’m okay with it.” She released his hand and approached the house again, but spun back around halfway there. “Am I supposed to tell her about vampires?”

“You can introduce the idea,” Destin said. “I’ll confirm it.”

Sabi exhaled, then sucked it back in, which Ryker suspected came as an attempt to discover bravery. “You do realize I could screw this up and traumatize the woman.”

Ryker winked. “Impossible.”

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The front door slammed closed behind Sabi, and she drew in a long, deep breath to prepare herself. What in the heck had she gotten herself involved in? She hadn’t been used to being the one who took the wheel. She always stayed on the sidelines, but she also knew she’d been no help to anyone so far, so if she could offer a little bit of insight...then so be it.

Of course, she could’ve sent Ryker in, but he wasn’t one to come off in a subtle way, and the conversation needed a soft edge to it. She stepped further into the hallway and a warm light filled a room next to her. Setting her reservations aside, she entered the room.

Cyan glanced up as she entered and Sabi smiled. “Hi, I’m Sabi. You’re Cyan, right?”

She wiped her nose with her tissue. “Are you another police officer?” Her voice sounded sweet, but tired. “I don’t know what else to tell you. I’ve told you everything...”

Sabi raised her hand to cut her off. “I’m not a cop.”

“Oh.” Cyan sniffed and gave her gaze became curious. “Who are you then?”

“Well...” Sabi hesitated, not sure how to answer her question. After a moment, she still didn’t know how to start the conversation. “Do you mind if I sit?”

Cyan inclined her head and Sabi took a seat across from her in the lounge. *Where to start?* She watched Cyan, who did the same to her in return. She could tell as each minute passed, Cyan's confusion deepened and she seemed uncomfortable. "I guess, first of all, I want to say I'm sorry for the friends you've lost."

"Thank you," Cyan responded, and tears filled her eyes again. "I just can't believe they're all gone. And if I hadn't called in sick..." She gave her head a shake and more tears fell, "I just can't process all this."

"No one expects you would."

Fate worked in funny ways and Sabi had to wonder why the woman's life had been spared. How different would her life be because of one event? It saddened Sabi to put her in this position. If Cyan didn't want to be turned, they could never protect her, yet the alternate didn't sound all too appealing either.

It would've been great to stall, come up with the best way to tell her all this, but to put it off was pointless, so she got right to it. "I'm going to talk for a little while and I want you to listen. Be opened-minded and just hear me out."

"Okay..."

Sabi took a long deep breath, gathered her thoughts, and once her mind settled on the path to take, she began. "What you were involved with goes far beyond normal. And I think if you look back, focus on what I tell you now, seeing the truth won't be hard."

"What truth?"

"Destin told us the blood you examined made you suspicious."

Cyan nodded. "Yes, it had been all so strange. I've never seen anything like it. The blood came from a person who happened to be alive, although dead at the same time." She shook her head. "I know what just came out of my mouth makes no sense at all."

"Actually, it makes perfect sense."

Cyan's gaze showed her intrigue and she leaned forward with interest. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The blood came from a vampire."

Sabi waited for the moment of shock to hit, the second where Cyan would burst out laughing and call her insane, but it never came. Instead, she said, "Vampire, huh?"

"That's who came to the office tonight and killed your friends. Whatever you guys have been doing with the blood, whatever had been altered, you've given vampires further strength and that's why he killed so rapidly, and with so much force."

Again, Cyan sat, staring at Sabi with a relaxed, but perplexed expression, which hadn't been what she expected at all. Maybe the woman suffered from shock or something. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Completely."

"And this...I don't know...doesn't shock you?" Sabi had never heard of a human reacting that way before. So strange. So calm and accepting. It didn't make sense.

"I'm a scientist. I knew the second I analyzed the blood, something didn't make sense. Now, hearing this, it actually puts the final piece of the puzzle together. For months, I searched for a reason to understand the nature of the blood. Vampire blood, dead but alive, yes it makes sense."

"Sorry." Sabi couldn't help but chuckle. "But have you been in contact with vampires before?"

"No, of course not. I've never once believed in anything like this or thought vampires were actually real. But I do watch *True Blood*, so I know how it all works, even if that's only fiction." She drew in a long breath. "I knew the day I got the results back, that the blood hadn't been human. So, I guess hearing this, just confirms what I suspected."

It pleased Sabi she'd accepted all of it, but she still suspected Cyan couldn't wrap her head around the idea. But Sabi needed to get more answers, especially because so far, Cyan had been compliant. "Did you ask Nico about it?"

"I did. I went to him with the findings and demanded answers for what he had gotten me into."

"He never told you though, did he?"

Cyan shook her head. "No, he said the more I knew, the more dangerous it would be for me. He apologized for bringing me into all this, but he had no choice. And I had been the best geneticist on his team, which is why he couldn't leave me out."

"But if you knew how dangerous it was, why did you go further? Why did you alter the DNA then?"

Cyan gave a feeble shrug. "It interested me. He said the testing had been part of an experiment and the findings wouldn't be used to harm anyone. Simply to see if it were possible."

"And you believed him?"

"I had no reason not to. He's been a great boss and there are rules we must adhere to. I didn't once suspect he'd take what I found and use it to hurt people."

Sabi wouldn't point out what a terrible mistake Cyan had made, and surely, didn't want to prolong it anymore. "Well, I'm sorry to tell you, but whatever you were involved with is a dangerous situation, and I'm also sorry that tonight you're going to have to make a difficult decision."

Cyan's eyebrows drew together as dread crossed her face. "What decision?"

"There's a reason this vampire attacked your colleagues, and whatever his reasons are, he doesn't want anyone alive who happened to be involved with the lab."

A knowing look flashed across her face. "Which means, I'm in danger?" At Sabi's nod, Cyan continued, "If I need to go into police custody until he is captured I will." Then, her expression shifted to baffled. "Do vampires get captured?"

Sabi couldn't withhold her smile. At least now, she showed a bit of emotion. "Yes, there's a place..." she hesitated, wondering how complicated she should make it. Deciding to keep it simple, she continued. "There is a group of people who handle this kind of thing. I'm one of them. And we'll hunt him until he's destroyed."

She saw the questions in Cyan's gaze, but decided to interrupt before she got ahead of herself. They'd fill her in on the existence of the Otherworld later. "The police won't be able to protect you. It's too dangerous to have you stay with others who can't defend themselves against this vampire. He could kill them all to get to you."

"I'll go wherever I have to then."

Good news, but Sabi had no idea how to tell her what she'd have to become to go there. "All right, but you'll...I mean to say..." Oh, she could get through it. "You'll need to..."

"Become a vampire," Destin said from the doorway.

Cyan's eyes grew huge, and for the first time Sabi saw an appropriate reaction—fear. "Sorry, what did you just say?"

"I said for you to come with us, we'll need to turn you. As a human you're not allowed to come into our world, and we cannot protect you here. Besides, it will make you more resilient if this vampire seeks you out."

"But...but...but..." Cyan sputtered.

Sabi's gaze shifted between Cyan and Destin as she wondered what she should say. After a long awkward pause, she intervened in hopes she eased Cyan's worry. "I can't imagine what you're going through right now, or all the things that must be running through your mind, but the truth of the matter is, if you don't come with us you are going to die. Is that what you want?"

"No," Cyan whispered.

Sabi tried her best to ignore the fear in her tone. Getting emotional wouldn't help Cyan. "You'll have a life still, but just a different one is all. In all honesty, I can't tell you the ins and outs of it all since I'm not a vampire."

"What are you?" Cyan interrupted.

"A witch."

"Yeah, right." Cyan snickered, disbelief rolled off her tone. "First vampires are real and now so are witches."

Instead of drawing it out and trying to explain it to her, Sabi drew on her magic. When the Earth Element warmed her soul, she stood, placed her hand on Cyan's leg and watched the vine wrap around her ankle.

"Shit." Cyan screamed, startled.

"Yup, exactly." Sabi laughed then took her seat as Cyan ripped the plants from her leg. "I'm sorry if I scared you, but it saved a long conversation."

"I suppose it did." Cyan glanced at Destin. "And you?"

"Vampire," He took a step toward her then knelt at her feet. "Now don't be afraid, but I'm going to show you." He released his fangs and Cyan gasped. Destin either didn't notice her reaction, nor didn't care since he said, "And I offer to be your maker."

"My what?"

"I'll be the one to turn you."

Sabi witnessed a flash of heat in Destin's gaze. Clearly, he hadn't been opposed to this idea and it appeared he held an attraction to her. It actually eased Sabi. He'd be a good maker and maybe they could even form an attachment.

Cyan clearly hadn't missed his reaction because her eyes grew even wider. "But I don't even know you."

He smiled and Sabi saw it stir a little something in Cyan when her gaze lowered. "Once you're a vampire, we'll have all the time in the world to get to know each other better. I'll protect you and

guide you.” His expression became serious. “And I also won’t lie to you. The life you know now will be gone. You have to cut all ties. Do you have family?”

“I do.” Her chin quivered as familiar tears filled her eyes again.

Destin reached forward and took her hand. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to see them again.”

Tears trickled down her rosy cheeks. “Ever again?”

“No, I’m sorry.” Destin wiped the tears off her face in a gentle and sweet gesture.

Sabi’s heart broke. All those deaths, all those lives and their families’ lives forever affected. Now, Cyan had to make the same choice, give up everything she once knew. Sabi wondered if she could make that decision, and she doubted she could.

Cyan glanced down at her hand clasped in Destin’s and sighed. “What you’re telling me is, if I don’t choose this, I’ll be dead anyway?”

“I suspect you will. Whoever is responsible for this went to great lengths to ensure everyone who worked in the lab is gone. He wants whatever you know hidden. You’re not safe any longer.”

Cyan lifted her gaze to Destin, and Sabi saw the resolve form on her expression. “I have only one choice, don’t I?”

Sabi agreed, but she sure hoped the decision had been the right one.

## Chapter Eight

Of all the Mistresses in the Earthworld, Ryker wished it hadn't been Ellery they needed to see. Not that she hadn't been fair, she usually was, and she always ran the Pacific Northwest Territory in strict order, but she had proved to be the toughest one to deal with.

Judging by the tight set of her lips on her beautiful face, Ryker stood correct. The woman had a nasty streak—stern couldn't even describe her well.

Ellery's gaze scanned Cyan from the top of her head, right down to her toes. "You want to turn her?" She finally focused on Destin.

"It's in her best interest that I do."

Ellery snorted. "Not a good enough reason." She glanced back to Cyan and gave her a studied look. "It seems to me that you've gotten yourself into this situation. Why do you think we should bail you out when we're the ones who have to clean up the mess you started?"

Ryker nearly rolled his eyes. Really, they could do without pointing fingers. They needed to move on and see their way through it. Before he could voice his opinion, Sabi interceded. "We told her to come here. She didn't ask, so maybe we could move past all this."

Sabi usually never spoke up like that, and he had been proud of her. She always acted so refrained and quiet, stayed back and let others lead the way. Right then, she showed some leadership, as well as some balls. It pleased him.

Ellery frowned, but quickly returned her attention to Destin. "From what you've told me of this situation, it would be quite a risk for her to stay here. I have no interest in bringing this vampire you have spoken of anywhere near my home."

"This vampire is in your territory," Ryker reminded her.

Her gaze landed on Ryker's, appearing far from happy. "Yes, I realize this, but you're all dealing with this, are you not?"

"We are."

"Well, then," Ellery snapped. "I choose not to risk my family. Bringing her here will draw him closer, and that I cannot have."

"It's of no concern," Destin interrupted. "I will take her to the Otherworld."

A slow smile spread across Ellery's face, making her stern expression seem almost friendly. "And have you discussed this with the Council?"

"No," Ryker cut in, not at all fazed—the vampire could undo him. "But she will be safest there. He wouldn't dare come into the Otherworld and she will be well protected."

Ellery appeared to ponder for a moment before her gaze returned to Cyan. "Do you want to become a vampire?"

Cyan shrugged. "I still don't even know what it all means."

"Immortality, power which you cannot even fathom, and the luscious taste of blood."

Ryker cringed, and saw Sabi do the same. They might be immortal, but the idea of drinking blood did not sound appealing. Judging by Cyan's squirm, she appeared to seem put off by the idea.

"The truth is..." she said, "I don't want to die. If I had known doing what I did would put me into this situation, I never would have done it. Does the idea of becoming some creature that I never knew existed scare me, yes, it does. But I'm left with few options now. If I don't do this, I won't see another day."

"You won't see any days if you *do* this," Ellery countered.

Confusion crossed Cyan's face, and Sabi raised a hand to her shoulder, as Ryker would expect from his kindhearted witch. "Vampires can't go out in the sun."

"That is actually true?"

Destin shook his head. "You won't even be aware of it. Your body will naturally go into hibernation and you won't miss it. Your days will simply be reversed, is all."

Cyan's gulped visibly. A second later, she drew in a deep breath then sobbed. "This is all just so unbelievable."

"It is," Destin soothed her. "But, it's happening and your choices are limited."

A few minutes passed as Cyan apparently ran her options over through her mind. Ryker saw her struggle, act as if it had all been a dream she would wake up from, but that want was hopeless.

Finally, she broke the silence. "By doing this, I'll be able to help you find the one who killed my friends, right?"

Destin nodded. "That's the idea."

Cyan released a shuddering breath, wiped her tears, and glanced at Ellery, dead serious. "Yes, this is what I want."

Ellery smiled. "Very well, I welcome you into the territory of the Pacific Northwest. We have to get some of the formalities out of the way first. Come and kneel before me." Cyan did as she asked, and Ellery continued. "If you chose to be in my territory, you're choosing to be under my rules."

"What kind of rules?" Cyan asked.

"Simple ones. Never take a life, keep your existence a secret, and cut ties from your old life."

Cyan appeared to consider this for a long moment, before she nodded. "I understand."

"And last, I'm your leader. You need my permission for anything and everything out of the ordinary. Am I understood?"

Cyan glanced to Destin, who responded, "I'll guide you through all this, not to worry. I'll make sure you stay within the laws set out by our Mistress."

"Okay," she whispered.

"You'll need to get information out of her now." Ellery glanced to Ryker. "After Destin turns her, she'll be useless for a while. Her thoughts will only be focused on feeding, and trust me, you'll have a frustrating time getting her to spill what she knows. So, I suggest you take this time to learn what you can."

Ryker nodded. *Good idea.* He glanced back at Cyan, who had just been helped to her feet by Destin, as a thousand thoughts captured his mind. But he stuck to those that would get them at least a place to start. "You have to be truthful here. Don't hold back on anything. Even something you think is not important may, in fact be, so tell us every minute detail. All right?"

"Of course," Cyan replied. "What is it you want to know?"

"Did you ever see the vampire?"



"I saw one man, and now looking back, I think maybe he could have been a vampire. He appeared much like Destin and Ellery."

Ellery cleared her throat, sharply. "You will direct me as Mistress."

"Sorry." Cyan blushed. "Mistress, I mean to say. His skin held the same tone—pale and flawless."

"What did he look like?" Sabi asked.

"Blond, tallish, quite handsome."

A thousand vampires, Ryker thought, but didn't voice the thought out loud. He focused on Sabi. "Is that who you saw in the vision?"

She shook her head. "No."

So the vampire responsible for this hadn't been the one who killed everyone at the office, which made no sense at all. Pressing on, he continued. "Did Nico ever say why he wanted to do this?"

"He did say, and why I altered the blood, was this project had been something his life depended on. He demanded I help him do this." She blushed. "At the time, I thought he meant he had been onto something. A new discovery. Now though..." she trailed off.

"You suspect different," Ryker finished for her.

"Exactly." She gave a puzzled look. "If I spoke of DNA and gene therapy, would any of you know what I was talking about?"

Ryker glanced around as everyone shook their heads. This hadn't been their speciality and he knew nothing on the matter.

"Well, to keep it simple, DNA can be altered. For example, we can take blood cells out of a person, alter them, then place them back into the body. This is known as the *ex vivo* technique." When everyone stared at her blankly, she added, "As we know, it's a dangerous thing to do, with serious repercussions."

"But you did it anyway?" Ryker accused.

Shame filled her face and. "It made me happy to be given the opportunity to try. Truthfully, I just played around with the genes to see if I could strengthen certain parts of them. I didn't know Nico would be using them on people...or vampires, I should say. And furthermore, research has shown us that even if injected into a person, the DNA will mutate and normally causes death."

"Yeah, but vampires are already dead," Sabi noted.

"Yes, they are, and I can't say how the gene would affect a vampire. Only research and testing would show me."

At least they were getting somewhere, but Ryker still had so many more questions that needed answering. "So you never saw them put these altered DNA back into someone?"

"No. I had only been part of the DNA altering. I didn't know..."

"How difficult did you find it to alter this DNA?" Destin asked, clearly in an attempt to save her from her sorrow.

"For me, it hadn't been hard at all. It's what I'm trained to do. When Nico came to me with this, it presented itself as a real challenge. He wanted to improve qualities of the DNA. Make it stronger and faster."

"And, as we know, you succeeded," Ryker remarked.

“Apparently I did.”

Though her statement intrigued him, he expected her to be absolutely certain. “You didn’t know?”

“Not all at. Truth is, I had no idea what I was doing at first, with the blood being so rare. I knew I had successfully altered it, but I had nothing to base it on or to compare it to. Yes, the DNA appeared stronger, but I couldn’t identify what strengths I gave to it.”

“Well, we know one of them is speed,” Sabi offered.

Everyone nodded, except Ellery, who happened to appear beyond bored.

Sabi hummed, and Ryker could tell she had something on her mind. After a pause, she voiced her question. “When you met this vampire, did he say anything to you?”

“No, we actually met by accident. I found him late one night at the lab when I heard an argument going on. I discovered him and Nico in a heated conversation.”

“Did you hear what they were arguing about?” Ryker asked.

“Me.”

“You?”

“Yeah, Nico kept saying I had been doing my best, and he couldn’t rush me. That he did believe I could do it, but I needed more time.”

“And what did the vampire say?” Sabi gasped.

“Time had run out, and I only had twenty four hours to complete the job. But something else had been said too—something about it not working. There had been no control...or something like that.”

“No control?” Ryker repeated. *No control over what?*

“That’s what he said.” Cyan continued, “And truthfully, I don’t know anything more. Now that I know what you need, I could do further analysis on the blood if it’s still at the lab to discover more about what he attempted to do.”

*Which was shit.* She hadn’t told him anything they didn’t already know and it left him frustrated. He doubted the blood still remained at the lab and suspected the reason the vampire had been there in the first place was to collect the evidence, and dispose of anyone who knew about it. Ellery snorted, clearly thinking along the same lines as Ryker.

“Seems like you’re right back where you started.” She gave a flick of her hand to dismiss them. “Go and do this elsewhere. I don’t want this vampire to track her here.” As Ryker strode toward the door, she called out, “If you run into more issues where you need my assistance, do come.”

Ryker nodded and followed the others out. Ellery might be difficult, and might come off as the coldest of women, but she hadn’t been given her position of power for nothing. She knew she had obligations to assist with the vampire who created havoc in her territory. “He’ll be dead in a few days’ time so you won’t have to worry about it.”

Ellery grinned. “I’ll hold you to that.”

## Chapter Nine

It didn't surprise Sabi that the Council had agreed to Cyan coming into the Otherworld. Now, however, she wished maybe they hadn't. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind Destin and Cyan would need to stay with them in her residence. Seeing that it had been she who connected with Cyan, clearly, it didn't give her a way to refuse them the need to stay with her. Sabi stood while Cyan lay on her couch with Destin kneeling at her side. As much as Sabi had been involved with the Otherworld, she'd never witnessed a human being turned into a vampire. "So what exactly is going to happen here?"

"I'm going to drain your blood to the point of near death, then I'll feed mine back to you." Devin replied, his focus solely on Cyan as if she had asked the question.

"And then what?" Cyan whispered.

*Yes, exactly my thoughts.*

Destin nodded toward a cooler that sat next to the couch. "Once you awaken, you're going to be thirsty. I've got some blood here that will feed you until you gain more control over yourself."

"So, I don't have to feed on anybody?" Cyan's eager tone said she liked the idea of drinking donated blood more than the idea of having a human snack.

"For now, this will do. It's the safest thing for everyone. When you're first turned, you can be aggressive, and if a human got within your grip, you'd likely kill them. We use packaged blood to assist with the first few nights, until you gain control of your bloodlust."

Sabi made a mental note to avoid her residence for the next few nights. Actually, as she thought it over, maybe she should shack up with Ryker until Cyan got control over herself. She had no interest in being someone's late night snack.

"I know you're afraid." Destin's tone had been soft and gentle. "I can hear your heart racing, but you don't need to be. Everything will be all right, I swear it to you."

Cyan smiled, but it appeared forced. "Right, everything's going to be just dandy."

Sabi had to stop and wonder for a moment. It seemed too easy for her and something about that worried Sabi. She could only hope Cyan hadn't been in a serious state of shock then tomorrow gained her mind back and went all loopy.

With the unsettling thought, Sabi couldn't hold her concerns back any longer. "Are you sure you want this? I mean, won't you miss your family and old life?"

Destin frowned at Sabi, but she ignored his irritation. It needed to be asked. She worried Cyan didn't understand the implications and if she said nothing she might regret it. It all unsettled her, and until she resolved her unease, she'd make sure Cyan had made the right decision.

"I will miss my family, but what can I do?" Cyan sighed. "I don't want to die."

"Yes, I've heard you say that before," Sabi replied, pushing the issue. "But I don't know, aren't you just a bit unsure about this all?"

Ryker's gaze focused curiously on Sabi. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were telling her she is making the wrong decision."

“No, no.” Sabi waved her hand, dismissingly. He had it all wrong. “I don’t mean to come off like that, but I just think maybe she doesn’t fully understand what she’s getting herself into.” Sabi leaned toward Ryker and whispered, “Don’t you think she’s just a tad bit too accepting of all this?”

Ryker studied Cyan. “Do you know what you’re doing here?” Classic Ryker—where Sabi beat around the bush, Ryker got right to it.

Cyan nodded. “Tonight, I’m ending my life.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Sabi gasped in disbelief. Good grief, it was as if they were discussing a stroll through the gardens.

“Well, I have to be, don’t I? I have no choice but to be okay with it. Listen, I won’t deny that learning vampires, werewolves and people called Guardians exist is so shocking that I am having some trouble comprehending it all. Hearing the world I once knew is nothing what I thought, and knowing I’m now in a place called The Otherworld is making my head spin so fast I can hardly see straight. But I knew the day in the lab when I examined the blood, that it hadn’t human. Does coming here to this place scare me? Yes, undeniably so. But...” She glanced back at Destin and her expression held not an ounce of doubt. “I believe he’ll take care of me, and I don’t want to join my friends. I’m not ready to die.”

All well and good, but Sabi still had a point to make. “You’re kinda going to do that now, you know.” Destin scowled at her, but Sabi shrugged away his disapproval. “What? It’s the truth. She is.”

Before Destin could say the nasty retort on his tongue he obviously held there, Cyan interrupted. “I’m scared, all right.” Her voice rose with some of the fear she apparently hid all too well. “There, I said it. I’m so fucking scared out of my mind right now. Seeing vampires, werewolves—all of this is insane. But tonight I learned all of my colleagues were murdered because I acted selfishly. I fooled around with something I shouldn’t have because I wanted it for myself. Now you need my help. I can only help if I came here, and to come here I need to become a vampire. Is it fucked up? Yes, so fucked up I don’t even have words. Do I know what this will mean for me? No. But I’ve screwed up enough because I’ve acted thoughtlessly. I’m doing this because I owe it to my friends. I’m going to shut up and push my hesitation away because they deserve that.”

Silence drifted in the room. Sabi had wanted an answer to settle her hesitation and Cyan had given her that. Finally, after a long, awkward pause, Sabi said, “Okay. So, she seems to understand well enough.”

Destin smiled, pride brightening his expression. “I’d say she does.” He placed his hand on her jaw and angled her head to expose her neck. “Are you ready?”

Cyan only nodded.

Destin didn’t hesitate. He leaned in, placed his mouth on her neck then bit down. A little squeal escaped Cyan’s lips before her eyes rolled back and she moaned, fully aroused sounds that should only be heard behind the bedroom door.

Sabi giggled, uncomfortable watching Cyan all but orgasm in front of her. A strange thing that vampires caused such a reaction in mortals when they fed, but nonetheless, completely real.

Ryker simply appeared uninterested.

Sabi used the silence to run over the recent events in her mind. After a while, she realized she couldn’t come to any understanding on her own. She drew away to leave the drinking Destin and the

moaning Cyan to their thing. “What do you think about all this? I mean, where do we even start?” She hadn’t been used to this kind of mystery. With Black Witches, she already knew the whys and where they were located. It’s as if they were chasing a ghost.

“I’m not quite sure.” Ryker shrugged. “Until this vamp pokes his head up and does something else, we’ve got nothing to go on.”

“Maybe we could go back to the lab. We might have missed something.”

“It wouldn’t get us anywhere. Whatever is there, we won’t understand anyway. Not without her.” He gestured toward Cyan. “We have nothing to even go on. We’ll need to wait until he strikes again. Obviously, whoever is behind this wanted these powers for a reason, and we need to see why. If my assumptions are correct, he’ll act again soon.”

Sabi thought what Ryker suggested made sense. Whoever had been after this power gained from the enhanced blood wanted it for something. But, what exactly? Where was his need directed at? At that point, it could be anyone or anything. The Council, the Mistresses, humans even. Without knowing more, they were indeed at a standstill until he acted again and they’d be able to gather more information on what his motives were.

The minutes ticked by and Cyan paled. Her moans were now silent and her eyelids closed. Sabi saw the life drain from her and had the urge to tell Destin to stop. But he’d proved himself so far. She knew he wouldn’t hurt her and also trusted he knew what he needed to do in order to be successful.

She returned her gaze to Ryker, still confused by all this. “You honestly have no idea what this could be about?” Ryker usually had all the answers. His experiences over the years had left him knowledgeable. It hadn’t been often that he couldn’t come up with a possibility.

He shook his head as his expression stayed blank. “The only thing I can think of is right now it appears whatever they were trying to do, they’ve succeeded. Which meant everyone involved needed to be destroyed, or someone had been onto them and he needed to make sure whatever he’s up to isn’t found out.”

“Either way,” Sabi countered. “It’s not good.”

Ryker didn’t need to answer, his eyes said it all—this was far from over and she suspected would only going to get worse.

Sabi glanced back to Cyan then, and her skin wrinkled, and she appeared right on the edge of death. Destin drew away from her neck, raised his wrist to his mouth and bit down hard. Lowering it, he placed the falling blood over Cyan’s mouth. At first, he had to hold her lips open so the blood flowed down her throat, but after some time, she accepted the liquid.

A few minutes passed, before Cyan resembled more of herself. Her skin, still pale, had shifted back to the image of health. After a final gulp, Destin withdrew his arm from her and stood. Sabi watched, waited for something to happen, but nothing did. “Sorry, am I missing something? Is she going to wake up?”

“Soon,” Destin answered, glancing at Ryker. “And when she does you will have to hold her still, she’ll be strong.”

At that moment, Cyan’s eyes snapped open and she shrieked. Startled, Sabi screamed. Ryker rushed forward, latching onto her arms to hold her still.

Destin knelt down and placed his hand on Cyan's head. Her fangs exposed and she snapped out at him raging with thirst. "Quiet now. Here, this will help." He reached into the cooler and took out a bag of blood. Ripping the top open, he held it to Cyan's mouth and she sucked it back as if starved.

One after another, she continued to drink, and not until she finished her tenth bag did she stop.

"Better?" Destin asked her.

Cyan nodded, tried to sit up, but Ryker held her still. "Why are you holding me down?"

"Preventive measure." Ryker glanced to Destin. "Can I release her?"

"She's fine now. The next couple nights, she'll need to feed often, but the thirst after waking is the worse."

Ryker released her and straightened, then stepped back beside Sabi. Cyan shot up with impeccable speed. Sabi gasped, and hid behind Ryker, just in case Destin could be wrong.

"A bit scared, are we?" Ryker chuckled.

"No." Sabi peeked around his back to watch Cyan examine her hands. "Just cautious."

Cyan's laugh interrupted their conversation. Sabi glanced over to her and she beamed. "Wow, this is certainly different."

"Different good?" Sabi asked, still hidden by Ryker's body. Not that she didn't trust Cyan...well, actually she didn't. Staying behind him was the perfect place to be. She didn't need, nor cared to show her bravery by facing a newly born vampire.

Cyan examined her hands, arms, even gave her body a shake before she glanced up at Sabi. "Yes, I would say I feel wonderful."

"So, you're okay?"

"Better than okay...but um..." She appeared ashamed. "I'm thirsty."

"You will continually want to drink for the next night or so." Destin reached down and grabbed another bag, but this time, poured it in a glass with a straw. "Don't be ashamed of what your body is telling you it needs."

Cyan seemed fine. Destin appeared to be in the control of the situation, and Sabi took that as their cue to leave. She pulled on Ryker's arm. "Okay, they okay now. Let's go."

Ryker grinned at her, before focusing back to Destin. "Sabi will stay with me for the next couple nights to give you all some privacy. If you need anything, you know where to find us." He allowed Sabi to pull him back, while she retreated toward the door. "Two nights will do?"

Destin nodded. "Yes, two nights should be enough time. She'll be of more use to you then, and I will come along to help with this."

With that, Sabi rushed the door. Sure, they were going to go and hunt for a crazy ass vampire, and while it held little appeal to her, anything would be better than watching Cyan drink blood like a damn *Slurpee*.

## Chapter Ten

Ryker returned home from advising the Council on what they learned from Cyan and brought them up to speed on what had transpired so far, to find Sabi in the kitchen. He sat at his dark, oak kitchen table and sighed as he laced his hands behind his head. What was ahead of them proved far more dangerous than he had first expected and tension filled him. It had nothing to do with him though, he craved that type of adventure. His sweet, little witch in front of him that held his concern.

Standing in front of his black cabinets situated around marble counter tops, Sabi had made quite a mess while she baked. She'd never admit to him how nervous she had been about the danger, but as of late, she'd been baking constantly.

He studied her as she added the berries to the pie. His feelings for her were still something he hadn't quite figured out, maybe because he'd never cared for anyone before. Not in the sense where he actually worried about them, and right then, he worried for Sabi.

The slight tremble of her hands as she dusted the pie with dark spice didn't go unnoticed by him. He couldn't let the situation continue without trying to comfort her. "Sabi."

"Mmm," she responded, not turning around as she placed the pastry overtop of the pie and pressed down the edges with her fingers.

Ryker approached her then pressed his chest against her back. So delicate compared to his size, her sweet and spicy scent filled his nostrils, only enhanced by the smell of her baked goods. He leaned down and placed a kiss on her shoulder. "You don't need to be afraid here."

She sighed as he continued to kiss along her skin, and he took notice of a little shudder that ran through her. "I'm not."

Ryker didn't believe her for one second. He grasped her hips and spun her around to face him. "Then tell me, why are you baking so often?"

"Because I like it."

He arched his eyebrow, before he glanced around his kitchen, which had been presently full of all sorts of treats. In the few hours since they'd come back to his residence, she hadn't left the kitchen.

She laughed, drawing his focus back to her. "Okay, well maybe I'm a little nervous." Her smile drifted away as she gulped. "It's just been hard lately...and I'm..."

Ryker saw her struggle for words and the sight ate at him. The pain on her face caused his stomach to clench. He could kill vampires and destroy any threat, but this, he couldn't help. Truthfully, he didn't know what to do, but he did realize he needed to understand what she feared in order to help her. "What are you afraid of?"

Her chin quivered. "When I heard of all these new developments from Cyan, it wasn't the danger that lies ahead for us which scares me, it's knowing that I'm going to have more visions."

Ryker brushed his fingers across her cheek as a lump formed in his throat. As much as he expected the same, he wouldn't share that now—he wanted to hear her thoughts on the matter. "Why do you think that?"

“Because you heard Cyan. Whoever is behind this is after something. And for them to get it, lives will be lost.” Her brow furrowed. “As if you don’t know this.”

Yes, he did, but he wouldn’t confirm it. No, he would keep that to himself. He wouldn’t add fuel to an already burning fire. It wouldn’t do her any good to always worry about what the future held. She needed to stay in the moment and protect herself there. “I don’t pretend to understand what you go through when you see these things. But you need to find a way to resolve these visions you have and distance yourself.”

“I don’t know how.” Her eyes, filled with tears, tore at him and broke his damn heart.

Ryker experienced her pain right down into the pit of his stomach. A reaction he wasn’t used to sharing with anyone, a revelation that knocked him off his axis. He gazed into her beautiful stare and realized she meant more to him than he had let himself believe. He realized then that he had been so insistent to help her because to do so would save himself. To make her happy would only give him happiness back.

Could it be love?

Ryker held no answer, but the protection he had for her had been unlike anything he’d experienced before. Such a powerful emotion he couldn’t ignore. “I hate to see you like this.” He wiped the tears from her face. “It’s killing me to watch you in so much pain and be helpless to stop it. Tell me, what can I do? How can I make this better for you?”

She shook her head, sending more tears trickling down her cheeks. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Ryker released a deep sigh and wished he had the ability to save her from all the horrible things she saw. But he didn’t possess the power to stop her visions and never would. Watching her, seeing her agony, he resolved to have only one choice of action. If he couldn’t stop the evil from stealing her thoughts, he’d give her an outlet to gain control of it.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. “This is what you need to remember,” he whispered against her mouth. “It’s not the visions, the death, or screams which echo in your mind. This is your present and what you need to come back to when things get rough.” He took her lips in a long, slow kiss, forcing her to forget anything and everything but him.

Her tears dripped along his face as he cupped her cheeks and kissed away her misery. She gave a strangled moan as he poured everything from his heart into their embrace. He wished he could tell her how much he cared for her, how much he needed her, but he couldn’t give her those words yet. Not until he knew he meant them.

He needed to sort out if his attachment had been as true as he thought it to be. Having no experience with love, only flings, he wouldn’t put her in harm’s way. Not until he knew for sure he could give her everything she deserved.

But there, with his little witch sinking against him and giving all of herself to him, he had to wonder if he deserved her. She put so much trust in him and needed him, and women like her were ones he usually stayed away from. He didn’t like the idea of being tied down and held hostage by one woman. But why was it when he thought of Sabi doing so, the idea intrigued him and warmed his heart.



She wrapped her arms around his neck and moved her soft body tight against his. Ryker's arousal went into full gear, his groin stiffened. His only thought had been to get his witch naked and beneath him. He grabbed onto her thighs and lifted her up around him. Holding her tight, he hurried through the living room and into the bedroom.

At the four-poster bed, he lowered her down to the mattress, and reached for the hem of her shirt. She sat up as he lifted it from her body. He tossed it aside, then grabbed onto her skirt and pulled it down, leaving her in a black lace bra and panties.

He dropped his kilt to the floor but left his shorts on. More so, because he knew if he took them off, his need to take her would overwhelm him too much to wait, and he wanted her to remember this. He hoped she would always come back to moments like this one when things got hard for her. She needed to see the visions were not her life, and he decided to make it his duty to see she never forgot that fact.

Ryker could have gotten right down to making her climax, but it wouldn't be enough. She needed to reach her boiling point to never forget. He came back over her, stared down to find a smoldering witch awaited him. He groaned, marvelling at how sexy she was, before he took her lips once again. He kissed her mouth and became lost in the silkiness of her tongue.

Breathless, Sabi broke off their kiss some time later. "Please, Ryker. Don't make me wait. I need this. I need you."

"Well then, what my lady asks for, she gets." His tone sounded husky even to his own ears. He kissed down her chest, moving along her stomach, drawing out his kisses. Her squirms indicated she wanted to hurry him along and as much as he wanted to, he knew he had to prolong this to make her never forget.

He placed his fingers in the rim of her panties, pulling them down as she angled her hips up to help him. Once removed, he ran his hands up her legs to her inner thighs where he pushed them open. Then, he lowered himself between her legs.

"No." She grasped his face with firm hands on his travels to stop him. "Just please come inside. I need you there."

Nothing had ever sounded so sweet, but she would not deny him his favorite part of her. He ignored her request, grinned and held her legs open as he lowered his mouth upon her sensitive flesh.

Sabi gasped and her body quivered beneath his lips. Her sensitivity always undid him. So responsive, she knew her body well, and had always been open with her sexuality. She always came for him, and did so with intensity.

He might have indulged her longer, but the taste of her drove him mad, and he couldn't wait any longer. He might have had intentions to take it slow, but his need refused to acknowledge those wants.

With a final lick of his tongue against her nub, he kissed her inner thighs, and removed his shorts. He worked his way back up her body with his lips, and when he gazed up at her again, he found a lustful Sabi very eager for him.

He wouldn't disappoint her.

What she wanted, he'd deliver.

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Ryker brought his lips back to Sabi's at the same time he positioned himself between her thighs and breached her. Her body burned in each and every way it should. Ryker filled her so completely, it made her eyes roll back. He never rushed his lovemaking. And now, he took his time, slow movements which were heaven itself.

His mouth captured her moans as he delighted her with open mouth kisses so sensual she could lose her mind completely. His tongue swept across hers delicately, but full of purpose to arouse her.

It worked.

Sensations rushed through her and sent tingles to awaken every nerve. He backed away from her mouth, and braced himself on his hands. His smile came sweet across his face and she reached up to cup his cheeks. So handsome. So sexy.

The beginning of love? The thought danced through her mind. Could Ryker be a man possible of giving his heart? She had yet to decide. Something special lay between them, an undeniable truth. But love? Ryker had never been the type. Commitment had never been a word in his vocabulary. Yes, they appeared to be exclusive, but the relationship had been so new, only time would answer that question.

He gave a swirl of his hips and her eyes widened. Flutters of pleasure stole her breath and her thoughts drifted away as she revelled in his embrace. However, just as the sensation increased, a tingle formed elsewhere which had nothing to do with pleasure, and before she had a chance to open her mouth, fight against it, Ryker faded away as darkness clouded her vision.

Once it cleared, she found herself no longer in his bedroom, but in a dark room—a basement maybe. She stood in the center of the room. Her body still heated from Ryker's attention, but coldness sank into her bones. She glanced around and searched out for the source of evil that crept there. Abruptly, a high scream came behind her. She spun around and saw a vampire, soaked in blood.

Needing to understand what happened, she took a step forward to see better in the darkness. The moment she did, she wished she hadn't. Bodies lay on the floor around her, ten of them, at least. Sabi's gaze drew away as the vampire screeched again. She glanced into the vamp's gaze to find a young woman—twenty years old, if that.

The fear in her gaze captured Sabi as the vampire glanced at the bodies around her—some dead, some not. Interrupting her hysteria, a frustrated sigh came loud. Sabi glanced toward the sound and discovered another vampire. One that matched Cyan's description well—blond, about four feet taller than her, and quite the looker.

He stepped closer toward the woman. "Not another fucking one." He sounded exasperated. "What a damn waste."

Sabi snuck a peek back to the vampire, entirely confused. *Not another one, what?* Before she could even come up with possibilities of what he meant, he continued, "I thought you were going to be a special one." He shrugged in a cold manner. "My apologies, you weren't."

Suddenly, another voice filled the dark room. "I keep telling you, we cannot rush this."

"I've given you enough time, Nico, and yet you continue to disappoint me." He approached the man who appeared to be in his late forties, a simple sort of looking fellow, someone who might be

seen in a coffee shop, sipping a cappuccino—well-dressed wearing casual business clothes and quite proper. “Yes, we’ve had success, but this is the fourth failure.” His gaze turned wicked. “Let’s hope for your sake the next one succeeds.” With that, he left the room.

“Help me,” the vampire on the ground cried. But Nico never acknowledged her, never said anything, only followed the vampire out. “What’s happened to me?” she sobbed.

Sabi’s gaze stayed glued on the woman. The fear, the sadness, and the confusion were so consuming she could barely breathe. The vampire studied the bodies, and in mere seconds, those emotions washed clear off her face as the bloodlust consumed her.

The victim’s frightened eyes grew wide right before he screamed, as the vampire ended his life.

“Sabi,” Ryker shouted, giving her a hard shake.

Her vision cleared of the horror, the darkness fled, and she blinked once before Ryker’s face came back into focus. Sabi did her best not to react, or show him how much the scene she’d seen crippled her. She wanted to be strong like most were in the Otherworld. Her job declared she not show weakness, and as she focused on that, guilt roared through her at the acknowledgment she’d once again failed. The scene had been too intense for her to focus away from the emotional aspect of it, to gather what she needed to. She chastised herself for not concentrating more on the minor details. But how could she with all the sadness that engulfed that room—not only for the humans, but for the vampire, too. Clearly, she’d been turned against her will and left to fend for herself.

It always annoyed Ryker when she blamed herself, so she wouldn’t go there. Besides being truthful about what she experienced had been something even she couldn’t admit to herself. Sharing didn’t come easily. However, when Ryker demanded, “Don’t close yourself off to me.” her control plummeted and her tears came heavy.

Just as her cheeks dampened, Ryker placed his erection back against her warmth, which he evidently removed when her vision hit, and he thrust in hard, sending a ping of pleasure to clear her head. “Stay here. Be here with me.” Again, he thrust hard, which made a loud smack echo in the room. “What you saw is not your life. You cannot carry the weight of all their pain.” He withdrew slightly only to slam back inside her. “This is real. The vision is over and you have to leave it behind. You need to remember this. Us.”

Her tears still hot in her eyes, but the sensations building in her couldn’t be ignored. Each movement Ryker made reawakened the arousal that had dissolved, a demand she release the terror and enjoy the pleasure he gave to her.

Continuing to thrust, Ryker reached down, raised her hips up and rocked harder against her. She leaned her head back and moaned as a rush of sensations built in her body.

He groaned long and deep as her body tightened around him, every muscle clenched as she fought the first hints of her release. Her toes curled into the bed as her hands gripped his strong shoulders.

All it took was a final hard thrust for her to release the tension raging within her and to surrender herself while her body erupted with complete satisfaction.

She heard Ryker’s own release, but she’d been held captive by her own climax to pay any attention to his. But as she released from the high he sent her on, his hands gripped her face. Her eyes fluttered open to find a determined Ryker above her. “Tell me you see it now.”

Sabi couldn't deny his point. This would never change for her, but what she focused on was what would define her. The visions would always be a part of her, always steal her thoughts, but they didn't own her. They were only as real as she let them be. Yes, lives were lost and misery rose because of it, but she couldn't be held responsible.

She stared at him and saw the raw emotion that pleaded for her to understand. To get past it, and for the first time, she saw a way through the despair. She couldn't ignore it, but she could remember no matter how bad it got, she had this. She had the strong man above her who made the good moments superb.

To waste her life in the darkness she couldn't control hadn't been the life she wanted or deserved. The point he wanted to make, he did. "Yes, I do see."

"It's about damn time."

## Chapter Eleven

Sabi stood before the Council and fiddled with her fingers—uncomfortable being an understatement. With all the emotional garbage out of the way from the realization she'd had with Ryker, she could focus on what the vision told her.

Which was exactly what she'd been explaining to the Council for the last twenty minutes as she went through it, piece by piece. The situation didn't only have her thoughts doing somersaults in her head, but she held grave concern for the woman in the vision.

*What would happen to her now?* The vampire had been responsible for taking mortal lives, but it hadn't been her fault, not really anyway. Black Magic had been so much simpler—evil witches after dark power. Simple. None of this mystery, and Sabi decided she didn't like it. She would much rather let the Guardians handle this as they usually did. Her new role definitely took some time to adjust to, and she had to wonder if she'd truly ever enjoy her new line of work. Right then, she enjoyed none of it.

By the time Sabi quieted after explaining the recent events, Zia's expression shifted to perplexed. "From what you've said here, it appears the earlier assignment Ryker and Kyden went on is connected to this."

"I took it as that, yes." The assumption had not been hard to come by. Not only had a new vampire been born and left in the same manner as Ryker's previous assignment, but something else had been a dead giveaway. "The vampire called Nico by his name, which is the name of Cyan's boss."

"Your vision and the recent assignment seem nearly identical," Ryker confirmed. "What are the chances two new vampires in a complete state of bloodlust aren't connected. Plus, if Nico had been there, it's quite obvious they turned the other vamp we hunted earlier."

Zia tapped her finger on her mouth as her eyebrows drew together, clearly thoughtful. "This vampire, the one feeding, seemed frightened?"

Sabi nodded. "Frightened and confused, as if she had no idea what happened to her."

"Strange," Zade remarked.

"What are we going to do now?" Sabi asked, voicing her earlier concern. "I mean, it changes things now, don't you think?"

Ryker arched an eyebrow. "How so?"

"Because, she had no idea what she was doing. She didn't kill those people on purpose. Someone had set her up in an impossible situation and left her to act in the only way her instincts told her. And she's so young, only twenty or so."

"That is quite young," Zade said, with a troubled gaze.

"Before we discuss her," Talon directed his stare at Sabi. "You said the other vampire there had made a comment about the fact she hadn't been *special*. Did you get any idea of what he meant?"

"Not at all, but since Nico had been there, and with what Cyan has told us, I'm guessing whatever tests they're doing it's on new vampires. Apparently, the test failed with her." The only conclusion she could find made any sense at all.

“Quite a predicament,” Zia said. “I’m afraid I know nothing of DNA or why a vampire would be so interested in altering supernatural blood.”

“And why he’d do it this way,” Ryker said. “He has to know we would come after him if he created vampires then left them to kill in the masses. Why would he take such a risk?”

“A good question,” Brax said.

Her mind spun with confusion. She needed to sort it out. “So, what we’ve got so far.” She raised her fingers to check them off as she listed what they knew. “One, a vampire either hired or demanded Nico do DNA research to alter the make-up of vampires. Two, whatever happened, they needed to make sure no one knew about it, which is why the humans at those offices were murdered. Three, apparently they’ve begun testing to see if they can alter this DNA, and are picking random people to turn and test on.”

“I think you’ve covered the bases,” Ryker agreed.

Sabi sighed as she ran her hands across her face, more tired than ever. “How then, will knowing all this lead us to him?”

She lowered her hands. Ryker shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea.” His gaze left hers as he glanced the Council. “You?”

The Council appeared baffled.

After a long pause, Talon finally broken the silence, “I believe the only choice we have here is to wait this out. See what progresses from here and see if this vampire slips up.” His gaze fixed on Sabi. “We all understand this is hard for you, but you need to get more out of your visions. You need to focus on him, learn his details, see anything on him that could identify who he is. See if he has any scar marks, tattoos, anything to distinguish him. Maybe then, you can go to Ellery and see if she has an idea of who he is.”

“Okay, I can try.” Sabi hoped not to disappoint Talon. As much as the rest of them understood, Talon had always been tough and she knew if she continued to miss stuff, he would get annoyed with her. The Master of Guardians wasn’t someone to anger.

Right then, a scuffle came from behind her. Sabi glanced over her shoulder to find Nexi and Kyden approaching them, Guardian gear on, ready for battle. Sabi looked to Ryker questioningly. His eyebrow arched, obviously in the dark over why they were here?

Before she could voice her curiosity, Talon said, “We’ve decided to pair you all up.”

Ryker appeared half annoyed and half curious. Yes, he’d gone out with Kyden, but she only thought it had been due to the fact that Nexi was detained with Haven’s labor. Pairing up teams wasn’t common practice in the Otherworld. Clearly, the Council had been more concerned over this matter than they were letting on, and had informed Nexi and Kyden on what they were facing.

“Excuse me?” Ryker growled.

“It’s a good match,” Talon countered.

Kyden’s expression declared he held the same disgruntlement as Ryker did when they stepped up beside Sabi. “Nexi and I do fine on our own. We don’t need to join ranks.”

“Sabi and I, as well,” Ryker added.

Talon gave Ryker a chastised stare then sent it along to Kyden. “Having all of you on this might bring it to a close faster. Nexi’s abilities can come into use here and help further discover what this

could be about. It's not a dig at either of your skills. We cannot wait around on this. He's already proven to be powerful and we need to stop him. Now."

Neither Ryker nor Kyden said a word

Nexi rolled her eyes, and Sabi nearly did the same at the men's display of hurt pride, but in truth, she didn't mind the extra help.

"Now then," Talon moved on, not caring one bit about the guys' annoyance. "Before you all came in here, we received notification a young woman is being held by Detective Myles at his home. I'm taking a guess in saying this is probably the woman you saw in your vision, Sabi. Go on all of you, see what she has to tell you then come back to us if you learn anything."

Even though Sabi still had more questions, even some about why Myles had that woman at his house, she wouldn't voice them. The air appeared thick enough. Instead, she kept her mouth shut and questions to herself as she followed Ryker and the others out of the Council's Hall.

Suddenly though, a thought stopped her and she spun around. "What should we do about the girl?" she called out, realizing no one had asked one of the most important questions.

"Bring her home," Zade replied.

Sabi exhaled the breath she'd been holding, and could see the same relief on Nexi's face. It had been one thing for them to hunt killers, but to destroy innocent people? No, she would have no part in such violence.

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Myles' house had been warm and inviting. Not at all what Ryker expected to find from a male vampire. The home had a feminine touch and Ryker suspected had to be his mate's doing. Yet, he couldn't find her there. He had hoped he wouldn't see the San Francisco Detective again so soon, but his wishes weren't answered now—the City was in grave danger.

Ryker groaned as he eyed the glass of blood on the coffee table. Twice he'd seen this, and could do without it. But he understood the reason, and that reason cried bloody tears in front of him.

Upon arrival, he learned the newly made vampire was Reese. Right then, she appeared to be a mess, but he suspected normally she'd be quite sweet looking.

Sabi reached out and took Reese's hand, a move Ryker found utterly kind. "I know you're frightened, but what you can tell us might help find out who has done this to you."

Nexi took a tissue out of the box on the table and handed it to Reese. "Please, use this." Her tone came out soft enough, but Ryker knew Nexi had always been just as put off by the blood dripping down her face.

Reese snatched it up and wiped her tears. "I'm just so confused. I don't even know what happened." She sounded too young to even have the conversation, and it saddened Ryker.

"I'll tell you how I found her," Myles cut in, clearly taking the wheel. "And we'll start from there."

Ryker nodded. He agreed it had been the best place to start. He suspected getting Reese to talk would come as a challenge, but he could sympathize. She'd been through hell and back and wouldn't be able to make sense out of all that happened until the bloodlust could be controlled.

“A man came into his factory earlier tonight and discovered Reese there. He called in the murders from his cell phone, but by the time we arrived,” Myles gestured toward Reese. “It had been too late for him.”

“She killed him?” Sabi gasped.

Shame sank into Reese’s expression. “I didn’t mean to...it’s just that his blood smelled...”

Myles interrupted her by placing his hand on her shoulder. “You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s not you that is to blame here. You were turned and left on your own accord. Nothing else could have been expected.”

The right response, but Ryker needed answers. It pleased him to see Myles had gotten to her early enough to gain control of her before the bloodlust consumed her. But he didn’t want to draw things out. The longer it went on, the more Sabi had been subjected to visions of such cruelty. He needed it to end and he needed it to be now. “So you found her there and then what?”

“My team is at the scene working it as a normal homicide to prevent anyone from asking questions. Once I discovered Reese, I immediately fed her to sustain her then brought her back here. And that leads us to now.” Myles visibly gulped. “I understand what she has done is against the laws of the Otherworld, but it doesn’t seem fair to punish her.”

Ryker’s impatience grew since Myles had told them nothing of importance yet. But he also agreed Reese didn’t deserve to face death for what she’d done, and luckily, so did the Council. “Zade has offered to assist her and we are to bring her home with us tonight.”

“The Otherworld.” Reese interjected. “That place you told me about?”

Myles nodded, relief showed on his expression. “They’ll take care of you there, and in time, you’ll have better control and can,” he waved his hand whimsically, “make something out of your life.”

“But my family, friends...”

“Are dead to you now,” Ryker’s statement might have been harsh, but how could such knowledge be said easily? Her life would be forever changed from that night on, and he wouldn’t tiptoe around her. They needed answers and those answers were captive in her mind.

In took of all of second for Reese to sob uncontrollably. Sabi gave Ryker an annoyed glance, which told him his tactic might have been the wrong one. He might have cared, or even regretted his choice of words, but his thoughts were too focused around Sabi. Time had been counting down until she had another vision and he wanted to stop it. Reese might hold vital information about what happened, and more importantly, the whereabouts of those involved. Frustration set in.

“Well, this isn’t going anywhere good,” Nexi commented, eyeing the sobbing Reese, clearly thinking along the same lines as Ryker. She nibbled on her bottom lip, before her gaze focused. “Let’s just do this the old fashioned, magical way and save a bit of time, shall we?”

Ryker pondered, unable to understand what she meant. Then he remembered as a Spirit Witch, Nexi possessed the ability to read someone’s mind. A gift Sabi hadn’t been granted, and right now, he wished the Elements gave her that gift instead of the hell that had been thrown upon her. Focusing away from his own thoughts, he realized now why the Council had instructed Nexi and Kyden to come along. Her gifts did come in handy and that ability saved a hell of a long, difficult conversation. He nodded in ascent. “Please do.”



Nexi stood from the couch and approached Reese. However, only a few feet away, Reese shot up with speed only a vampire could produce and lunged forward. She didn't hit Nexi, but came straight toward the one person who made Ryker's protective instincts flare to life.

He stepped in front of Sabi, grabbed onto Reese's neck and sent her flying across the room to slam against the wall with a loud thud. The second she crashed into it, her fangs gleamed against the light as her lips pulled back in a snarl. She pounced forward again and Sabi screeched as Reese flew toward her. Ryker didn't have to look to know Sabi was terrified. Nor would he dare glance away from Reese now. Her eyes were black and wild, and he had no doubt in a second's time she would make a meal out of Sabi if given the chance.

Not that he'd ever let that happen. The little vampire would be dead before she laid a fang on Sabi. With Reese only a hairsbreadth away, Ryker lunged forward, wrapped his hand around her throat again and pushed her to the ground. His knee came down hard on her chest as he used all his strength to hold her there. "Damn it, she's strong." His words were strangled as she struggled against him.

Myles knelt by him a second later, forced her mouth open, and poured the glass of blood down her throat. "She's hungry."

Within a minute or so, the color of Reese's eyes shifted back to brown and her fight against Ryker vanished. "Oh no," Reese cried. "I'm sorry."

Sabi placed her hand on Ryker's arm, which drew his gaze to her. "You can let go of her. She's fine now."

Ryker focused back on Reese and the adrenaline coursing through his blood fled him. Reese sobbed in hysterics. Clearly, she would not attack anyone else. He released his hand and stood, glancing back to Nexi. "Go on then, do your thing." His gaze fell back to Myles. "And refill the glass and force her to drink it. Let's not have a repeat."

Myles nodded, and immediately left to refill her cup.

"I'm going to touch you now," Nexi said as she approached her. "Don't go all vampy on me."

"Wait." Kyden knelt beside Reese. "I won't take the risk you'll hurt her. I'm not doing this to scare you, but in fact, to keep you safe. If you cause injury to Nexi, I'll likely not take it well."

Ryker chuckled. Kyden and he might get along better these days, but he still liked to goad him when he could. "Afraid of a wee little girl, are you?"

Kyden snorted. "Shut up." He glanced back to Nexi as he placed his hand on Reese's shoulders to pin her to the ground. "Go on."

Nexi took Reese's hand, and the moment she did, they both closed their eyes. They would be aware of the present, yet their minds would be drawn back to Reese's memories.

As the silence drew in around them, Sabi snuggled into Ryker's side. He wrapped an arm around her as she smiled up to him. "Thank you."

He nodded, but didn't want to be thanked by her. In fact, his duty to her declared he protect her there, and Nexi hadn't thanked Kyden, because she understood it be his role. Unhappiness filled him that Sabi didn't.

Myles ventured back into the room with a full glass of blood in his hand. He knelt on the other side of Reese. He raised the glass to her lips and she slurped it back.

Minutes passed before Nexi gasped and wrenched her hand away. “Oh, okay, wow.”

Kyden immediately released Reese, pulled Nexi with him and moved her to the other side of the room. Ryker didn’t think it necessary to move away from her, seeing she just drank, but he did release his arm around Sabi and tuck her in behind him, just in case.

Myles helped Reese sit up and handed her the glass, which she drank by herself. “Um, thank you.” She sounded so confused, her tone wishy-washy.

Ryker couldn’t imagine how lost the young woman would be. Magic, vampires, blood—hard to grasp when it had been known merely as folklore. Instead of continuing to try to understand where Reese’s thoughts lay, he had a job to do and moved along. “Well...” Ryker glanced back to Nexi. “What did you find out?”

“A whole lot.” Nexi grinned.

Ryker waited a moment for her to continue, but she didn’t, only blinking at him with an unreadable expression on her face. He waved her on, suspected his expression showed his impatience. “You plan on telling us anytime soon?”

“No.” Nexi spun on her heels, striding toward the front door to leave everyone in her wake. “I’m not going to repeat myself a thousand times. So, let’s get back to the Council and I’ll tell you all then.” She glanced over her shoulder, but kept walking, clearly in a hurry. “Besides, Reese has been topped up. Let’s get her home before she tries to chomp on Sabi again.”

Ryker couldn’t have agreed with her more, and Sabi’s relieved gaze said she couldn’t wait to be far away from the Reese. With that, though, Ryker’s earlier irritation returned, she shouldn’t have been afraid. Not with him there, his job was to protect her. Did she truly not believe he’d protect her at all costs? Had he not been clear with her?

Nothing about this new discovery pleased him, but personal matters would have to wait. His focus needed to stay on what Nexi knew. If she held answers to stop this, he wanted to get them and find the one responsible. There, he could release his building frustrations, along with the rage he intended to unleash on the one haunting Sabi’s mind.

## Chapter Twelve

Upon their return to the Otherworld, Zade swept Reese off to his residence, and Sabi didn't mind that one bit. The journey home had been quick, but she kept an eye on Reese the entire time. Maybe even stayed hidden by Ryker too, he could stop her in her tracks, and she didn't possess the strength to fight against Reese, well with brute force that is.

Thinking back over the night, Sabi couldn't appreciate Ryker protected her like he had. They'd never been put in the situation before where he needed to defend her, and it made her smile that he guarded her. She glanced over and studied her Guardian.

In the Council's Hall, he stood proud and strong like always. Why had he been so compelled to watch over her? The reaction made her wonder. Did he love her? In truth, her attraction to Ryker had been merely physical, at first. He'd always been a playboy and quite vocal about it. From all she knew of him, he'd never once been committed to anyone, and truthfully, she never expected it of him. The relationship between them had been purely physical—a mutual agreement they were attracted to each other and wanted to indulge themselves. But from what he showed tonight, his feelings for her seemed to have deepened.

Could Nexi be right? Did he feel more for her than she let herself believe?

Yes, he'd proved supportive through her visions and even seemed to worry for her. However, his attention didn't surprise her. If anything, they were friends. She knew he'd react the same way if it were Nexi, or even Kyden. Ryker might be arrogant, possibly even complicated, but a good man lived within him, too.

Although, as she wondered if maybe she had been reading him wrong, one thing couldn't be erased from her mind. If he did love her, why hadn't he declared it? A question that had no easy answer, and instead of mulling over what-ifs, she focused on the conversation going on around her.

Nexi had given the quick version on the recent events at Myles' home to the Council, excluding Zade, but also included Destin, who had placed Cyan with another vampire to watch over her. Clearly on the brink of a new discovery, he wanted involved with this.

Nexi said, "When I read into Reese, her thoughts were foggy, which I'm guessing is from all she's been through. And let me just tell you, she is going to need a therapist once she's pulled herself together."

Sabi laughed.

Nexi grinned back before she glanced at the Council with a firm gaze. "And it ain't going to be me." She pointed at Zia, then directed it at Kyden, and moved along. "I saw little flashes of things in her mind. Like her day, which had been boring and normal, to her going out with friends then to her walk home that had led to the attack. From there it gets all screwy. It went black for a while but then I caught a glimpse of her being carried toward a building." Nexi's gaze flashed with excitement. "I saw a number."

"You did?" Sabi rejoiced, it could be the lead they needed, and a way to end this. Yes, good news indeed.

Nexi nodded. "I did, but it was weird. I saw the number fourteen, but it hadn't been like a house number—it was really big."

Destin apparently didn't agree this could be anything important since he huffed. "What will a number do? The number fourteen doesn't narrow it down. That could be thousands of places."

"Yes, yes." Nexi waved his remark away with a flick of her hand. "But I saw details and heard things. I'm hoping I can explain the area to you and maybe it might ring a bell."

Ryker shifted on his feet next to Sabi, and she suspected his adrenaline had kicked up a notch. His gaze focused on Nexi, his eyes alight and fervent. "What did you hear?"

"A train—and not just one."

Kyden gave Nexi a curious look, incredulous almost. "How can you be sure of that?"

*Yes, good question.* Sabi doubted she would have even noticed enough detail to catch one train, let alone two.

Nexi shrugged. "When it moved on the tracks, the sound didn't match and it seemed like the trains were travelling at varying speeds."

As much as hearing this should have made Sabi happy, it didn't. She couldn't remember big details from her visions and yet Nexi described minute ones. Embarrassing.

"And, I heard horns, like boats or something."

"A ferry?" Destin offered. At Nexi's nod, he went on. "The only place in San Francisco where there would be more than one train, I suspect would be the Amtrak Station." He grinned. "It just so happens, the ferry terminal is there as well."

"So, that's gotta be where they're at?" Sabi piped up, ignoring her self-pity for the moment.

Many heads nodded, before every gaze shifted to the Council, awaiting some sort of acknowledgment. Talon leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Before you head out there, did you get any idea what this is all about?"

"Just flashes of things. The visions were too foggy and confusing to make sense of it all."

"Because she had just been turned, I suspect," Ryker interjected.

"Seemed like that," Nexi said. "Once they brought her into the building, I could see a couple of people, vampires, in fact. But because she had been so out of it, they came in blurry. Even the speech sounded muffled."

"Of course it did." Sabi's voice sounded as frustrated as experienced inside. *Why couldn't anything just be easy?*

"But..." Nexi hesitated a moment and cocked her head to the side with a curious glance. "One thing I will say is, they didn't appear threatening."

The revelation surprised Sabi. Whatever she thought had been going on, and the fact they had killed so many innocent people, that didn't seem accurate. "What gave you that impression?"

"First off, they weren't powerful. And trust me, I would have known." Of course, she would have. She'd seen her fair share of powerful vampires in her time. "It didn't appear that they wanted to hurt her. From what I could see, even though it's all a bit of a blur, they were being considerate of her."

"Which makes no sense at all," Ryker countered, "considering the way they left her to fend for herself."

Sabi agreed completely, but before she could voice her thoughts, Brax hummed a low rumble. “It seems to me this has nothing to do with power, which I should say is good for us, and more so has to do with the vampires in the Earthworld.”

“I have to agree,” Zia added. “It doesn’t seem as if they are targeting anyone specifically, since until now there’s been no talk of trouble brewing anywhere. But still, I can’t understand why vampires would be doing this. Why would they want to alter themselves?”

“The point doesn’t matter,” Talon said. “The only thing we need to focus on is finding them and stopping this. How many lives will be lost if they continue to act?”

Lots, Sabi suspected. Not only would human lives be lost while these vampires needed to feed, but all of the humans would be turned against their will, which was almost as bad. It had been one thing to choose to become a vampire, but forced into it against one’s will, for all of eternity, she couldn’t imagine that. And worst, if they’d disappointed whoever had been behind this, they’d be left to their only devices.

“Go see if you can locate this building,” Talon said, drawing Sabi back into the moment. “Maybe the ones responsible will still be there.”

*Yeah, and then they can drink us dry.*

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In downtown San Francisco, Nexi had narrowed down the location by her memory of what the trains sounded like. They headed west down *The Embarcadero* on foot. The streets were relatively quiet. Being three o’clock in the morning, most of the residents would be fast asleep. All the better, no one would die tonight.

Sabi stayed quiet alongside Ryker and Kyden as they followed behind Nexi as she searched for the building. Minutes ticked by, and still nothing. Twice Nexi had spun around, striding up and down the street.

Annoyance filled Ryker. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“Hush, you.” Nexi snapped. “I know it’s here. A lot of this seems familiar and I’ve never been here before. Just give me a sec...”

Sabi reached out and touched Ryker’s arm to garner his attention. He looked down to her to find her finger over her mouth, indicating he should stay quiet. For her, he’d keep his irritation at bay.

Besides, she appeared worried. He held as much concern, not for him of course, for Sabi. He’d never been put in the situation before where he would need to fight, but also protect her. And he didn’t have a full understanding of what her magic could do. From what she’d told him, she provided protection in a battle with Black Witches—a distraction. He hadn’t been convinced if she got thrown into a fight, she’d be able to defend herself, which brought a realization to his mind. Ignoring her requests to be quiet, he leaned down and whispered so not to disturb Nexi, “When this is over, I’m going to teach you some combat skills.”

Her beautiful eyes went wide. “Like to fight?”

“If this is what the Council expects of you now, it’s important you learn to defend yourself. As you said yourself, your magic isn’t strong defensively. You’ll need to learn how to protect yourself if you’re put in a dangerous situation.”

“Good luck with that.” She laughed.

He lifted an eyebrow. "You don't think you could do it?"

"I know I couldn't."

He could understand her hesitation, but he wished she'd show more confidence in herself. She had been far more capable than she gave herself credit. He suspected he needed to give her a push. "A challenge I see."

"A challenge I have no doubt I'll lose." Sabi snorted.

Ryker grinned at her in response. She doubted herself, but he'd show her the strength which lived inside of her. Help her find a way to work her magic in with some combat skills to be a force of her own.

The Golden Gate Bridge shone through the night sky, quite a lovely view. If not for the circumstances, Ryker might have enjoyed it, but right then, his only focus remained on finding the location and end this. Maybe even more so to discover what the motive had been behind it all.

He'd been around vampires when he worked for the Mistress and, even to him, it all came as a surprise. To alter oneself seemed absurd.

As he approached, a street sign read *Mission Street*, and a building appeared to Ryker's left. Brown brick, historical, yet taken care of. As he strode past the building, a big marble slab came into view. *Pier 14*.

Nexi stopped dead in her tracks. "It's here. This, the fourteen, that's what I saw. I didn't see the pier..." she kept spinning around, "but yes, I saw the fourteen."

Ryker examined the area. They stood in downtown San Francisco, there was no way any vampire would bring someone to this area so exposed. Carrying a semi-conscious woman in his arms would cause quite a reaction. He looked around further and he settled back on the building, next to the pier. "It must be there. If you saw the pier sign he must have taken her from the car over there."

He trotted next to the building and reenacted the moments Reese had been through in his mind. As he stood next to the building, he could see the pier sign clearly, probably just as Nexi had seen in her mind.

"I think you're onto something." Kyden's gaze took in the building behind Ryker. "What is this place?"

"It's a ceramics store," Sabi answered. "I saw the name as we walked by."

Ryker glanced back to the building, aware of its large size. "It cannot only be used as the store. The sheer size of it has to be used for other purposes."

"Well, only one way to find out," Nexi remarked, approaching the door on the right side of the building. Once there, she turned the handle and as expected, it didn't budge. "For crissakes, couldn't it just be open?"

Ryker took two big strides forward, raised his leg and kicked the door in. The second it broke from its hinges, he waited to see if an alarm sounded. Thankfully, none came. He waved his hand out gallantly. "And, now it is."

Nexi laughed, took a step forward, but Kyden latched onto her arm. "No, behind me."

She rolled her eyes and huffed a little, yet stayed back with Sabi until Ryker and Kyden had gone through. As Ryker stepped into the darkened hallway, he searched out for a light switch on the wall. Only a few feet in, he discovered one and flipped it on.

The building appeared to be office space, however, he'd assumed the ceramic shop had been in the front. At this time of night, the place had been deserted. He continued to lead the way down the hallway when Nexi said behind him, "A powerful vamp is here, I can sense him."

No one questioned her. Her abilities always gave her the gift to recognize power, but that knowledge only set him on edge. He wanted this over yesterday. With Sabi here, danger didn't have the same appeal. He pulled his sword from its scabbard, and heard Kyden do the same.

"Do you know where he's at?" Kyden asked.

"No," Nexi replied. "But close."

Progressing further down the hall, light glowed off to the right, not a large amount, but enough to fill the empty space at the bottom of a door. Ryker stopped, glanced back to Kyden. "I'm assuming down there."

Kyden nodded.

Ryker's gaze drifted to a terrified Sabi. His chest clenched. He wanted to say *stay here*, but he knew better than to do so. Shielding her wouldn't help her any. Besides, he wanted her close to him. Then he could protect her.

Glancing back to the door, Ryker wrapped his hand around the handle and opened it to find a set of stairs. His first step down came quiet, but then he realized the vampire would hear him anyway so he didn't bother. He charged down the steps and rushed into the basement with the others right on his heels.

The moment his foot hit the last step, the scene floored him. After his first initial shock, he recognized he shouldn't have been surprised. "A lab," he said, more of a statement than a question.

Kyden stepped in beside Ryker and gave him a puzzled look. "Appears so."

Ryker scanned for any threats, but found nothing but an empty room. A bed had been set up with monitors, much like a hospital, bare except for a few tables and chairs.

"We're not alone," Nexi said.

"No, we're—" Sabi's words were cut off by a vicious snarl.

Ryker spun around to find Sabi staring toward a hallway at the far side of the room. There, he found the reason she sounded so fearful. Vampires, four of them slunk forward, ready to fight.

*Sabi.*

Ryker lunged forward, grabbed her arm and tossed her behind him. He winced as he heard her land hard into the table. A bruise or two would heal, but her life could not. Just as her squeal sounded in his ears, one of the vampires growled then attacked.

## Chapter Thirteen

The world spun as Sabi's head hit the stone floor. She blinked away the stars that formed in her vision. Now wasn't the time to black out. Focusing back on the scene in front of her, she immediately scrambled back, terrified.

Ryker stood strong in front of her, in an all-out fistfight with one of the vampires she'd seen. He hadn't been the only one. Nexi and Kyden had their hands full too, which left one vampire stalking toward her.

Right then, the air shimmered and a deep growl, followed by a black blur lunged toward a vampire. Clearly, Nexi's familiar, Willow had arrived. The panther sworn to protect Nexi had attempted to assist her.

The extra help didn't ease Sabi. "Ryker," she squealed. "Help." Fear roared through her—she had never been a fighter. No, she hadn't been prepared, but as panic crept up, her Elements reminded her she had her magic. Slapping her trembling hand against the floor, she let the warmth of her magic build. Hot tingles erupted over her body, and when they burned scorching hot, declaring her magic had reached its potential, she released it with the full extent of her ability.

Vines—thick and strong—grew and rushed along the floor toward the vampire. They wrapped around his legs and worked their way up his body. A second later, he dropped to the floor, and fought against the restraints.

It wouldn't hold him for long, but it'd buy her time in order not to become his next meal. She stood, not quite sure what to do. Her gaze travelled the room quickly and she'd never seen Guardians struggle so much. Yes, the vampires were strong, but normally Guardians didn't work up a sweat when fighting vamps. Right then though, she hadn't been sure who would win.

"Nexi," Ryker shouted, sounding a bit strangled. "Burn them." He leveled the vampire in front of him with a hard punch that did send him back, but not for long.

"No." Nexi dodged a blow from the vamp attacking her. "I don't use magic in my Guardian role."

Willow growled, clearly issuing the same frustration.

Kyden groaned as he got a fist to the side. "I think it's about damn time you break that rule."

Sabi wished she'd get on with it, too. If Nexi used her Fire Element, they'd all be burnt to a crisp and it would be over. Other than Zia, Nexi had been the only witch who could conjure magic without touch. It gave a great advantage. But Sabi also understood why she didn't do it. Being a mixed supernatural of Fae, Guardian and Witch, it kept her true to herself. So, she could understand why Nexi refused what Ryker suggested. Even though it would make things a lot easier for them.

With that out of the equation, Sabi was the only one left to help since she didn't have her hands full at the moment. But a quick look back to her vampire, she saw he'd already begun to loosen the vines around his body.

Sabi knelt back down, placed both hands on the ground, called to her magic, and asked it to give them some kind of advantage in this battle. Immediately, vines covered the ground as they worked



their way toward the vampires. Maneuvering throughout the space had to be avoided so the vines could find the vampires legs.

Their struggle had been useless. The second the vines crawled and wrapped around their thighs, they were incapacitated, but that didn't get them out of the woods. As proud as she was that she had been useful, she doubted the strength of her magic, and knew in a moment's time, they'd all be free and attacking again. "Quickly, kill them. The vines won't hold very long."

With beautiful precision, three lives were lost, all by the swords of Guardians, except for one. As heads rolled along the ground, Sabi's stomach clenched at the sight of such violence. Not that it bothered her they were dead, but the gruesome view had been hard for her to stomach.

Willow shifted back to her kitty form then hissed at Nexi.

"Don't you even start. Your fur will grow back." Nexi apparently answered something that Willow had said to her telepathically. "And yes, I'll get you some milk when I get home."

With a flick of her now half-bald tail, the snippety Willow vanished.

Ryker sheathed his sword then turned back to the vampire Sabi had originally rendered useless. He'd gained more movement and Sabi called to her magic again to send more vines his way, even did a few more for good measure. Instantly, he stilled, unable to move an inch. "That should hold him for a while longer. Get what you need from him."

Nexi stepped forward, glared down at the vampire. "You have been a very naughty vampire."

He snarled and didn't say anything of importance, simply spat out a vicious string of curse words.

"Well, this isn't going to get us anywhere." Nexi exhaled a frustrated sound. "You know, you're making me break my rule, and that really pisses me off," she told him. "I. Do. Not. Like. To. Break. My. Rules."

"And now she decides to break her rules." Ryker's voice was far past annoyed. "Couldn't you have come to that conclusion while we were being beaten to a bloody pulp?"

"Oh, be quiet, you," Nexi snapped.

Kyden laughed, and Sabi joined him.

Nexi knelt down and placed her hand on his forehead, the only free skin to touch since the vines held him bound. He shifted around a bit and tried to get out of her reach.

Ryker grabbed the vamp's hair. "Move or attempt to bite me and your head will become my centerpiece."

Sabi stayed right where she stood, away from the vamp who burned with rage and right behind Ryker. A perfectly safe place to be.

"Let's see what we have here," Nexi said before she shut her eyes, and read into his mind.

A few minutes passed before her breath whooshed from her body and her eyes snapped open to meet Kyden's stare. "We certainly have our hands full."

"How full?" Sabi interjected before Kyden could say a word.

Nexi stood and backed away. She gave Ryker a nod, and with impeccable speed, the vampire's head was detached from his body. Blessedly, a mere second later his body vanished, along with every drop of blood.

Ryker sheathed his sword just as Kyden asked Nexi, "What did you learn?"

“This vampire,” she pointed the ground where the vamp had been, “isn’t like the new ones you’ve discovered on the assignments.” She glanced to Ryker, then Sabi. “He’s very controlled.”

“Like the very first vampire at the lab who had been fully in control of himself. Apparently, whatever *he* is doing, it worked with this guy,” Sabi said.

Ryker nodded. “Do you know who the *he* is?” he asked Nexi.

“Not quite sure. But I got some insight into what this is all about.”

Ryker’s eyebrows rose. “Did you?”

Sabi could understand his excitement. Finally, an answer for all of it, a reason behind why anyone would go to such extremes came as a huge relief.

“When the vampire woke, a guy had been with him. I’m guessing this is the one behind all this since he appeared completely thrilled—like jumping up and down in excitement. He told the vamp,” she pointed to the ground again to clarify whom she meant, “that he had been a new species of vampire, and said he had been given gifts which made him invincible.”

“Like superhero invincible?” Sabi laughed.

Nexi gave a lazy shrug. “Who knows with this bunch of freaks, but clearly they aren’t invincible since they’re all dead.”

Good point, Sabi thought. Yet, she also understood if there had been more, Nexi would have had no choice but to break her rule, and use her magic against them. They proved to be strong and fast. The acknowledgment of how dangerous these vampires were unnerved her.

Ryker didn’t seem so intrigued by this line of conversation, nor did he seem put off at all since he asked, “Did he say anything as to why he’s doing this?”

“It’s hard to tell, but I didn’t get the sense they’re doing this to harm anyone. It seemed like it’s all just an experiment. Not once did the guy talk about some wicked plan. More so, he had been thrilled that whatever this DNA business is, worked.”

“Quite strange,” Kyden noted.

Sabi nodded in agreement. “Why would someone do this to vampires? I mean, what would be the point to it all? To give them what...” Her words cut off with a hiss as darkness rushed into her eyes.

*Oh, no.*

“Shit.” Ryker’s groaned, latched onto Sabi’s arms and pulled her into his embrace as she tumbled into a pit of shadows.

A bright light flashed before her vision. She blinked and tried to focus. Finally, sense came back to her, and the scene unfolded. The room in which she stood had been bare to the bone except for a hospital bed in the middle. Cement floors, white painted walls, and the strong scent of antiseptic made her nose wrinkle.

But none of it made her heart leap into her throat. No, the woman on the table made her heartbeat stutter. She took a step closer, sure she had to be seeing things wrong. However, the closer she got, the more she knew her eyes weren’t lying to her.

*That’s me.*

She had been strapped to a table in such a way that her hands could not touch anything to produce magic, and she cried. Her skin appeared pale and her gaze had filled with a terror she'd never known. What was going on there?

Scanning the room in panic, a voice cut through her confusion and Sabi startled. She spun around to face the blond vampire she'd seen before. In the light, every curve of his face, every dark shadow defining his face became clear. Handsome, but a cryptic note held in his gaze. Not evil exactly, but not innocent either.

Sabi shook her head to focus, then decided it best to listen to him. "This hadn't been my plan, you know." He approached the future Sabi. "But I can't deny I'm not a little intrigued here."

"Why are you doing this?" Sabi cried. "Who are you?"

She watched the scene unfold as her feet stayed glued to the floor. *This couldn't be real.* How and why was she there? Hysteria crept up, but she forced herself to calm. She couldn't lose it. No, she needed to learn as much as she could. The order from Talon still sat within her, and now with it being her, she couldn't fail. She needed to prevent this future from coming true, and if she took special care, she could.

"The name is Dario. And the why, well, it's quite simple." He slowly strode around the table Sabi laid on and dragged his finger along the edge. "Vampires, as you know, are flawed. We have limitations, ones that don't bother some, but do indeed bother me."

"What limitations?" Sabi thought her future-self asked an important question.

Dario stopped at the bed next to her. "Sunlight, for one." He glanced up at the lights. "Even these are no replacement for what the sun feels like beating down on your body." He sighed. "How I miss it. That is why I've been doing all this testing, DNA altering, it's all to make me better...vampires stronger."

"You're doing this because you miss the sun?" Sabi exclaimed, incredulous.

Dario laughed, cold and harsh. "In part yes, but there's so much more. The power of this new blood." He drew in a deep breath. "It's invigorating. We've been testing, you see." Dario gave her a knowing look, and chuckled. "The levels were unstable. It took a lot of research, and much disappointment with each vampire turned to see if this worked."

"How could you use innocent people?" Sabi snapped.

Dario continued to walk around the table again, using measured steps. "You think someone would volunteer for such a thing?" He *tsked*. "No, I do not think they would. Using humans had been the only option. The only way for me to see this through and give me the final result I sought."

"This has been all about you...what you wanted?"

Dario stopped at the other side of the bed and trailed a finger down Sabi's cheek. "No, this is about everything." Sabi shifted her head away from his touch and he laughed. "Think of this as an industry—a moneymaker. How many vampires would kill to feel the sun against their skin? Or pay a small fortune so the normal rules don't apply to them?" Sabi's eyes widened and Dario nodded. "A smart witch you are. Yes, some lives were lost along the way, but this is all for a bigger cause."

Sabi wanted to let herself experience the shock of this, cry out and demand this could not be real. She wanted to lose herself in this moment of insanity, but she needed to get whatever information was possible from this scene. Quickly, she glanced around the room as she heard the

voices continue. She couldn't care what had been said, only needed to take in enough knowledge to stop it from happening.

As she scanned the area, disappointment settled in. Nothing. Nothing here gave any clue as to where this place was located, only blank, sterile walls. The true horror of the situation sank in, and a cold sweat formed on her body as she realized the room could only be there for one reason.

She glanced back toward her future-self just as Dario said, "I hadn't once conceived the notion of what this blood would do if put into a witch. But sometimes moments present themselves and cannot be ignored. Who knows, maybe it'll create another breed of witch that others would pay a pretty penny for."

Sabi ignored Dario to glance around again urgently. She needed something so she could avoid coming to this place in case this came true—the name of the building, anything to help her stay away. Yet, nothing gave her any clues, completely stripped clean of items.

Suddenly, she caught sight of someone in the corner, hidden by the shadows. She stepped closer toward him, studied his face as best she could. She'd never seen him before, and hoped she could remember him. Dario continued to talk and she thought she heard him speak of the Otherworld, but she didn't quite make out what he said, too intent on finding out anything to make this premonition false.

Soon though, on the table, Sabi cried out—hard, deep sobs, which drew her attention back to the table. "You can't do this."

Dario moved away from the table, grabbed something off a tray. "Who is going to stop me?" He raised a needle in his hand filled with thick, rich, crimson fluid, took one giant step forward, grabbed her head and sank the needle into her neck.

She screamed, both present and future, as the blood entered her body. The darkness stole her vision and her eyes shut tight. When her sight returned, she faced Nexi's annoyed stare.

"You scare the bejesus out of me of when you do that." She stepped forward, placed her hand on Sabi's arm and offered her healing through her magic. The last remnants of the fear and exhaustion that always came from the visions fled, but still, Sabi couldn't shake her rattled nerves.

Ryker brushed her hair off her forehead and concern tightened his features. "What happened?"

Sabi contemplated. What to tell them? Deep down, she wanted to tell them she was in danger, tell them everything she saw, but something stopped her. Well, a few things stopped her. One, if her gut told her to tell them, she needed to act against it to change the fate in front of her. The other being, if Ryker knew what could be possible, he would hide her away until they found Dario. Their focus wouldn't be on the matter at hand and instead only about stopping the premonition from happening. If that happened, she held no doubt that more lives would be lost. Realizing the need to act against what her instincts told her, she bit back the truth and said, "The vision had been of a witch and the vampire, Dario. He gave her the tainted blood."

Nexi's eyes widened. "A witch?" Bewildered, she glanced at Kyden. "I thought this had been about vampires. Why would he do that?"

"Oh, I know why," Sabi interjected, drawing every confused gaze back to her. She could tell half-truths here, enough so they could find Dario and explain his reasons behind it all. "And you're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you..."

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Ryker listened to Sabi describe her vision, yet he had a hard time comprehending it. It was ludicrous, a vampire seeking to alter their true nature in order to defy the rules of their species. Absurd.

However, something continued to nag at him. More had been going on here, and Ryker studied Sabi in an attempt to figure out what she kept from him. She had yet to hold eye contact with him and that wasn't like her. Nexi rambled about something, which he heard none of and Sabi stared at her. Determined to figure out what she had been keeping, he took Sabi's chin and demanded she meet his gaze. "What are you withholding?"

Her smile appeared innocent. "I'm not withholding anything." Her voice came out smooth and steady.

He didn't buy it. Yet, he wondered if she hid the entire vision because Nexi and Kyden were here. Maybe she saw something that scared her. He could understand why she didn't want to divulge her feelings in front of others who she considered to be strong. Because of that, he let it go, but kept a close reminder to himself to come back to the issue. "Did you see anything to lead us to where he is?"

Sabi shook her head. "The room had been much like this one—plain. Nothing to indicate where they were."

"The vampires here were definitely stronger." Kyden's voice sounded less than happy.

Ryker understood. Vamps could put up a good fight, normally one he relished in, but that night, their skills outmatched theirs. It had been a struggle and without Sabi's assistance, they might have been unsuccessful and Sabi could have... No, he wouldn't think of the danger that could have put Sabi in. "Clearly, whatever Dario has been doing, he succeeded, and these vampires are proof."

"Well, I guess that's a bit of good news," Sabi stated.

Ryker laughed, incredulous. "How is *that* good news?"

She smiled, sheepishly, but still held a hint of worry in her gaze, something that unsettled Ryker. "I just mean no more humans will suffer what we've seen so far. If they've got all the..." she waved her hand wistfully, "DNA levels, or whatever it is, figured out, he's accomplished what he needed to. Which means, no more new vampires made and left to fend for themselves—no more lives lost. And that's good, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," Ryker admitted. But he believed the situation was far from over. What had been done was reprehensible. Dario would pay and pay with his life.

"So, what do we do now?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"We'll go and see Mistress Ellery," Nexi cut in. "See if she knows this Dario and where to find him. Now that we know more about this, maybe she can help."

Ryker nodded. It had been the right decision, yet everything to him right then seemed all wrong. It did please him Sabi had come out of the vision a little more put together, that she seemed to obtain information she'd never been able to, but he suspected it had been because no one died. Those thoughts drew questions to his mind. "You said he gave the witch this blood?"

Sabi nodded.

"Did he say why?"

“From what I saw, he hadn’t planned for it, it just kinda came about and he took the opportunity. He said it had been a test, kinda like the ones he’d been doing. If he could change vampires, what would happen if he put the tainted blood into a witch?”

Nexi huffed out an annoyed breath. “Kill her.” When no one said a word, she stammered out. “W-w-wouldn’t it?”

“I doubt it would,” Kyden responded. “But I’m not quite sure what it would do. The witch would already be an immortal, therefore killing her would not be likely. It would however, change her make-up.”

“So, she’d become a vampire?” Nexi seemed confused.

“No,” Ryker replied. “You can’t change an immortal. She’s a witch, would always be a witch, but it would alter her, and transform her Elements.”

“But it’s not done often,” Kyden added. “Why would it be? Witches, like all immortals, are proud of their heritage. They wouldn’t crave to become a vampire. To change oneself is not a desired state. More than that, it’s just unnecessary.”

Sabi released a deep breath she’d apparently hadn’t known she held. “But what if it could offer you more? Give you things you couldn’t imagine? Things no one knows existed.”

Ryker agreed with Sabi. Being a vampire wasn’t an ideal state. It meant the person had in all actuality dead, and had to feed off human blood to survive.

With that, the realization dawned on Ryker and he saw what Dario had to offer to the vampire world.

Freedom.

“You all do realize what this means...” he started.

Sabi sighed. “That we’re up shit’s creek and our paddle has been gnawed on by a bunch of freaky vampires.”

## Chapter Fourteen

An evening at the senior citizen community center playing Gin Rummy would have been more exciting than what had transpired the following two nights. No more murders, no word from the Mistress about anyone offering the new blood, nor had she discovered Dario's location. No visions. Nothing.

Of course, the dwindling visions pleased Sabi, she had no qualms about that. It thrilled her to have her mind free from danger. Yet, there had been one vision in particular she couldn't get out of her mind, and it weighed heavy on her heart. She hadn't told anyone about it and prayed that her silence changed the path of her possible future course, and she didn't want the mission to become about her. Her visions could be altered—shifted along a different path. And as long as she kept herself guarded, acted cautiously, it wouldn't come true...she hoped.

She needed to be smart and had enough of everyone worrying about her, knowing she'd been the weakest link. Knowing about the vision would only amplify their concern. Still, she had to wonder, were the steps she took enough to change fate? Had she interrupted the line that had been drawn to what led her to being captured? Since the visions stopped, she hoped she had shifted the outcome. Although, it could mean this end had been inevitable.

Needless to say, she hadn't slept much.

In Ryker's residence, she stood at the kitchen counter, stirred the honey into her tea in slow spins. As her spoon clinked against the mug, a warm body pressed against hers. "I think it's safe to say your tea is stirred." Ryker's voice sounded well-amused.

Sabi laughed, leaned back against him in hopes he wouldn't recognize her unease. "Have I been stirring for a while now?"

Ryker spun her around, pinned her between him and the counter. "I've been watching you for five minutes." The corner of his mouth arched up, yet she saw the trepidation resting in his eyes. He brushed his thumb across her forehead. "What's going on in here?"

She attempted to move away from him, but he locked his arms on either side of her and gripped the counter, rendering her helpless. Unable to do anything else, she answered him, "There's nothing going on."

He lifted an eyebrow. "So, it's a usual practice for you to stir your tea until its cold?"

"Of course not."

"Indulge me then. What's going on?"

She raced to come up with lies to feed to him. Ways of getting herself out of his stare and back into casual conversation. But her mind blanked. It'd been his eyes, the honesty, the respect shown there. How could she lie to him? She couldn't, but that didn't mean she didn't have a few things up her sleeve. "I guess I just feel bad I couldn't get anything more to lead us to Dario. Days have passed now, and yet, we have nothing." She hoped that did the trick.

Ryker frowned. "You're not to blame because there had been nothing to offer you any clues. You did your best, Sabi."

"I know," she whispered.

"Then..." Ryker's gaze filled with concern, but he looked right through her as if he searched for the truth. "Why are you so troubled?"

Sabi shrugged. She needed to do better. Clearly, he believed she hid something and she didn't want him to know. So, she pulled out the only card she could play. "Well, you know this has been hard for me."

He inclined his head.

"Lately, I guess it seems if I'm letting everyone down because I can't get hold of my visions and not get emotionally involved with them."

Ryker's expression became unhappy. "No one faults you for that, and you did get information from the last vision, so you *are* getting stronger."

"Well *I* fault myself." Honest answer. She'd experienced this way the entire time and had to give Ryker something to settle him. Opening up about it had been her only recourse. "I guess with seeing the witch in the vision, it just hit home. Not saying, I don't feel bad when I see visions of the humans, because you know how much it affects me. But seeing the witch, part of my sisterhood, and being unable to help her just rattles me, I suppose."

"You can't carry all this responsibility. It'll do you no good. We're all in this together and will see it to the end. You can't control what others do. You're not the one doing this and shouldn't bear the weight."

Sabi smiled, not only did his words ease the heaviness off her shoulders, but her plan had worked. He believed her. "I know that. You've told me the same thing a thousand times, but it doesn't change the fact sometimes it's just....hard."

"We will set this right, and when we do, you'll see in the end something you offered made that happen. You just can't see it yet, and that's how you will find peace in all this. To know you're being a part of this, being here now, is what saved lives."

Sounded good and all, but she wasn't sure she believed that. She had been glad her answers settled his questions. More than ready to end the conversation, she pulled out another trick to divert his attention. "You know, other things have been on mind too." She wiggled against him and rubbed herself against his groin.

Ryker groaned a low rumble. "That's where your mind has been, has it?"

"Mmm hmm," Sabi purred to entice him. His curious blue beauties darkened as the pupils dilated. The furrow of his brow that always appeared when he became aroused, formed, and his gaze shifted to only one focus—her.

Maybe it hadn't originally been on her mind, but with him staring at her like that, it wasn't hard for naughty things to fill her thoughts. They increased as he leaned in further and placed his nose at the base of her neck.

Ryker inhaled deep, forcing a quiver from Sabi. "You smell like my own little bakery." He ran his nose ever so slowly up her neck. "I can never place it, pinpoint exactly what you smell like, only that your scent is delicious and makes me want to devour every part of you."

She closed her eyes and reveled in his touch as he continued his journey up her neck. A sigh escaped her mouth as his tongue flicked out along his travels. With his arms still bracketed around



her, her movements constricted as he made his way to her ear where he licked the lobe. “Ryker, please, stop teasing.”

He chuckled and his breath against her skin made her knees go weak. “Why would I do that? I enjoy seeing you brought to a level you cannot control. To see you writhing and begging for my touches. Would you deny me what I enjoy?”

She wanted to say *hell yes*, but knew better. The more she battled against him, the longer it would take. That much she had learned with Ryker so far. Teasing had been his indulgence and turned him on. Sex to him had never been about quick satisfaction or a race to get to the climax. No, he fed off the foreplay. And damn him, he excelled at it. Instead of feeding into it, she gave him a steady look. “No.”

“Good answer.” He rewarded her with a sexy smile, then brought his hand up to the spot where he kissed on her neck and trailed it down until he reached the first button of her blouse. He danced his finger over the swell of each breast and her thighs squeezed together tight in response. “You’re very beautiful, Sabi.”

She gasped and leaned her head back when he dipped his finger lower to run over her nipple on the outside of her bra. Apparently, she encouraged him by her reaction, since he lowered his mouth to hers.

First, a soft kiss so delicate as if she would break, then he pressed deeper and she eagerly opened her mouth as his joined hers. The man had the tongue of a god. Every swipe of it purposeful, done in a way to make her melt, and she did.

His mouth worked in unison with hers. He reached up and unbuttoned her shirt, letting it fall away, then removed her bra until she stood bare before him. The cool air against her scorching skin came as a much-needed comfort. Her hair tickled her back as it lay against her skin and her nerve buds awakened. He cupped her breasts in his hands, squeezed them together and ran his fingers over her nipples. Sabi nearly up and lost control, too sensitive, so aroused.

Ryker backed away from her mouth and made his way toward her breasts. There, he sucked, twirled, bit even, and Sabi’s knees shook. He could unravel her. No one had ever had such an impact with simple touches. Ryker could though, his confidence, swagger—a man capable of making her go all gooey.

He released her nipple from his mouth and delivered soft kisses along her torso. Sweet, gentle, and so Ryker to never miss any part of her skin. Unhurried—simply enjoying. He worked his way down, unclipped the hook on her skirt, and let it fall to the ground. Then, he made quick work of her panties, never once stopping with his sweet kisses.

Bending down, he grasped onto Sabi’s bottom and gave it a firm squeeze before he lifted her up onto the kitchen counter. The mug of tea behind her was knocked out of the way and thankfully fell into the sink. After hoisting her onto the cold marble counter, he knelt down between her thighs and kissed each one as he did.

All she could do was bite her lip in anticipation and watch, as he got closer to the desired area. She held her breath, as he made his way gingerly, in the exact way he always did. Cruel. But the result of her current reaction had been exactly what she figured he wanted. Her breath couldn’t be

held any longer and she panted, moaned between breaths and her whole body tightened, expectant. She gripped the edge of the counter and held on for dear life.

Ryker finally left the little kisses he placed upon her thighs, glanced up at her, the burn in his gaze unmistakable. Clearly, he enjoyed himself immensely. He ran his hand up her thigh, along her stomach, to the valley in her breasts, and kept going until he stopped at her lips. He skimmed his finger over her lips until she parted them. There, he dipped the digit past her lips where she wrapped her tongue around as he pushed it deep into her mouth, then brought it slowly back out.

With it dampened, he lowered it back down her body. "Is this where you want me to touch you?" His voice came out husky as he placed the wet finger on her sensitive nub.

Sabi shivered all over, even gave a desperate squeal. "Yes, heavens yes, right there." As much as Ryker teased, he also loved confirmation. If she didn't say what she wanted, he'd do something else. And this had been certainly something she wanted.

With slow circles, he worked her sensitive skin so flashes of pleasure built heat in her body. At that point, remaining attentive to anything would be impossible, and her head fell back to bang against the cabinets above her and she rested it there for much-needed support.

After only mere minutes of attention with his finger, the sensation changed to something else, something moist. She snapped her head forward to find his mouth against her heated flesh. Her world spun upside down. Quick sparks of ecstasy rippled through her body.

Her only reprieve was to moan, squirm, and search for some type of output to release the effects his intentions had on her body. But as Ryker did every time, he didn't give her completion. He never did. His view—to draw out the climax, bring it to its peak and leave it hanging. Then, watch it explode. Sabi hadn't quite decided if she agreed with his theory, since multiple orgasms sounded all too good to her, but she didn't doubt there had been some brilliance to his motives. Whenever he made her come, she went cross-eyed.

A few swirls later, he backed away, which displeased her. She needed more than what he had given her. Before he could get up from his knees, she latched onto his shoulders with her thighs and held him there. "More."

His sexy eyebrow arched up. "More, you say?"

"Yes." Sabi panted. "I need more."

Ryker grinned, a smile full of intent. "Will this do?" He pushed his finger deep into her center and she sighed.

Maybe being so aroused, the sensation completely undid her, but his finger nearly sent her spiraling out of control. Her lips parted as a soft whisper expelled from her mouth, "Yes."

"What about this?" He withdrew the finger to push it back in with slow precision making her tremble around him.

"Yes."

He withdrew again, only to add another finger. "Will this suffice?" Both fingers worked in her body and her hips arched, begging him to continue.

Just as she expected, the second she reached her climax, he withdrew his finger and stood. Sabi blew out a frustrated breath as her gaze connected with his. She may have been aggravated but the reaction only lasted for a moment. His gaze declared a sex-crazed man stood before her, and he

wouldn't leave her hanging. Oh, no, he planned to take pleasure for himself too, and she wanted to give it to him.

Sabi reached forward, unclipped his kilt, then Ryker pushed down his shorts. Once free and out in all his manly glory, she wrapped her hand around his thick erection, and gave one slow tug. Ryker thrust his hips forward as he groaned.

She pushed against his chest for him to back up, and gave him a seductive smile. His jaw worked, bunching the muscles there and she rejoiced at the sight because she knew he liked to tease her to insanity, but she could do the same to him in return.

Sliding off the counter, she rested on her knees, and gave his erection a couple strokes. "Is this what *you* want?" she teased, playing his words back on him.

"No." His voice sounded rough and wavered.

Her mouth parted as she leaned forward, then as lightly as she could, and ran her tongue along the tip. He groaned, but his gaze never left hers. "This then, will *this* make you happy?"

"Yes," he said through gritted teeth.

"Hmm..." she continued to swirl her tongue around him. "Seems as though you like this. And what about this..." She brought her mouth down and welcomed him into her throat.

Ryker's body trembled as she moved painfully slow. Two could play at the teasing game. Her gaze stayed with his as she worked his body. The longer she continued, the more she saw his control fail him.

A happy bubble rose up in her soul, and she suspected it wouldn't be long before she got what she wanted.

Only two more strokes of her mouth, and her assumptions were confirmed. As she withdrew him from her mouth, he stepped away, gazed at her with a ravenous stare and pulled her up. He spun her around then pushed her toward the kitchen table. Her thighs met the edge of the table, and he placed his hand on her back, putting a little weight against her so she lowered against the table. The wood came cold against her breasts and cheek, but came as a relief against the heat of her skin. Behind her Ryker nudged her legs open until she had been wide for him. He grasped onto her hips, and without a moment to lose, entered her.

Sabi moaned as her body finally received what it longed for, and Ryker equaled her moan with one of his own. Slow, and with sensual, fluid movements, he delighted her body. Over and over again until she could only close her eyes as the pressure built within.

But as always, Ryker drew the sensations out, and never came at her with hard movements to send her over the edge. No, he moved with long, endearing thrusts, allowing her to enjoy every inch of him, and what splendid inches they were.

He ran his hand over her back, trailing along her skin as if he marveled in her body, and she felt treasured. Whenever Ryker touched her, he always made it seem like no one in the world existed but her. Beautiful and even if he tried, he couldn't stop touching her.

However, she had ways to get him moving a little faster. As he withdrew, she pushed back against him. Ryker's chuckle washed over her like a warm bath. "Greedy are you?"

"Yes," Sabi groaned.

Ryker froze, no longer thrusting, and lowered his hands from her back to rest at his side. "Enjoy yourself then, babe."

Oh, how she did.

Without him in control any longer, she slammed her bottom back against his thighs as he braced himself. His groans were loud and it only took a few of her thought-out thrusts before Ryker lost his ability to remain still.

He moved his hand up to her hip, while the other pressed down between her shoulder blades, pinning her. With the strength she knew him capable of, he delivered rounds of wicked thrusts.

All that remained was a screaming Sabi, a groaning Ryker, and two heated bodies in the throes of pure satisfaction. Muscles tightened. Minds were lost and roars of completion were found.

Sometime later, Sabi's hot cheek had been still pressed against the table, her breath all but lost to her as Ryker leaned down over her body as she attempted to recover from the lingering effects of the intense climax. "I know you're keeping something from me. Your distraction worked, but I have not forgotten." His warm breath came heavy next to her ear, as his tone had been serious. "Be forewarned, if this has something to do with you, it'd be in your best interest not to keep it from me long."

*I'm in danger...and I'm scared.*

## Chapter Fifteen

The next night, Ryker kept Sabi's hand in his as they entered Mistress Thalia's home. It might have surprised him that it hadn't been Ellery who contacted them regarding Dario, but he was too eager to get the show on the road, and more than pleased when news came from the Council that Thalia had made a discovery on their current predicament. From what he'd learned, word of the tainted blood had spread between the Mistresses and news of it being sold had erupted in the Mid-West territory.

Returning to Kansas brought wonderful memories to Ryker. His time working for Thalia as a shield had been a cherished time for him. He hadn't left his duty there because of unhappiness, more so, because he got bored and craved the adventure.

His decision to return to the Otherworld hadn't been one he regretted. So far, his time there had given him the excitement he sought, and also gave him Sabi. His life had changed in dramatic ways over the past months, but they were all changes he welcomed. Coming back into the Mid-West territory only confirmed he'd made the right choice.

He stepped into Thalia's sitting room, an impressive space in the posh mansion, and found his former boss with her back to him, staring out the window. She glanced over her shoulder and her smile welcomed him. A smile he'd seen a thousand times on her beautiful face, and one, which used to drive him mad with arousal. Now, it did nothing for his libido, but he found himself happy to see it nonetheless. Thalia had always been a kind and fair Mistress.

"Good evening, Thalia." Ryker returned the warm smile.

Her gaze focused on his hand in Sabi's then glanced back to him with a knowing smile. "I would say it's a fine evening, indeed." Her voice, thick with a French accent, sounded amused and slightly shocked. "Do tell me, Ryker, have you found love?"

He should have expected the question from her. Thalia had never been one to hold back, nor did she hide the fact that she enjoyed making him uncomfortable. She knew more than anyone love had never been an interest to him. But he hadn't resolved his attachment, or talked to Sabi yet. And, he had no intention of divulging his feelings in front of not only Thalia, but Kyden and Nexi too.

Before he had to summon up a response, Nexi intervened. "Thalia, it's nice to see you again."

"Pleasure as always." Thalia gave a soft nod, before her gaze flicked back to Ryker and her gaze indicated she enjoyed how he'd sideswiped the issue.

Kyden, apparently done with the formalities, sat down on the chair. "Tell us what you've discovered?"

"Ah, yes..." Thalia took a seat on her chaise. "This whole altering blood business."

Nexi sat on Kyden's lap, Ryker followed by plopping down on the couch, with Sabi tucked in next to him as he glanced toward Thalia, wanting her to get on with what she knew. "Yes, that'd be what interests us."

"I'm sure other things interest you, too." Thalia winked, and gestured toward Sabi.

Sabi tensed in his arms, and he took her reaction to mean she experienced discomfort with Thalia's flirty nature. Yes, Sabi knew he hadn't only been her shield once, but also her lover. He'd been forthright about his past. Clearly though, she didn't like the reminder. In hopes of relaxing her, he gave her hand a little squeeze.

She glanced at him with narrowed eyes, full of heat, but at his soft grin, she sighed and the tension in her face eased. He understood her reaction, but she had no need to be jealous. Things between Thalia and him ceased long ago and friendship had been the only thing between them now.

"Thalia," Kyden said, curtly. "Again, I ask, what have you learned?"

"All right, good grief, no one is fun around here." She sounded quite irritated, but Ryker expected as much. Thalia, a young girl in an old vampire body filled with so much heart and spirit, which had been what drew Ryker to her initially. Thalia made times fun. She straightened her skirt, eyeing Kyden with annoyance. "All business tonight?"

"Yes, strictly business," Ryker retorted in hopes she'd let this issue go and move along.

Thalia grinned, but obliged him. "I'll keep it to the point so we don't get lost in the non-important."

"Thank goodness," Sabi exclaimed.

Thalia pulled her legs up under her on the chaise and draped her crimson silk skirt over so it flowed onto the ground. "Earlier this evening I was contacted by one of my family, who said some new vampire blood was about to circulate through the mid-west. Blood much like what you told Ellery about." She looked directly at Kyden and Nexi. "When my vampire learned of this, he thought it right to come and tell me so I knew what had been going on."

"Kind of him to offer and not just take the blood himself," Ryker stated.

"He is loyal and has been rewarded for his honesty."

Ryker got the meaning quick—he'd been bumped up the ladder in vampire society. Maybe given a higher rank, a city for himself to watch over, anything which would declare he held importance. Money to vampires had been an unnecessary want, they all had plenty of it, centuries behind them gave that wealth. "How much did he know of who offered this service?"

Thalia's eyes twinkled with knowledge and she grinned. "He knew everything."

"Which means?" Nexi quipped.

"Yes, what does that mean?" Sabi added.

"It means he knows of the whereabouts of the vampires. Before he brought this information to me, he played along as if he planned to obtain this blood, and fronted the money to prove he wanted to be involved. Which I might add, didn't come cheap." She twirled her finger in her hair. "An hour before his appointment to have the blood transfer, he came to me, and told me what had been going on."

"Well..." Sabi's voice came out full of impatience, "what did he tell you?"

Thalia dropped the strand of hair she fiddled with, grinned, and inclined her head toward the door. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Thalia grinned, and Ryker followed her gaze to find a vampire entering the room. He could understand her reaction. He doubted the vamp had trouble keeping his bed warm, and suspected Thalia had found herself a new toy to play with.

“This is Malik,” Thalia introduced.

Malik bowed his head in a formal way, before rising back up to offer a kind smile. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Sabi’s body tensed. Ryker glanced toward her to see her staring at Malik, inquisitively. He nudged her thigh to gain her attention. “Everything all right?”

Her stare never left Malik, but finally voiced her thoughts. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Malik shrugged. “It’s possible we have met before.”

“How do you know him?” Ryker asked, unable to ignore her reaction. Whenever Sabi made a comment like that, he knew to take it seriously. Her visions gave her insight and Ryker would never pass it over when she held curiosity about something or someone.

“I know him from somewhere, I just don’t know from where.”

All eyes, including Ryker’s landed on Malik for an explanation. He knew for a fact he’d never met this vampire before, and he’d worked for Thalia for many years. This meant the vampire had no standing or power within the vampire society, and he wanted an explanation.

Malik smiled with no hesitation, nor he did appear guilty. “The world is a big place, I’ve come to the Otherworld before, I’m sure that is where you recognize me from.”

“Oh, okay.” Sabi laughed, apparently feeling foolish and wanted to move along. “I’m sure that’s it.”

“It’s important you ask these questions,” Ryker told her, not wanting her to feel shameful for her reaction. “With your visions, it’s necessary. Understand?”

Sabi nodded, cheeks flushed.

“You have no reason not to trust him,” Thalia interjected. “He’s been loyal since he joined my territory a few months back.”

Sabi’s blush deepened as her gaze landed on Malik. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound as if—”

Malik raised his hand to cut her off. “Not to worry, a simple question, and I’ve taken no offence to it.”

It pleased Ryker she didn’t have to continue her apology, and after the current assignment was done, he would explain she had the right to ask such questions. Her abilities gave her insight into things no one else knew. If she had questions, hesitations, she should be able to voice that without shame.

“Can we please get back to the matter at hand?” Kyden sighed deep.

“We can,” Malik replied. “And I’ll tell you what I know on the way over to the location. It’s a bit of a drive, so I can prepare you on the way then you can deal with this vampire accordingly.” Malik bowed at Thalia before he spun on his heel to head toward the front door.

“So, it’s that time is it?” Sabi whispered, staring at him nervously.

“It’s that time.” Ryker cupped her cheek and leaned forward, wanting to put out a suggestion he hadn’t made yet, but one he thought important. “You don’t have to come. You can stay here with Thalia, if you’re....”

“No, it’s fine,” Sabi snapped, backing away and giving him a stern stare. “I’ll be fine.”

Ryker saw the lie written on her face, but understood her desire to be involved, and it pleased him. She needed to belong in her new role, feel useful, and he hadn’t wanted to shield her. However,

he didn't want her afraid either. For him though, he had been much more determined. Nothing would happen to Sabi, not on his watch.

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Sabi sat restless on the drive through Wichita. What were they about to face? A whole crapload of crazed vampires, she suspected. The only consolation to her had been that she had three of the strongest supes who existed in the Otherworld with her. What would be the worst thing to happen? A scratch or two, which Nexi could heal immediately, and that knowledge eased some of her tension, but still, nerves ping-ponged in her body.

Her vision remained heavy on her mind. Had she altered things enough to have a future do-over. She sure hoped so. But what if she hadn't? That was where her mind stayed and she was sick with worry. As her thoughts ran wild, Ryker took her chin and drew her gaze to him. "Mind busy, huh?"

Sabi forced a smile. "You could say that."

He returned the grin, his kind and gentle eyes offering her strength. Not that it helped her any—strength had been impossible to find. He focused back on Malik who drove, clearly needing more questions answered than had already been asked. "Do you know how many are there?"

"From the last count there were five at the location," Malik answered as he flicked on the turn signal and made a right down a quiet, suburban street. "And before you ask, no Dario had not been with them. I only met with him at the first meeting to discuss the blood."

Kyden shifted in his seat in front to face him better, and Sabi suspected it had been a move to gauge Malik's reaction. "Have all the vampires there been given this blood?"

Malik nodded. "Each of them had, yes. Call them the marketing tool."

"What do you mean by that?" Nexi snorted, sitting beside Sabi.

"When I had my first appointment there, these five showed off their new abilities." Malik shot a quick glance at Kyden. "And I won't deny I wasn't intrigued."

Sabi couldn't even imagine what he would find so interesting. It all sounded insane to her. "What did you find so appealing?"

"Their strengths have all been amplified—as in, the ability for greater speed."

They had all seen this when the vampire killed the humans at the lab. His speed had been unmatched. So, hearing this didn't surprise her. "And the others?"

"Various things, a longer time without the need to feed, and when they first wake they do not experience bloodlust."

"You cannot be serious!" Sabi exclaimed.

"I'm quite serious," Malik replied. "Like I said, the idea appealed to me."

"Tell us then, why didn't you take it?" Ryker asked the question Sabi had been wondering as well.

Malik pondered before he spoke. "I won't deny I nearly caved. The draw to have such freedom had been something I fought against. But in the end, I had a change of heart."

Silence filled the car, and Sabi waited a couple of breaths before she couldn't stand it any longer. "Because..."



“Because, I saw an opening to make my life something more. If I brought this news to Thalia, she would reward me. I’m tired of living in the shadows of everyone else. So, I made the choice to go to her.”

“A good choice,” Nexi agreed.

Apparently, everyone else agreed too, since no one said a word. Kyden, however, finally broke the silence. “What else can you tell us that could assist us?”

Malik took a hard right, which led them into the business district. “They’ve rented out a commercial warehouse. The design is simple—one way in and one way out. The front door opens to a main hallway, which will bring you into four separate offices. If the plan is going like they suggested it would, I’d suspect each of those rooms will have a vampire in it, along with another who is doing the procedure.”

“Four rooms,” Kyden groaned.

Ryker’s protest equaled his.

Sabi couldn’t quite grasp the problem. As much as she wanted to stay quiet because she didn’t want to appear amateurish, her curiosity made it impossible not to ask. “Why are four rooms a problem?”

“There are only three of us,” Ryker offered.

Awareness simmered through her mind. Her defensive magic wasn’t strong enough, and her fighting skills were useless. Sure, she could wrap a vine or two around someone, but the vampires proved to be beyond powerful. Anyone could get to her before she had time to kill them off. And the thought disturbed her since she’d never killed before. Yes, she’d provided protection to Zia or Nexi so they could work their defensive magic to end life, but she’d never actually taken a life before. Maybe some training was in order.

Weakness did sting, but her self-pity held no importance there. Bigger things mattered right then.

Just as Sabi settled the remaining inadequacy coursing through her, Nexi said, “As much as I *hate* doing it, I’ll use my magic here.”

Kyden glanced over his shoulder toward her. “You sure?”

“Don’t have much of a choice, do I? We’re out numbered, and by what we faced before, we can’t take the chance to wait. This way, it’ll be over before it even starts.”

Sabi couldn’t disagree with her logic, and had been thrilled Nexi came to this resolve. Her magic held so much power that in two-point-two seconds the vampires would be dust in the wind.

“Do you know where Dario is located?” Kyden asked, clearly settled on Nexi’s resolution and not finding it necessary to discuss it further.

“No, but I’d suspect one of the vampires at the warehouse will know this information. They’re Dario’s workers. If anyone knows his whereabouts, they will.”

Sabi glanced out the window of the car. Being so late at night, approaching midnight, the streets were dead. But the longer she examined, the more an uneasy sensation crept up into the pit of her stomach. One she could blame on the journey ahead, but the lump in her throat made her believe there was more to it.

The car slowed which brought her gaze back toward the front window to see Malik had turned into a warehouse, and the sense of unease within her increased. She’d never been brave. Bold, no

she had never been that. And nothing in her whatsoever wanted to walk through those doors to face whatever lay behind them.

Malik stopped the car. "This is as far as I will take you."

"You're not coming in there with us?" Sabi accused.

Malik shook his head, slow and stern. "Thalia said for me not to. This isn't our problem, it's yours."

"But it's in your territory," Nexi retorted, angrily. "And speaking of that, why aren't Thalia's hoards of vampires here to help?"

Kyden open his door then glanced to Nexi with eloquent eyes. "Like Malik said, this isn't their problem."

"Thalia would only become involved if this impacted vampires, which at present, it hasn't," Ryker added. "Now, this is on us." He took in a long, deep breath as his gaze grew in strength. "Ready?"

"No," Nexi snapped.

"No," Sabi agreed.

"So, we are ready then." Ryker grinned and ignoring their hesitation, opened the car door and got out.

Sabi hummed and hawed, but eventually saw she had no choice in the matter, and realized it had been pointless to prolong the inevitable. She slid across the seat to join Ryker outside, and glanced back to Malik as she shut the door. For a brief moment, she swore a smile hinted at the corners of his mouth, but she had to be seeing things. For good measure, she opened the door again and leaned in. "Will you wait here for us?"

He nodded with no sign of the smile she thought she'd seen. "I will, and be safe in there."

Why did his words seem like a lie? The strangest sensation of dishonesty washed through her. Yes, he said nice things, but the words sounded empty. Her gaze lingered on him for a moment. She tried so hard to remember where she had seen him. Had she meet him in the Otherworld? So many supes lived there, and even more passed through visiting the council, it had been possible she knew him from there. Yet, something in her heart of hearts said that hadn't been the case.

One thing she couldn't ignore though, Thalia trusted him, and that wasn't a given right, but had to be earned. Either Malik had been a damn good liar or Sabi was reading into something that wasn't there. Resolved she had no way to answer, she let the issue go, and shut the door. As she spun around, Ryker grabbed onto her hand and jerked her into his arms.

*Safe.*

"Don't be reckless." His voice sent a wave of protection over her, creating warmth in her heart. "Hide if you're in danger and I cannot get to you."

When he leaned away from her, Sabi saw his expression shift to the warrior that sometimes lay dormant in Ryker. All business. No bullshit. It built confidence in her. Why did she have these worries of concern? No one would touch her there—not if Ryker had anything to say about it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Ryker had his sword drawn as he crept his way into the warehouse. Malik had been accurate in his description of the building. The front door opened to a long hallway with four doors spaced out evenly, and mauve textured wallpaper covered the walls. He had his arm wrapped behind him to hold Sabi close to his back. Kyden and Nexi stayed in tight, ready for the battle ahead.

The further Ryker entered the hallway, the more his instincts flared to life and told him something seemed off here. Too quiet. A vampire's hearing was impeccable. They would have noticed their arrival the second they entered the building. He glanced over his shoulder, and the inquisitive expression on Kyden's face said his thoughts ran in line with Ryker's. "Do you hear anything?"

Kyden cocked his head to side, listened for a moment then said, "No, nothing." He scanned the area with a troubled gaze. "This is all wrong."

"Maybe they're busy," Nexi offered. "You know, with the procedures."

"I doubt they'd be *that* busy." A creak of a door caught Ryker's attention. He glanced forward again just as the door at the end of the hall swung open. He steeled himself and kept his sword out in preparation. Yet, nothing came through the door. "A hint?" he murmured more to himself, yet Kyden answered him anyway.

"Indeed."

Ryker continued on. He'd never been worried or afraid in the face of battle. Now though, he wanted to tell Sabi to run out of the building and return to the car with Malik to find safety. But he hadn't been convinced she'd be safe out there either. What if others waited outside and had gotten to Malik?

Until he knew more of what was going on, he wouldn't act. However, with each step he took, the more he had to wonder if they had been set up. If Malik had any involvement in leading them there and putting Sabi in harm's way, the vampire would have Ryker's sword shoved down his throat by morning.

He kept her tucked in behind him as he inched his way forward, trying to see inside the room to see what awaited them. Yet, he only found darkness. Concern turned to outright alarm. The closer he got to the door, the further he wanted Sabi away from it.

She didn't have the strength like Nexi. Maybe the two had a similar personality, light-hearted and fun, but Nexi excelled in her magic. Sabi did not. Not that Ryker would ever fault her for it. Defensive magic had not been what the Elements gifted to her, and were the exact reasons why he worried now. If he got distracted by the fight and left her alone, would she be protected? The unknown put him on edge.

Before he stepped through the door, he glanced over his shoulder toward her. "Find somewhere to hide, keep your hand planted to the ground and if you see anyone coming toward you, don't hesitate to use your magic to disable them. Do whatever you have to in order to keep them there until I have the time to handle it myself."

Sabi nodded. Her eyes wide and fear burned in their depths. "Okay." Her voice came out as a shaky whisper.

His gaze moved over her shoulder to see Kyden and Nexi. Both focused, and each gave him a strong nod of support. They were ready.

So was he.

Ryker drew in a deep breath before he raised his leg and kicked the door. He scanned the area, searching out a target, yet found nothing. Empty. This couldn't be right. The hairs on his neck stood up and a cold shiver rushed through him, telling him they were not alone. He never doubted his instinct, and right now, he knew the attack would come.

Mere seconds passed before his thoughts were confirmed. Vampires stepped out of the shadows and into the light. Malik had fed them lies. More than twenty vampires approached and a wave of terror washed over him. Not fear for himself, but for Sabi. The world slowed as he glanced back at her. Never had he seen her so afraid. The color drained from her face, the pupils in her eyes had fully dilated and her body trembled.

As he looked back to the vampires approaching him, time seemed to slow. Every step they took he knew had to be in warp speed, yet it flowed around him like nothing at all.

He blinked, then as if an elastic band time snapped back, sense struck him. Sabi hadn't been trained well enough to handle a battle such as this. Her defensive magic could keep her safe from a few supernaturals attempting to harm her. But a group such as this—with the enhanced abilities they had—she didn't stand a chance at gaining the upper hand, and she would be in danger. "Get out of here," he roared. Sabi's mouth parted to clearly object, but he wouldn't have it. He would need to protect Nexi, give her the chance to conjure her magic. If she fought, she couldn't do so. He needed for this to end for everyone involved.

If the vampires held the abilities he suspected they did, Nexi needed to act without haste. To allow her to do this, both he and Kyden had to provide a shield for her, which would mean he couldn't protect Sabi.

"Now." His voice came out unyielding just as he intended. "Run and hide."

He heard the vampires closing in, and Sabi either saw or became too afraid to do anything else. As a breeze came by, he heard Kyden yell something, probably to alert him to the closeness of the attack. As he focused back to the vampire, he saw Sabi run from the room.

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Hard and fast, Sabi ran from the warehouse with no idea where to go. She needed to get away, and as quickly as possible. Ryker's frightened voice made her act without hesitation. He'd never sounded so concerned or talked to her in such a curt way before and she knew it centered on his worry for her.

His alarm made her respond to his demands with no questions asked. She cleared the doorway into the hallway and pushed on. The front door had been only a few feet away, but she didn't want to go out there.

Who would be out there? More vampires. No, she didn't want her vision to come true and had no intention to run into the arms of vampires out there who might take her away. She just needed to hide until the others dealt with the vampires. She had no doubt they'd come out fine, but she suspected there'd be injuries. If she had been there, she'd be more of a liability than anything else.

At the first door on her left, she opened it, but the room was bare. Nothing to hide behind, no closet to run into, nothing to keep her safe. Pressing on, she left the room and ran toward the other on the other side. Again, the room lay empty. “Fuck.” Hysteria rose and any minute it’d be full blown.

Continuing on, two doors remained. She prayed one of them had a place for her to hide. Her magic could do nothing against these vampires, and exactly why Ryker had sent her away. They were too quick, too strong—she couldn’t act fast enough, or use physical strength to keep them away. Hiding would give her a place to stay safe, give Ryker time to deal with this, and keep her tucked away from any other vampires that lurked there.

As disloyal as it seemed for leaving, she would do more harm than good, and her magic had proved that. She held no doubt Ryker and Kyden would give Nexi the space she needed to conjure her magic to end this. Right now, she needed to stay safe.

Onto the second-to-last door, she flung it open, breathless. The moment she saw into the room, her world stopped, time stood still, and fear raced through her. “No,” she barely managed as she stared at her vision—the bed, the tray with the needle resting atop, and the vampire who studied her with a curious gaze.

*Dario.*

Sabi attempted to run from him, even scream out to Ryker for help, but it all came without merit. Dario lunged forward with a speed Sabi’s couldn’t even register, grabbed onto her—kept her hands apart so her magic couldn’t be conjured—dragged her to the table and pushed her down. With an effortless move, and in a speed Sabi hardly saw, she found herself strapped to table, unable to move.

Her vision replayed exactly as she’d seen it before and even though she knew the answer, she said, “Why are you doing this? Who are you?” Her brain couldn’t think, her thoughts so wrapped up in the moment, nothing made sense and she couldn’t stop the words exiting her mouth.

Like clockwork, the conversation she had seen before drifted around her. Her mind and mouth worked on instinct. She wanted to stop herself, remind herself she’d seen this before and didn’t need these questions answered, yet fear made thoughts impossible.

Suddenly, movement in the corner caught her attention. She glanced toward it to the vampire she’d seen before hidden in the shadows. She strained, fought to see who stood there, wondered if she’d recognize him now.

Then, she saw...Malik.

How could she have not recognized him enough to out him? That had been where she’d seen him before. She’d done this to herself. Her foolishness and lack of attention to detail made this vision come true. It hadn’t been following her instincts, or not following, that would have stopped this. It all revolved around her main insecurity—her inability to focus and obtain what she needed to in a vision. If she hadn’t been so lost in the sight of seeing herself in harms way, she could have paid more attention to Malik, and if she had told Ryker about it...she wouldn’t be there. No one else to blame, but herself.

Drawing her away from Malik, she heard Dario mutter the words, *The Otherworld*. Before, she hadn't heard, but she made him repeat it to understand, needing to draw the moment out in hopes Ryker dealt with the other vampires and came for her. "What about the Otherworld?"

Dario grinned as if he knew she heard him, yet obliged her. "I said, since The Otherworld has gotten involved in these matters, you all have left me little choice with how to proceed from here. I planned to disable you," he gestured toward the door, "in the warehouse and then use one of you for my plans. But I have to admit, I hadn't counted on you walking right in here. I expected a bit of a fight to keep you hostage."

His statement confused her, and he must have seen it on her face since he continued, "If I taint your blood the way ours has been, the Council will have no other choice than to accept this—or they will have to kill one of their own. I highly suspect they will be so inclined to do the latter, which means, they'll allow me to continue on with my venture."

The blood in Sabi's body ran cold and horror crept into every part of her soul. *No, this couldn't be happening*. She tried to get out of the straps holding her, to call on her magic and fight defensively, but she couldn't reach down to touch anything. She had no way of igniting her magic since her Element failed her now and she was helpless.

Just as she had in the vision, her mouth parted and the words escaped her lips before she could stop them. "You can't do this."

Dario strode toward the metal tray, before turning back with the needle in his hand. "Who is going to stop me?" He took a giant step forward, bowed down over her and sank the needle into her neck.

Sabi shrieked in pain, attempted to fight against him, get away to stop it from happening, but her attempt was useless. Her stomach rolled with sickness.

She tried to move, scream out, conjure her magic, but weakness sank in. Dario yanked the needle from her throat, and Sabi's head fell to the side as she met Malik's smiling face. Darkness clouded her vision, heat rushed through her veins, and pain stole her thoughts.

## Chapter Seventeen

Ryker braced himself and waited the final seconds for the vampires to close in on him. Their eyes were dark, filled with cruelty he'd not seen since the first vampire at the lab. The event which started it all, and he suspected it came from the need to protect the tainted blood. He raised his sword across his body, his muscles tightened, readying himself for impact. He would not give the vampire an advantage. In a move he suspected would surprise the vamp, he took a step forward to close the distance and sliced from left to right.

His sword tore through the vampire's neck and separated his head from his body to drop like a heavy weight on the ground. Blood spread on the ground beneath Ryker's feet, but not nearly as much as he expected. Clearly, the vampire hadn't fed in quite some time which gave truth to what they learned of these vampires. They now lived outside the normal rules of vampirism.

A breeze swept over him and he saw the black panther lunge toward one of the vampires. Willow had arrived and he welcomed her.

Focused on his next target, two more vampires closed in on him. Ryker glanced sideways to see Nexi and Kyden in a fight of their own, surrounded by vampires, all rich with power and strength. Before Ryker had the chance to think of a good strategy, a hard punch leveled him in the jaw. His feet swept out from underneath him as he flew back to land on his back. He opened his mouth once, ascertained it hadn't been broken then he focused on the vampire who dared to strike him.

The vampire sealed his fate. Ryker needed to move, and move quick. The vamp lunged forward, but Ryker rolled away as the vampire tried to disable him, and he heard the vamp's fist crash against the floor. Ryker jumped to his feet, noticing Kyden next to him. Vampires circled in tight around them. Ryker kept his sword out in front of him and waited, dared another one to come near him.

Seconds passed before one did, the one in fact, who'd just delivered the ache in his jaw. Fangs out, a snarl formed on the young vamp's face as he raced forward. Ryker could have killed him, but wanted revenge.

Instead of using his sword when the vampire closed in on him, Ryker used every reservoir of strength he had and punched out, connecting with fangs. The vampire groaned, fell to the ground, both of the long fangs resting in a pool of blood near him.

The move had been intentional. To a vampire losing his fangs would be equivalent to losing his balls. Ryker had no time to relish the fear that passed over the vampire's face, though, as two more vamps were on him, ready to kill. The fight he didn't mind, his adrenaline burned through his veins in rapid speed, but it'd be foolish not to know if they didn't act soon, these vampires could gain the upper hand. "Nexi, do it."

Ryker heard a scream, followed by a thump. "Kinda busy right now," she groaned, clearly just finished with taking a life.

The vampires had positioned themselves well, each angled out in a direction to guard themselves. Ryker couldn't even tell how many vampires Nexi and Kyden had killed since he stayed focus on everything in front of him. He raised his leg when a vampire lunged toward him, kicked

out so the vampire stumbled, then without pause, dug his sword deep into his gut. Ryker yanked his blade back out and the vampire bowed over, crumbling to his knees. It wouldn't kill him, but the injury would disable him. Ryker raised his sword then realized the situation was about to deteriorate.

Not only did the remaining vampire charge toward him, but a group approached in impressive speeds. This could be a battle to be proud of, one he usually rejoiced in, but not then, he needed it to end. Thoughts of Sabi filled his mind and he hoped she'd found safety.

As the vampires closed in, Ryker held his stance strong, not focusing on any one in particular, waiting for the first vampire to attack. The seconds ticked by, the vampires virtually on him, when a sudden thought struck. He snapped his gaze to Nexi for the briefest of seconds to find she waited for the attack as well, just as Kyden did. Resolved, there had been only one choice. Ryker reached over, grasped onto Nexi's hand and yanked her behind him.

"What..." she squealed as he crushed her against his back.

"Protect her," Ryker yelled, and immediately Nexi squished further against him, which he suspected meant Kyden had moved in front of her and backed up against her.

Then, the attack he waited for, hit. Three vamps reached out to subdue him, and doing the only thing he could do, he swiped his sword out in front of him. Damn, these vamps were fast. Willow continued to pounce forward to disable them, but even the strength of the panther couldn't keep up.

By the sound of air swishing behind, he heard Kyden mirror his movement. The more Ryker fought, the more sweat formed on his body, and he worked his sword with precision—sometimes connecting with flesh, other times not.

His muscles burned with the exertion. He stared into the faces of the vampires around him, and saw just how different they were. Power raged in the depths of their eyes, and they possessed strength he'd never seen before. In mere minutes, he suspected he'd lose his first fight, and with Sabi nearby that couldn't happen.

"Nexi, now..." As he said the words, power rose at his back to send his hair stand on end. Heat rose against skin, making his sweat-lined body dampen more. The wind picked up around the room and a loud roar filled the space.

Ryker smiled as he stared at one particular vampire. "Now, you're fucked." Fire erupted through the room. A blazing wave raged at high speed as it circled and closed in around to cage the vampires.

The vampires froze and Ryker stepped back, pushing Nexi and Kyden with them as the fire drew in closer, and touched every vampire until only dust remained. Willow shifted back into her cat form and began to clean her paws.

Ryker released a long, deep breath, lowered his sword and stepped away from Nexi to glance back at her, then to Kyden. "Malik will need to answer for this." Clearly, they had been led here to be killed, and Malik had been responsible. He would pay for such treachery, with his life, but first something else held much more importance. "Sabi, I need to find her."

Without waiting for Nexi and Kyden, Ryker charged from the room and into the hallway. Most of the doors to the offices were open, and as he passed by, he glanced in to find the room empty. He rushed on and worry clenched his chest, concern he couldn't quite place. "Sabi," he called out to no avail.



He suspected Sabi would have found somewhere to hide. With all the vampires they fought against, he doubted any more remained in the building. They'd all been sent to fight against them, but had Dario missed something important. He hadn't known of Nexi's abilities, because if he had, he would've known the fight was useless. Ryker had to wonder if it even mattered to him to see all those he altered now dead, he'd been paid and it appeared momentary gain had been all that remained important to him.

At the last door on the right—the only closed door—he grasped the handle and slammed it open. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight before him now.

Sabi had been strapped to a bed and a vampire leaned over her. Comprehension couldn't come to his mind. He glanced around to find Malik in the corner of the room, and he wore a mask of surprise. Yes, they had beaten the hoard of vampires, and Malik clearly hadn't expected that outcome.

Ryker's gaze flicked back to Sabi and the vampire leaning over her, who had just drawn away with a needle in his hand—an empty needle. His mind rebounded to allow sense in, and rage formed, burning red hot in his body.

He roared, enraged and even to him, it spoke of a loss of control. Lunging forward, he attempted to kick out at the vampire by Sabi, who he assumed had to be Dario, but he moved away too quick for him to connect. Like that could stop Ryker. He grabbed his sword, and held it steady in front of him. Again, he pounced forward swiped the sword out, only to miss as Dario dodged.

"You are going to have to do better than that, Guardian," Dario sneered.

"Don't worry," Ryker growled in return as he stalked him with a fury he didn't know existed in his soul. "I plan to."

He vaguely heard Kyden say something before a sizzle came to his right, and the scent of burnt vampire filled his nostrils, which meant Nexi had dealt with Malik. Yet, she hadn't intervened, and he knew why. Dario was his to kill. He had no idea if Sabi lay dead or unconscious, but whatever her current condition, Dario would face his sword for it.

Repeatedly, Ryker attacked, but failed.

Dario had been much stronger than the vampires he'd fought not long ago. He appeared to be aged, which gave him further strength, and with the added enhancements from the tainted blood, Ryker couldn't catch him. Dario played with him, his gaze amused, even if cruelty lived in their depths, too. Frustration sank deep. How could he kill him if he couldn't land a hit?

Minutes passed before Ryker saw no end to it. Resolved, he had one choice, and shouted, "Nexi, hold him."

"It's about time," she exclaimed.

Goose bumps rose along Ryker's arms. He'd never used anyone to assist him in battle before, but Dario hadn't been a typical vampire. These extra powers made it impossible to get a hold of him. In the end, Sabi held importance here, not his pride. Yes, he wanted to kill Dario himself, but he needed to care for Sabi. Nexi would give him the advantage he needed.

Dario glanced around frantically, and stopped moving to watch the breeze forming in the room. He hadn't seen Nexi's force, too involved with Ryker, so he hadn't noticed her kill Malik and how she did it. "What is this?"

Ryker never bothered to explain. The wind continued to pick up and circled around Dario. In speeds no normal vampire could match, he shifted around the room, trying to get away from the circle of wind surrounding his body. But as it closed in tighter, his eyes went wide with fear. Fucked couldn't even explain his position.

The mini-tornado squeezed in tight, forcing Dario to remain frozen, unable to move. Ryker witnessed Dario's struggle as he attempted to get free, but he had no hope in hell. With a grin, Ryker raised his sword as he closed the distance between them. "If I had the time, I'd fucking make you bleed slowly, to make your end as painful as possible," he raised the sword to Dario's neck, "but as it turns out, I don't." Using all of his strength, he drew the sword back and swiped.

The loud swish sped through the air before the only sound heard had been the thump of Dario's head as it hit the floor. Blood pooled near Ryker's feet, yet he rejoiced in the sight of Dario's demise.

Ryker blinked, a roar sounded as heat made the air thick, then fire rushed through the room to engulf Dario's remains. Ryker glanced over his shoulder at Nexi, confused as to why she killed an already dead vampire.

She shrugged. "Who knows what powers they have? He could've come back to life or something freaky. This way we know he's dead...for good."

Ryker wouldn't protest her theory. He neither cared, nor worried over anything but one thing. "Sabi." He rushed toward her, tore off the bindings, and grabbed onto her cheeks, drawing her toward him. Her eyes were closed, but he saw her chest rise and fall. "Nexi, heal her." With her ability to restore health, return a body to its original condition, heal injuries, Ryker thanked the God above she'd been here.

Nexi grabbed onto Sabi's arm. Her eyes fluttered a moment then opened to meet Ryker's gaze. He studied Sabi, waited for her to wake.

She never did, only remained still, unconscious.

"Your healing didn't work." His voice sounded desperate even to his own ears.

"How can it *not* work?" Nexi exclaimed. "It's always worked before."

"Maybe she cannot be restored," Kyden offered.

Could Kyden be right? Had the tainted blood altered her in a way that she would never be the same again? Frantic thoughts filled his mind, but suddenly, Sabi moaned and snapped Ryker back to the present. She looked upward, her normally light amber beauties now dark pupils.

"Sabi." Her gaze never faltered from the ceiling, her breathing coming in rapid, deep pants, and sweat formed along her skin. "What's happening to her?"

"I have no idea," Nexi replied with a sad tone.

Ryker couldn't tear his gaze from Sabi. Seeing her, the sound of Nexi's sadness, all told him one thing—Sabi was in serious trouble.

Her panting grew louder, and her chest moved so rapidly Ryker wondered how long she could continue without passing out again. Then, without any warning, she screamed a sound of pure terror, and writhed on the table.

"Help me," Ryker shouted, doing his best to hold her down, but her strength floored him. Hands immediately joined his, bracing her around the bottom half of her, and Ryker glanced up to see Kyden's worried expression.

Sabi continued to thrash about as Ryker held her arms and pinned her, when wind touched his hands. Nexi had restrained her, and he released his hands from her arms to touch her forehead, her skin chilled as she fought against the magic holding her.

Content that Sabi would not hurt herself, he asked Nexi, “What are we to do?” He’d never been without answers before, but right then, he had none. “I’m sorry, but I have no idea how to help her.” Ryker couldn’t get his mind to focus. His thoughts spun, but one thought came clear in his mind and outraged him. Sabi had kept this from him—he held no doubt about it. It was what held her mind, captivated the past nights, they were secrets she hadn’t spoke of, and she faced this vision alone. “Why would she not tell me she had a vision of herself?”

Nexi shook her head, dismayed. “I don’t know.” Her solemn voice said it all—she couldn’t understand it either and her despaired gaze echoed Ryker’s horror that Sabi’s life had been forever changed.

Sabi’s secrets burned in him, making him furious, but knew if she’d kept them from him, her reasons were his fault. Clearly, she didn’t trust him enough to protect her and that landed in his lap. For the first time ever, he acknowledged he’d never given her a reason to think she could. She hadn’t come to him because he’d never told her it had been his place, his responsible, that she mattered more than anything else. “Let’s get her home.” Kyden placed his hand on Ryker’s shoulder, squeezing it tight to force Ryker to return from his busy mind. “Zia will help her.”

Ryker nodded. His heart bled—he needed Sabi. He hadn’t known until then how much. Yet, he never told her. Nights ago, Sabi said humans always realized after it had been too late what they had, never appreciated it sooner, but it hadn’t been only humans who made that mistake, because he’d done the same damn thing.

Treacherous emotions ran through him as he stared at a moment Sabi saw in her future, and faced right then. He couldn’t imagine how afraid she’d been, how alone she must have been. He should have been there for her, for now, for always.

And now, she could be gone...forever.

## Chapter Eighteen

Soft murmurs filled Sabi's ears. She ached, an endless, limitless pain, more than a burn in her body, as though her skin and bones didn't belong to her anymore.

"Sabi," a kind voice whispered.

She recognized the voice, but couldn't place it. If only the pain would stop, if only she could move, open her eyes in an attempt to understand what had happened. How long had she been in pain? What happened to her? Nothing made any sense.

Sabi had no understanding of how much time had passed when the voice came again. She recognized the sweet sound as her pain dissolved, and she put a face to the voice. "Zia," she croaked.

Loud sighs sounded all around her. Drawing in strength, she forced her eyes to open. At first, a haze clouded her vision, but after a blink or two, the scene came clear and she found Zia leaning above her, smiling, her expression concerned. "I am glad to see you awake."

Sabi glanced over Zia's shoulder to see her bedroom, felt the soft sheets of her bedding beneath her fingertips. She tried to think back to when she came into her room to sleep, but it never came to her. Furthermore, she couldn't quite understand why Zia was there.

Before she had a chance to figure it out, strong hands caged her face. Ryker. In a panicked voice, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

In the moments since she'd woken, her pain had completely subsided, but still, something had changed. She squirmed out of Ryker's touch and sat up, a little faint. "What happened?" Her memories were so opaque and her head hurt trying to figure it all.

"You don't remember anything?" Ryker asked, his tone worried, his gaze so alarmed it unnerved her.

Why did he seem so worried? What were his fearful eyes trying to tell her? Finally, unable to figure it out, she admitted, "I have no idea how I got here or why you're looking at me like something serious is going on. Anyone mind filling me in on what I'm obviously missing?"

Ryker touched her cheek in a simple embrace, yet his gaze revealed something she had never seen from him before—such depth and emotion. It should please her, but instead, unease rose up. Something was terribly wrong.

"Do you remember the past few nights?" he asked.

Sabi thought back. She could remember the times spent with Ryker—those were memories she wouldn't soon forget—then the newly risen vampires left to fend for themselves came back into her mind. Yes, they were on an assignment. Right, humans turned without their consent. The vampire, Dario. It all came back to her. Why then did it seem like she missed something of importance? "I remember the assignment, but your expressions say that's not what you want me to remember. What's going on?"

Zia exchanged a look with Ryker before she took a seat on the bed next to Sabi held her hand. "Do you remember the attack on you, sweetie?"

Sabi hadn't expected to hear this from Zia and had no recollection of such a thing. "Someone attacked me..." But just as her words came from her mouth, a memory surfaced. A vision—Dario, a needle, the blood.

Horror rushed through Sabi and a wave of sickness rolled through her stomach. Tears filled her eyes as her whole body shook, panicked. "It's in me, isn't it?"

Ryker appeared disgusted with himself, his jaw clenched, and his gaze raged with shame. "I didn't get to you in time to stop him."

"How is that possible?" Sabi tore her hand away from Zia, glanced at her arms, everything appeared the same. No, this couldn't be happening, and what had it done to her. She snapped her gaze back to Zia for clarification. "What does this mean?"

"I'm not sure," Zia replied. "Do you feel any different?"

"Well..." Sabi considered, wondering how exactly to explain it. "At first, everything hurt, but now I don't feel pain anymore, yet something is different."

"What?" Ryker probed.

She had a hard time placing it, her body seemed the same, her mind hadn't changed, yet, it was as if she didn't even recognize herself anymore. "I don't feel like me."

Confusion filled Ryker's gaze as he brushed his knuckles across her cheek, and gave a sweet smile that Sabi appeared forced. "Can you explain a little bit more?"

His touch brought comfort, but she made herself focus away from it and reach down deep to understand these changes. She took a deep breath, allowed herself to relax, and soon, the haze on her mind lifted completely. The realization of what happened to her hit and heat soared through her body as uncertainty crept up into her soul.

What had Dario done to her? Who would she be now? Her Elements were her roots, the tainted blood swimming in her veins made her different—where would she belong? She needed to get away, to ignore it, and act as if it never happened. The only recourse to save her.

She opened her eyes and Ryker stared at her with such adoration, but how could he love her—she couldn't even love herself anymore. "No, don't touch me." Needing to get away, she shot up from the bed, blinked once, then stood on the other side of the room, far away from where Ryker and Zia waited by the bed. Ryker's eyes were huge. "How did you do that?"

Sabi glanced down to her body. She appeared the same, but the move had been more vampire than witch. *Oh, no!* "What is wrong with me?"

Ryker took a step forward, but Sabi shifted away from him. He never stopped his approach of her and kept walking with purposeful strides, no matter that she tried to stay far from him. "There's nothing wrong with you." He took her hand, and she flinched, but he disregarded it and pulled her back to the bed. "Come, sit. You've just woken up and you need to rest."

How could she rest? Nothing would ever be right again. Doing the other thing she could do, she grasped onto the last thing he said and hoped to gain more clarity. "What do you mean I've just woken? How long have I been out?"

Ryker assisted her back into bed, covered her with the blankets, and he hesitated, almost as if he didn't want to answer her. With a stern stare from her, he sighed. "A week."

“I’ve been asleep for a week?” No, that didn’t register in her mind. Where had all the time gone? What had happened while she’d been out? She didn’t like the idea they had all been trying to deal with her, while she lay unconscious.

“In truth,” Zia injected, cutting off Sabi’s approaching moment of hysteria. “I assisted you to sleep longer than you probably would have. We wanted to learn more about this before you woke.”

“From who?” Sabi squeaked, unsure of anyone who would know what to do and how to fix her. If the Master of Witches needed help, she was clearly screwed.

“Cyan drew blood from you and tested it. I’m sorry we had to keep you asleep, but we wanted to make sure when you awoke, we would know how to deal with you appropriately.”

“Deal with me appropriately,” she repeated.

“We needed to learn what this blood had done to you, what effect it would leave, and what you’d need to survive.”

With one line, the horror of the situation deepened as reality set in. A cold sweat washed across her body, her skin flushed, and her vision blurred. She tried her best to get hold of herself, remain steady with the world around her. “Do I...I don’t have to...” She couldn’t even form the words through her tight throat.

Ryker shook his head. “From what we’ve seen so far, and the way you are acting right now, it doesn’t appear you need blood to survive.” He gave a measured look. “Do you feel thirsty?”

“No,” she snapped. Did she? After a moment, she had been a bit parched, but her thoughts didn’t revolve around blood, she craved water. “I mean to say, I’m thirsty but not for blood.”

“There’s your answer then.” Ryker sighed, showing he hadn’t been thrilled with the thought of Sabi needing blood to survive either.

Even though she got the answer she sought, and it had been settled that she wouldn’t have to do the unthinkable, she still couldn’t get a grip on anything. Insecurity hit hard, and she couldn’t look at Ryker anymore. She’d only come to accept her visions that had once crippled her, and now, she had something more to deal with. And *this* had been far worse than anything she could have imagined. *Who* was she now? *What* was she?

Ryker grabbed her chin, tilted her head up to force her gaze on his, so soft and loving. “You’re the same witch, Sabi.”

Tears formed as what he said could not register in her mind. She would have glanced away, but his firm grip held her still. “How can you say that...”

“Cyan compared your blood to Haven’s,” Zia interrupted, “and your genetic makeup is much the same, which means you’re still an Earth Witch, but there were some differences she noticed.”

The news brought relief. At least, compared to Haven, Sabi’s blood still held qualities of an Earth Witch. She didn’t want to be a vampire. Not that she held any prejudice, but she was a witch, through and through. Loved it. Breathed it. Lived it. She didn’t want to be anything else, and maybe now, she regretted how hard she’d been on herself when her visions had changed. Could this be a punishment because she always cursed what she could do?

Before she even let herself go down that road, she redirected her thoughts since that line of thinking would get her nowhere. She pushed away the negative thoughts and moved along to understand better. “What differences did Cyan find?”

“She couldn’t identify them exactly,” Ryker replied. “But she tested her own blood as well and it appears some of the genetic markers found in vampire blood, have been found in your own.”

Sabi’s head hurt—hadn’t they told her she was still a witch? “But I’m not a vampire?”

“No, you’re not,” Ryker confirmed with a steady gaze, an offering of support and one she didn’t mind at all.

Still though, she couldn’t quite understand what this all meant now. Yet again getting too far ahead of herself wouldn’t help, so she thought it best to state the obvious. “I moved fast like one though, doesn’t that make me one?”

“You hold traits of a vampire, since that blood has entered your body. As Dario suspected, it did give you further strength to your power, and gave you new abilities, but your genetic make-up remains a witch.”

Great news, but something he said made her nervous. “New abilities? Like what kind?”

“We cannot know until you show us, and this you can discover in your own time, sweetie.” Zia patted her thigh and gave a typical motherly smile full of love. “But just know you’ll be all right. It’s going to be different for you and might take some time to adjust to the *new* you. However, Cyan did say it didn’t appear like your DNA had mutated. You’re healthy, just different.”

A big load off. Still, Sabi couldn’t understand what it all meant. What kind of witch could she be now? She needed an explanation, and even though the answer probably wouldn’t make her happy, she couldn’t stop herself from asking. “So, my Element has changed?”

“I believe your Earth Element has been altered, yes.”

A lump formed in her throat, her body tensed, and even though she could have fallen apart, she focused on the questions swirling in her mind. “What is it now then?”

“Don’t think of it as *what*, as more so, it’s just you.” Zia smiled. “Maybe it’s awakened a hidden Element, something unknown.”

“A Dark Element,” Sabi offered, the horror finally upon her, the realization she now didn’t belong in the Sisterhood of Witches. No longer the same—her magic had been driven from an unknown source.

“Nothing in you could be dark.” Zia’s frown made her expression darken. “But I suppose, calling it a Dark Element wouldn’t be wrong. It’s not from the four Elements we know, therefore, cannot be light as we see them. However, I don’t want you to think as if you’re tainted somehow.”

Sabi wondered how she couldn’t feel like that. The Element that had guided her whole life had changed. Before Sabi could even begin to understand this or deny it, Zia continued, “I know you have lots on your mind so I’ll leave you two. Remember Sabi,” she patted her cheek, “you’re lucky to be alive and we will accept you no matter what blood travels in your body now.” She stood then, walked toward the bedroom door, but glanced back. “If you need me, you know where I am.” Ryker nodded, followed her to the door, and closed it behind her. Sabi pondered and let everything sink in. When Ryker turned back to her, gazed at her with such sorrow-filled eyes, it took one second for the inevitable to happen, her head fell into her hands and she wept.

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Ryker didn’t waste a moment—his witch would not cry alone. He darted back toward her, gathered her in his arms and held her tight against him. If only he had words to soothe her. Make it

all right for her, but in truth he had no idea what would happen from there. Only time would show what her new abilities were and how they were going to affect her life.

She sank into his embrace with no strength to her body and he did his best to show her she wouldn't be alone. So many unknowns, however he had discovered one thing from the event, and it had been sitting on his tongue the entire time she slept. The thought of losing her brought clarity and focus to his mind. He knew what was important, and more so, *who*.

He shifted Sabi in his arms. His heart sank as he stared into her eyes, so unsure of herself, and so frightened for what lay ahead. To him, they were right back at the beginning, where she couldn't accept the gifts she'd been given, and fought against finding her place in the world. It didn't make him happy.

But one thing would.

"I cannot face this world without you." The words came effortlessly from his lips, and it eased him to express them finally. It'd been a week of hell, wondering if he would ever have the chance to say these things to her. Now that he could, nothing had ever been so right.

Sabi's breath froze, her eyes stretched wide as she stared at him, even if tears still spilled down her cheeks. Silence came between them. So much silence, in fact, Ryker wondered if she comprehended what he said. "Did you hear what I said to you?"

She nodded. "I did."

Not the reaction he expected. He thought she'd reciprocate, be giddy as he heard women do, yet only silence greeted him. Growing impatient, he couldn't let it go. "And you have nothing to say on the matter?"

Sabi sighed and dropped her gaze from his. The loss of contact tore at his heart, but he allowed her the moment to think. She sighed again before she glanced back up at him with an empty gaze. "What's there to love?" Her voice had been so soft, if he hadn't been listening hard, he wouldn't have heard it, and he wished he hadn't.

Rage coursed through his blood, and he didn't know who to direct it at—Sabi for thinking such a thing, Dario for putting her in this situation, or at himself for not telling her this sooner. "You're talking nonsense now."

"I'm not me anymore." She sniffed. "Who knows what I am? I'm not the same witch, Ryker. I can't offer you what I did before."

*Silly thoughts.* He could understand her insecurity. Hell, her world had been ripped from under her, but he needed her to understand his position. He placed his hand over her heart to prove his point. "You're still you in here."

"Am I?"

The sadness along her expression shook his control, and moisture build in his eyes. If he had gotten to the room sooner, she wouldn't be in this situation, wouldn't be so lost, and for the first time ever, he wished he had the power to heal. Fix all the wrongs in her world. She tried to move away from him, but he tightened his grip on her. He could tell she fought herself, so full of doubt, and if she wanted to move away from him, she could have easily done so with her new abilities. Yet, she stayed and that told him to press on. "Yes, you're different now. It'll do you no good if I



sugarcoat it for you. Dario has forever altered you. You're going to have to accept these new gifts you have, but it doesn't, and will never change the fact that I'm undeniably enamored by you."

"Do you mean that?" Her gaze searched his, stared so deep, he knew she searched for the truth. "It's not because you feel sorry for me?"

"Of course I mean it, and no, it's not out of pity."

"But why are you saying this now? Are you telling me this because I'm so upset and want me to feel better?"

He arched an eyebrow at her, wondering if she heard what just came out of her mouth. "Do you take me for the type who would do such a thing?"

She pondered that a mere second, then chuckled, but it held no amusement. "No."

"I'll admit to you that I hadn't been aware, or to say, understood how I felt for you until this situation arose. But the second I entered that room, saw Dario standing over you, I've never experienced rage so deep in my life. Not only because he hurt you, but because he tried to steal my future."

She smiled sweetly before she exhaled a deep breath, and studied him. Ryker suspected she tried to resolve everything in her mind and he sat quiet while she reconciled her thoughts. Waited for her to come to terms with what happened, the new life she would live, and believe what he said to be the truth. He'd wait for as long as she needed to remove her doubt and accept the new life she faced, and the emotions he had for her.

After a long moment, happiness touched her expression, warming Ryker's heart. "You know I love you too, right?"

Ryker grinned and leaned toward her. "How could you not?"

"Always arrogant—some things never change."

"And some things do." He placed his lips on hers and gave her a kiss, expressing what lay in his heart. How could he have ever questioned his love for her? His life would only be complete with her in it.

Ryker always thought his purpose had been his duty to the Otherworld, to fight and defend it. Now he knew his purpose had always been *her*. Her happiness. Things were not going to be easy for her in the nights—weeks—months ahead, but he'd be there to help her through this transition she faced, and would fight alongside her until her soul, magic, and her trust in him felt as he did now...peaceful.

## **About the Author**

Stacey Kennedy's urban fantasy/paranormal and erotic romance series have hit Amazon Kindle and All Romance Ebooks Bestseller lists. If she isn't plugging away at her next novel, tending to her two little ones, she's got her nose deep in a good book. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband. Be sure to drop her a line at [www.staceykennedy.com](http://www.staceykennedy.com), she loves to chat.