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VOLATILE: THE EMPRESS AND THE EXECUTIONER

JEANIE JOHNSON

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THE EMPRESS AND THE EXECUTIONER

Third Edition

Jeanie Johnson



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NOVELLETTE

The Empress and the Executioner, 3rd Edition Jeanie Johnson

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Caveat

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

The Who Done It and Why

Astarla “Star” Hart—The first female Justice in Western Vampire Nation history.

Commander Cosmas Vadoma—The leader of the Locke Brotherhood before Lukas.

Lady Kanika Vadoma—The powerful half Magick half Vampire wife of Invictus.

The Locke Brotherhood—The physical executors of punishment for *The Society* under the leadership of a commander who is selected by the previous leader and a chief (second-in-charge) who is selected by the current leader.

Lord de Vires—The Ruler of the Western Vampire Nation.

Lukas Montague—The chosen successor of Cosmas Vadoma for the position of Commander of the Locke Brotherhood. He is the only male (besides her father) able to rattle Astarla Hart.

Mateo—A syndicate of the most powerful Healers of the Western Vampire Nation. They are a throwback to much simpler times, living in caves or small stone dwellings. They rarely consorted with any other beings, Vampire or otherwise.

Paramount Invictus Vadoma—The trusted right hand man of Lord de Vires in *The Society*.

The Society—The Elders/Leaders of the Western Vampire Nation who all answer to Lord de Vires.

Training Compound—The hallowed grounds where elite male vampires, including every member of the Locke Brotherhood, are trained. Novice vampires have to enter alone as a test of their courage. After the restructuring, Cosmas Vadoma became the Director. His brothers Basilius Vadom and Galenos Vadoma and his many of his uncles joined him as trainers.

Western Vampire Nation (WVN)—The Vampire Kingdom ruled by Serafeim de Vires. Includes all territories in North and South America, Scandinavia, and some parts of Europe.

PROLOGUE

Swathed in black, the man hunched over the small bundle in his massive arms. Pausing, he looked up at the stone columns of the daunting building before again looking at the silent baby he cradled so gently. Drowning in the wide, chocolate gaze, his eyes filled with tears.

It was as if the baby could feel his heart-wrenching sadness. Lifting a tiny hand, the baby touched tiny fingers against his jaw. Swallowing the lump threatening to choke him, he tried to smile for the child's sake, but it didn't work. Pressing a forefinger to the small, silver amulet around the baby's neck, he swallowed then visibly straightened himself before speaking in a dead language.

"Peace, my child, sleep."

Instead of closing her eyes, the baby watched him for another moment. The man smiled widely at the knowledge that this small being was able to defy him. He bent his head and brushed cold lips against the baby's smooth, sable cheek. Sighing, the baby finally succumbed to his words and drifted off to sleep. Looking up, the man noticed the figures standing a few feet away in the darkness. Moving towards them, he held the babe out to the closest figure before

turning and walking away...disappearing into the blackness that was no match for the darkness of his heart.

150 years later...

Sitting side-by-side, the three women watched the ruler of the Western Vampire Nation pace in front of them, gathering his patience. Well, attempting to do so...and failing miserably. Any other time he knew they would have joked, but one did not make jokes at the expense of Lord Serafeim de Vires; and as wild as they were—they knew this. Finally, he stopped his pacing and pinned them with his black-eyed gaze.

Lord Serafeim de Vires was not simply supreme ruler of the Western Vampire Nation, he was power atop of power. Most beings recognized this...and thusly did everything they could to avoid his wrath. Not these three. Even though he'd been the target of multiple assassination attempts by not just *rogue* vampires, but otherworldly beings wanting to make a name for themselves—and they'd all failed *miserably*—these three females were going to be the death of him.

Most vampires were unable to defy him...and even if they could, they wouldn't have attempted such a foolish thing knowing that the consequences would be most unpleasant. Astarla Hart, Ajali Nasaler, and

Jaylee Sorenson however were not most vampires. They were...spoiled...and they knew it. And that was why the three sisters did as they pleased—not only thumbing their noses at tradition, but outright taunting it. Those three did everything short of mooning it. Scratch that...there *was* that one time... Reminiscing upon their deeds—most of which were legends in the rich history of Western Vampire Nation—gave Lord de Vires what humans called a headache.

The misdeeds of the three were infamous. Vampire scuttlebutt was littered with complaints about them. He'd heard the grumblings of the Ancients...and he'd promptly ignored them. They were put out that he spoiled them. He did spoil them and everyone could just shut the fuck up about it unless they wanted to see what kind of torturous end he could exact for them. These women—the *Troika*—deserved to be spoiled because, because, because he had decreed it. The three women were not only special, they were the future of Western Vampire Nation. And they were all vampire warriors. There was nothing he could do to change that, but he would do everything—and he meant *everything*—in his power to keep them safe.

Sighing, Lord de Vires called on the last reserves of his patience. His body practically vibrated with

leashed emotion. He knew this wasn't going to be easy; then again, dealing with the three women he'd cared for as they grew from babies to toddlers to children to teenagers and now adults, he was as prepared as much as any *father* could be when dealing with defiant children. Having watched them progress to the stages of adulthood, he knew Ajali and Jaylee would be the most vocal and that Astarla would defend her sisters and attempt to get their punishment reduced or removed, but this time her pleas would not move him. Okay, they would move him; they simply would not change his mind. No matter what, he was determined to execute judgment. It was for their greater good; it was for the good of Western Vampire Nation; it was for the good of his own heart. He would rather have them angry with him and alive. The alternative was simply not acceptable.

"Nothing to say?" Lord de Vires asked, his deep voice deceptively calm as he looked at the three women who were in fact no more than teenagers in the *Otherworldly* realm they inhabited. He noted they looked anywhere *but* at him. And they shouldn't look at him after their latest escapade.

Astarla, the eldest of the three, was a powerful young vampire who'd continuously gotten herself into situations that, over time, had become exponentially more dangerous. In fact, her escapades bordered on

deadly. She'd barely gotten herself out of the latest debacle...and that had only been with the help of the entire Locke Brotherhood whom Lord de Vires had personally called in to deal with the situation. Lord de Vires took note of Astarla's mutinous pose. Sitting with her arms folded, she stared out of the window with her mouth set in an almost pout as she waited for him to continue. It was hard to believe that a mere twenty-four hours ago she'd been so badly beaten that she'd been unable to speak.

"Boss—"Ajali Nasaler—who'd renamed herself Destiny Smith—started, but swallowed the rest of her words when he turned his burning eyes upon her. She didn't drop her gaze; but then, again she wasn't being as confrontational as usual. He had to stop himself from smiling at the defiant picture Ajali made as she began to nibble on her thumbnail. His Ajali (he refused to call her by any of the common names she came up with) was destined to be a healer unmatched in skill by any other. Her skills would extend far beyond the Western Vampire Nation and encompass all otherworldly realms, which was rare considering the fact she was a full-fledged vampire.

"You should just get it over with," Jaylee Sorenson said quietly. He turned to look at the final member of the *Troika* as the three women called themselves. Jaylee was both a wolf *Shifter* and a

vampire, having been attacked whilst still a babe. In fact, she was the only surviving member of her family and Lord de Vires had used every trick up his sleeve to ensure she remained alive. Considering her numerous and creative stunts that had nearly gotten her killed, this was quite a feat.

“And what do you think I should do, Jaylee?” Lord de Vires asked the one young woman who of the three he had never been able to truly reach. With Astarla and Ajali, he knew how they thought, what their reactions would be to almost everything; but with Jaylee, she was closed off. That didn’t make Lord de Vires care for the young woman any less—he understood her need to not involve herself with anyone other than the two women she considered her *sisters*.

All three women were brave—a little too much in Lord de Vires’s opinion—but they would unflinchingly stand side-by-side against any adversary. This was the primary reason for this meeting.

“It’s pretty obvious that you’re going to punish us,” Astarla finally spoke.

Lord de Vires pinned each woman with a calm gaze. None of them looked away, which in the Vampire and even the *Shifter* Nations was seen as a challenge and defiance. Lord de Vires wasn’t about to quibble over such insignificant matters at that particular

moment; he had to do something he didn't necessarily *want* to do, but he *had* to do—he felt the guilt like any parent whose children had gotten themselves almost killed.

“And why would I do that, Astarla?” he asked the eldest of the *Troika*, who met his gaze head on.

“It was all my doing; Dessie and Jaylee had nothing to do with it,” Astarla said as her chin rose ever so slightly, her bravery shining in her chocolate-brown eyes.

Lord de Vires's eyebrows rose as doubt flittered over his features.

“Is that right?” he asked.

“Dessie and Jaylee had no idea what I was doing—” Astarla attempted to say but was cut off by cries of disbelief from her sisters.

“Bullshit!” Destiny snapped.

“Star, you—” Jaylee began.

“C'mon, Star, we can—”

“No! You need to just stay out of this!” Star answered angrily.

The three women were about to launch into a loud argument when the atmosphere in the room suddenly became unstable and the walls literally shuddered with might. Three pairs of eyes turned to look at Lord de Vires. His power was immense and the *Troika* wasn't about to mess around with *that*. The

arguments died on their lips and they waited as the energy abated bit by bit and the atmosphere returned to normal.

Lord de Vires swept his black eyes across each of them before answering.

“Astarla, I am more than aware of the *events* that have occurred and I can assure you that I know exactly who is responsible,” he said in such a tone that left no room for comment. Instead, it put the three women on alert. They gave each other a look that could only be described as anxious.

“Are you deliberately drawing this out to torture us?” Destiny asked with a frown

Lord de Vires didn’t answer. He simply moved away from the three women and stood with his back to them. He contemplated his words, knowing he had run out of time. He watched the arrival of the carriage that carried the soon-to-be leader of the Locke Brotherhood. Swallowing the sudden lump in his throat, he turned and faced the three women whom he loved. And because he loved them, he had to hurt them, for he knew he could no longer ensure their safety if they were left to their own devices.

“Astarla, it has been decided that you will continue your training with my personal security leader; Ajali, you will be tutored by the Mateo until there is no more to learn; and, Jaylee, because you

have denied your shifter blood for too long, you are being sent to live with the *Lake* family—the last of the Arcadian *shifters*—so they can help you develop your powers.”

When Lord de Vires finished speaking, all three women stared at him without blinking as the enormity of their punishment sank in.

“Let Dessie and Jaylee remain here, they’ll do—” Astarla began.

“Don’t speak for me!” Jaylee interrupted angrily.

“Shut up, Jaylee,” Destiny sighed.

Jaylee turned to Destiny, her expression one of total rage as she lifted a hand and transformed her fingers into long sharp claws. She took a swipe at Destiny, barely missing the other woman as Destiny flashed herself across the room.

“Dessie! Jaylee!” Astarla raised her voice to be heard over the flying insults between her *sisters*. Jaylee turned blazing eyes on her sisters and ran to the window. Turning back she spoke; and though she included everyone in her accusatory gaze, her words were directed at her sisters.

“We shouldn’t have come here!” she hissed, and then she was gone, having smashed through the window. In spite of the sudden violence, neither Astarla nor Destiny moved; rather, they remained stoic as Lord de Vires continued to hold them in his

unblinking gaze. After the lingering chaos of Jaylee's exit dissipated, Astarla bravely stood and laid her hand on his arm.

"We will find her, Lord de Vires," Astarla said as she kept her eyes respectfully lowered. Careful not to turn her back on him, she slowly backed away, mindful to show due respect to the ruler of all of Western Vampire Nation. She had taken no more than two steps when Lord de Vires stopped her with a mere thought.

"Astarla, you are to go with Lukas now."

Star turned as she felt another presence fill the room. He was tall; he was broad; and he was mesmerising. Star knew his gaze normally intimidated people, but she wasn't people; she was she and instead of turning away, she returned the stare. Imagining what she could do with all of that fine, she finally raised her eyes to meet his.

"Lukas Montague, this is Astarla Hart. You will escort her to our training grounds."

Star's eyes widened as she silently took in her surroundings. She committed every detail of the room to memory, including the look on Dessie's face before her eyes finally came to rest on the man Lord de Vires had called Lukas Montague.

“What about Jaylee?” she asked Lord de Vires whilst keeping her eyes trained on Lukas. She noticed a hint of amusement in Montague’s wintry eyes, which annoyed the shit out of her. What annoyed her even more was the fact that as angry as she was, she couldn’t help but notice how fucking hot he was with his wide shoulders and big arms and the long, pure-white braid hanging halfway down his back.

“Leave that situation to me,” Lord de Vires answered.

Star’s eyes flashed with anger and she turned her head to look at Lord de Vires. “Jaylee is my *sister*! She is not a ‘situation!’”

Lukas stepped forward. “Woman—” he began before the generously voluptuous woman farthest from the three people flashed in front of him. Holding her hand held up in his face, her caramel-coloured eyes snapped fire at him.

“I know you didn’t just call my sister ‘*woman*’ like some medieval asshole!” Destiny Smith snarled at the arrogant male.

“Look, little vamp...” Lukas trailed off, not even bothering to continue—probably thinking he didn’t need to—and made a move towards Astarla Hart, expecting the *little* woman to move. She didn’t; instead, she kept her body between Lukas and his goal. Destiny placed the tip of her index finger on his chest

just above his heart and there was a flash of fire beneath the vamp's fingertips.

"Ajali." Lord de Vires spoke softly. Destiny didn't remove her hand and the heat began to intensify inside Lukas's chest. Lukas scowled down at the little vampire who simply stared back with a raised brow. Normally, Lukas would have laughed at the female's attitude; but Star supposed he realised she wasn't simply challenging him; she was *daring* him to retaliate.

"Dessie," Star softly called her sister.

Stubbornly, Destiny took a moment longer to glare up at the hot-ass guy before removing the tip of her finger from his chest before finally stepping away. The searing heat was removed but the lingering effects remained. Star knew Lukas had to fight not to rub the affected area with the heel of his hand. "I'll go," she said while managing to sound both defiant and defeated.

"Can't we work something out, Boss?" Destiny said with a hopeful look on her face as she turned to look at Lord de Vires. When he simply raised a single brow, Destiny turned away from him and, after taking a quick glance at Lukas, grinned at Star.

"At least he's a babe," were the unexpected words that came out of Destiny's mouth.

Lord de Vires coughed discretely. Lukas actually blushed as Star turned to look him up and down again.

“You’re right as always, Dessie,” she said with a sad smile at her sister. The two women hugged briefly before Star turned and walked out of the room, Lukas following after a look from Lord de Vires and a glower from Destiny.

~*~*~

Lukas closely watched the woman sitting across from him. Though he knew she had a multitude of questions, she had yet to break her silence. As the carriage thundered through the night, she stared out into the darkness that surrounded them.

He couldn’t help but stare at the baby vampire. Everyone in the Nation was familiar with the rumours concerning the three young women who had been raised by Lord Serafeim de Vires, the most revered and feared ruler in the history of Western Vampire Nation...and with good reason. Lord de Vires was power wrapped in more power, which only seemed to increase over the centuries. An ancient with a bloodline unrivalled for purity, it was rumoured he appointed every single member of *The Society*.

Vampires who wished to remain alive gave Lord de Vires a wide berth and copious respect. One did not

question Lord de Vires, which was why he *was* the subject of so much rumour. At first it had been thought the three young women were to be trained to serve as Lord de Vires's mistresses. This was a popular rumour primarily because Lord de Vires insisted on remaining alone throughout the centuries.

The intimate life of Lord de Vires was rich fodder for gossip. One of the more titillating rumours bandied about suggested his True Mate was a Goddess of some type even though that rumour had never been substantiated. Though it was one of the more intriguing conjectures, Lukas didn't put stock in it one way or the other, especially considering how far off base the rumours about the *Troika* had been. Although the *Troika* had grown up with all of the privilege befitting Vampire Royalty, there was no doubt in any vampire's mind that though Lord de Vires might love them, he had absolutely no sexual designs for them.

Lukas had read the scrolls filled with details about the *Troika*. Though each of the women had intriguing entries, it was Astarla Hart who had fascinated him. Her parents hadn't been listed nor had it been documented exactly *who* had brought the infant Astarla to the exclusive vampire sanctuary for children that *The Society* had set up under Lord de

Vires's instruction; but what *had* been documented was Lord de Vires's protection over all three women.

Astarla's only possession had been the silver pendant holding the crest of the most ancient of all vampire families that hung around her neck. There were no actual records of how she'd gotten the pendant; it was enough that she had it. Currently, she was playing with her necklace. The sound of the pendant dragging along the chain was all that could be heard over the thundering hooves of the horses galloping through the moonless night.

As Lukas watched the baby vamp in his care for the next however-long-it-took-for-them-to-reach-their-destination, he found himself unable to look away. It was the silence that Astarla wrapped around herself that fascinated Lukas the most. Well, that and the fact Lord de Vires cared so damned much about protecting her and her two sisters.

"Something interesting there, friend?" the husky-voiced baby vamp asked Lukas as she continued to watch the night pass them by.

"Are you Lord de Vires's mistress?" Lukas asked even though he *knew* the answer.

The baby vamp didn't even turn her head to look at him as she answered him. "None of your business, bum boy."

Star glared at the Locke Brother without taking her eyes off of the darkness. She knew all about the *Physical Justices* of *The Society*, or as she and her sisters referred to them—the Executioners for *The Society*. Any vampires worth their weight in intelligence knew not to mess with *that* group of vampires.

They were cold-blooded killers who, in theory, answered to *The Society*; but in reality, everyone knew they only answered to Lord de Vires. The Locke Brotherhood did the bidding of their ruler and as such, anyone deemed unworthy of vampire status, such as *rogue* vampires who had succumbed to the deadly side of their nature and whose only desire was to kill their feeding companions, they were handed over to the *Death Realm* by the Locke Brotherhood.

“Lord de Vires may allow you to speak to him with disrespect, but I will—”

She actually turned from the window to look at him as she interrupted Lukas’s little tirade. “Teach me some manners? Show me how I *should* act as a fledgling vampire? How to bow down to a great and feared Locke Brother? I don’t think so, asshole,” she spat before turning back to her vigil of watching the darkness.

“I could kill you for that alone,” Lukas said in a deadly voice.

“But you won’t,” she said easily and full of confidence.

“Says who?” he asked.

Spotting a break in the darkness, Star leaned closer to the window. Her eyes widening slightly, she balled her hand into a fist and banged twice against the roof of the carriage. Before they came to a full stop, she was out and running through the night. She heard Lukas curse and jump down behind her, but she couldn’t be bothered with him at the moment.

Lukas had almost caught up with her when she found a clearing in the thick woods. Coming to a stop, she looked around her, barely breathing hard after her run. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and lifted her face to the moonless sky.

Lukas was about to grab his beautiful young charge by the shoulders when he heard a mournful cry from a wolf close by. Pulling the Brotherhood sword from its scabbard, he held it down by his side as he reached out and pulled Astarla to his chest. Looking around, he spotted a tawny-coloured wolf pacing a few feet outside of the clearing’s perimeter. The curvy baby vamp still in his grasp, he stared at the wolf, judging its intent. He noticed Astarla also stared at the wolf. Before he could drag her back to the carriage, the wolf howled once more; then with a snarl in their direction, it turned and loped off into the night.

“Goodbye,” Astarla whispered before pulling away from Lukas and walking back to the carriage. Their driver was leaning against the carriage when they arrived back from their run through the night. Astarla allowed the driver to help her into the carriage, but she resumed her silence and returned to the same position that she’d been in before their impromptu stop.

“If you’re not his mistress, then who are you to Lord de Vires?” Lukas asked.

Lukas didn’t know why he continued to rile her—he couldn’t seem to shut the hell up. Sighing, he knew he shouldn’t be thinking of the baby vamp as anything more than a parcel he had to deliver, but that didn’t stop him from doing so. He didn’t think Astarla was going to answer him, especially when the silence stretched for the next eight furlongs. He’d almost given up hope of receiving an answer when Astarla spoke softly.

“I have no idea, Lukas Montague.”

The underlying sadness in her tone and defeated facial expression was enough to finally stop Lukas from allowing anything else out of his mouth that would cause her pain. Though he was chomping at the bit for answers, he remained silent and watched Astarla Hart observe the night slowly turn into day.

Star felt warm and comfortable. Sighing, she snuggled deeper into the blanket that was wrapped around her. With a start, her eyes snapped open and she was greeted by the icy blueness of Lukas Montague's stare.

"You snore," were the first words out of his mouth—his sensual lip-licking mouth that had Star wondering if all of the muscles beneath his clothes were as delicious as they'd felt when she'd been pressed up against him the previous evening.

"I was tired," Star said defensively.

Sitting up, she pushed her curls out of her eyes as she looked at her surroundings. She was lying in a feather-down bed and covered with the softest blankets. Star didn't know where she was, but she knew she was in a man's room.

"Where are we?" she asked Lukas.

"My family estate," he answered.

That was *not* the answer she expected. Her eyes widened as she asked, "Why?"

Giving a shrug that could almost be described as apologetic, Lukas responded. "I have family business to take care of, but we won't be here longer than a few days."

“So what do I do other than stay in here and not make trouble?” Star asked the devastatingly fine man who haunted her dreams.

“Is that asking too much?” Lukas inquired with that small smile of amusement that Star either wanted to kick or kiss off his face.

“I don’t mind in the slightest—far be it from me to keep you from your family business,” she said as she snuggled back into the soft mattress and pulled the covers up to her chin.

“Thank you, Astarla. I will ensure not to take too long,” Lukas promised as he walked to the door of the opulent yet masculine bedroom.

“No problem, Lukas,” she said enthusiastically—perhaps a little too enthusiastically from Lukas’s reaction.

Lukas had the door open and was about to quit the room when he spoke. “There is no escape, Astarla, so I suggest that you save yourself the grief and refrain from running.”

Before she could respond, he closed the door. The sound of the key being turned in the lock was followed by the murmuring of voices. Her keen hearing allowed her to pick up part of what was being said. *Keep an eye on her at all times. Make sure she does as she’s told and stays where she is.*

Star stared at the ceiling contemplating her choices. No doubt, Lukas had been informed of her powers, or lack thereof, so he knew she couldn't flash herself out of the room, which meant her only real means of escape would be to go out the window. *Damn.*

Star? Destiny's voice came into her head telepathically.

Dessie! Star answered with a grin.

Oh, shit! Where are you? Dessie asked.

Mr. Montague's family estate, Star answered.

Wow, you work fast. Meeting the in-laws already? Dessie asked.

Star laughed out loud at her sister's comment.

Hardly. Mr. Big Britches has family business to take care of and, apparently, it's got to be dealt with immediately.

So, I take it his attitude hasn't improved? Dessie inquired.

Well, I fell asleep on the way here. I think he brought me up to bed...

Oh, my god...! Dessie exclaimed.

What?

You like him, Astarla! Dessie sing-songed.

You have got to be kidding—! Star retorted.

You really do. Oh, dear... Dessie sighed.

What?! Star asked.

Star, he's a Locke Brother. You know those guys are proverbial bastards and womanisers to boot—

Dessie, I am not about to jump the man's bones—

I bet you he's going to try and get you on your back, though, Dessie said.

Destiny Smith! He's doing what he's told like the good bum boy he is. Trust me, there will be no fornicating with this man, Star said.

Not for his lack of trying I bet! Dessie threw back.

Dessie!

Well, I just want to make sure you know that after he's rocked your world, I will only say 'I told you so' one time.

Star smiled. You're disgusting!

And you love it. Hey, Star...

What?

Take care of you, okay?

Of course. The same goes for you. Have you met your tutor yet? Star asked.

Dessie sighed. Yeah, some old guy who spits when he talks and doesn't care for personal hygiene.

Star laughed heartily even as she felt like crying. Destiny could always do that to her.

What is Lord de Vires doing about Jaylee? Star asked when she calmed down.

From what I gather, he's trying to find her himself, Dessie answered.

Star frowned. Blowing out a breath, she attempted to shrug off her feelings.

What was that for? Destiny asked when she heard her sigh.

We truly fucked up, didn't we? Star asked.

There was a long silence before Destiny answered softly. *Yeah.*

Let me know everything. I should be at the Training Compound later in the week. Keep me informed.

I will, and Star?

Yeah?

I miss you already, Dessie admitted.

I know. I feel the same way. Love you, Dessie.

Love you, too, Starlight.

Star felt the telepathic connection fizzle out into silence. Once again she was alone. How depressing.

~*~*~

“No,” Lukas said angrily to his older brother, Viktor, as he paced in front of the roaring fire.

Lukas Montague looked at his older brother from the corner of his eye. Both men sported the white

hair and ice blue eyes; however, Viktor was slightly taller than Lukas...and a lot less honourable.

“You are willing to choose Lord de Vires’s whore over your own blood?” Viktor exclaimed.

Lukas shook his head. “She is not his whore!”

Viktor threw back his head and laughed bitterly. “And you take *her* word for that. Do you?”

Lukas stood and slammed his hands flat on the heavy wood table gracing the banquet hall of Montague Manor.

“Be careful how you speak of her, Viktor. Lord de Vires will deal most unkindly to *any* act of treason.”

Lukas watched as Viktor spun to face him across the table, his eyes blazing with malice. For a moment, Lukas thought he’d glimpsed a red ring around Viktor’s pupils, but it was quickly gone. Blinking, Lukas shook his head slightly, sure it had been a trick of the firelight. There was no red ring around his brother’s pupils. Sure, Viktor was angry, but that had to be it. There was no way his brother could in any way, shape, or form, be *rogue*.

“Who said anything about treason, little brother? Maybe I just want to find out what the whore knows. She has to know more about our Ruler than anyone else. After all, she was raised by him.”

“Do not call her a whore. And it should be noted Astarla was raised by those whom Lord de Vires selected,” Lukas remarked.

Viktor waved a hand blithely at Lukas’s comment. “It is the same thing,” he said as he made a move towards the doors that opened out into the foyer of Montague Manor.

Lukas moved faster and stopped his brother with a restraining hand on his arm, but Viktor disappeared. Cursing, he flashed to the door guarded by two trusted colleagues. Viktor easily swept the two big men aside and shouldered his way into the bedroom where Astarla Hart rested.

Lukas stood beside his brother and felt nothing in the bedroom where he’d left the baby vamp. His brother obviously felt the same nothingness as he too scanned the room, looking left then right in an attempt to spot Astarla. Neither spotted her until they saw the bottom of her foot planting itself in Viktor’s throat. She managed to take them both down before doing what Lukas had warned her *not* to do. Run.

Astarla didn’t get far—as well Lukas knew would be the case. Growling, he flashed directly to where she’d been stopped by the guards who protected the sacred grounds of Montague Manor for centuries. Rather than finding her afraid and willingly surrendering to the forty fully armed guards who had

all served in the Locke Brotherhood, she stood up to them. Seeing the baby vamp bare her lengthened incisors at the guards surrounding her, Lukas had to quash the overwhelming sensation to shake some sense into her and for disobeying his commands. Nevertheless, he found himself reluctantly admiring the determination with which the unarmed Astarla braced to fight.

Viktor made a move towards Astarla, but Lukas stopped him with a growl. The brothers turned to face each other momentarily. Shooting him a look of disgust, Viktor stomped off in the direction of the Manor, but not without sweeping both he and the baby vamp with a meaningful glance.

“Leave us,” Lukas spoke softly.

The guards immediately snapped to attention and in an orderly fashion retreated, leaving him alone with the heavy-breathing, barely dressed vamp who remained in a fighting stance as she stared at him.

“I could’ve handled them,” she said.

Her husky voice slid over him, practically making him dizzy. Gathering himself, Lukas tamped down the urges he shouldn’t be feeling.

“With what weapon?” he asked while raising a single brow at her attire, or lack thereof. The baby vamp was dressed in one of his white linen shirts. Though the shirt fell to mid thigh, smooth-skinned—

thigh, it left plenty of flesh for him to ogle. Her skin practically glowed; her bountiful breasts, which were unbound by any restraint, heaved heavily beneath his shirt. Lukas knew he would never again wear that shirt without remembering how she looked inside of it.

“Not everyone has to fight with swords,” Star huffed as she tried valiantly to keep her hair out of her eyes.

Staring at Lukas who stood a few feet away from her, she tossed back the curls that refused to be tamed. The wind kicked up a notch and pulled the shirt further down her shoulder, almost exposing one of her generous breasts to the Locke Brother. She saw Lukas’s eyes darken and watched as he licked his lips. Star had trouble remembering what she was doing and where she was in *that* moment.

It took Lukas moving towards her to spur her into movement. Dodging his hands, she made a run for the huge iron gates that represented the only break in the fifteen-foot stone wall that surrounded the grounds. Gathering her powers as she ran, Star felt the tingling that always accompanied the use of her scant vampire powers. Extending one hand, palm facing out, blue-tinged white light exploded from her hand and hit the gates, which disintegrated into millions of particles. Picking up her speed, she slammed directly

into Lukas Montague who wrapped her in his arms and levitated, preventing her from falling to the ground.

Star sighed when Lukas held her tightly to his chest as he slowly settled them. Once he allowed her feet to touch the ground, she immediately attempted to move away, but Lukas didn't let her go.

"How did you do that?" he asked her as she tipped her head back.

Glaring up into his eyes, she responded, "What, you've never seen a big girl run fast?"

Lukas didn't answer her question, although she noticed his lips twitched.

"What power did you use to remove the gates?" he asked.

Star frowned. "You know...the normal blowing-shit-up power that we all have."

She was about to ask him why he'd asked when she felt Lukas push his way into her mind in an attempt to read her thoughts. Loosening herself from his embrace, she hauled back and punched him in the face for his rudeness. He was about to get punched again but he caught her fist in his larger hand.

"Stay out of my head, asshole!" she snapped at him and pulled away from a stunned Lukas. She started to take another step away from him, but he grabbed her arms and hauled her against him.

“No, Star. That is not a *normal* power that all vampires have. In fact, I only know of one other vampire that has ever had *that* particular power,” he rasped.

Confused, she stopped struggling and asked, “Who?”

“Lord de Vires,” he answered.

Silence enveloped them after Lukas whispered his answer so matter-of-factly. Star stepped away from Lukas, her eyes wide as she stared at him. Slowly, she shook her head from side to side, a frown marring her features. She turned to look at Lukas, confusion swirling around her as she absorbed the information he had just revealed.

“But I can’t flash from one place to another. I can’t even do the basics, and yet you’re telling me I have some far-out power that only the Ruler of the Western Vampire Nation possesses? How can that be?” she panted.

Her breathing turning staccato, Star struggled to breathe. *If I could just take one deep breath...* she thought.

It did not escape Lukas that Star was having a difficult time catching her breath, nor did he miss the panicked light that entered her eyes. Stepping forward, Lukas was going to try and calm her when he

felt the energy surge. He didn't have to look around to know it was none other than Lord de Vires who now stood beside him. Lord de Vires had thrall'd Astarla before he fully materialized. His power was such that he didn't even need to make any physical movement to put her under. As Astarla fell unconscious, Lord de Vires folded her safely in his arms. Lukas suspected Lord de Vires knew the question on his mind and he also had enough sense not to ask. Lord de Vires knew this too. Silently, Lukas led the Ruler of the Western Vampire Nation into his family home.

Without asking for direction, Lord de Vires went to the room Lukas had prepared for Astarla, gently settling her on the massive bed that still held her exotic scent. Words were not exchanged between he and Lord de Vires as they flashed to the banquet hall of the Montague Manor.

Lukas immediately felt the presence of Viktor even before he fully materialized. Though he was still angry, as the Chief of the Locke Brotherhood second only to Commander Costas Vadoma, his first duty was to the safety of their Ruler...and anyone under his protection. Lukas was more than confident Lord de Vires could handle himself, but Astarla was another story. Viktor had crossed the line.

Viktor was about to speak when he finally caught sight of the Ruler of the Western Vampire Nation. Like

Lukas, Viktor was powerful, but not powerful enough to sense the presence of Lord de Vires who did not want to announce his presence. Swallowing the words he had at the ready, Viktor stepped back giving Lord de Vires a respectful amount of space.

“Lord de Vires,” Viktor greeted their leader as he respectfully bowed.

Their leader didn’t even look in his direction, although he nodded politely. It was clear his attention was focused upon Lukas.

“What is wrong with Astarla?”

It was a question wrapped in a demand.

Facing his leader, Lukas answered. “She has a power I know very few possess. When I informed her of this, she was understandably perplexed by the revelation.”

“She is distressed!” Lord de Vires exclaimed, his eyes pinning Lukas where he stood.

“It is not every day an average vampire finds out she possesses similar powers to that of the Leader of the Western Vampire Nation, my lord,” Lukas responded. Despite Lord de Vires’s rising anger that was tantamount to a sudden and all-consuming firestorm, Lukas remained calm. It wasn’t as if he had much choice. He could not stand against their Ruler even if he had the will. To have that will was a death wish, not only to the one who attempted such folly, but

to everyone connected with the individual who would be so utterly insane.

“She has never been *average* anything!” Lord de Vires hissed.

“What exactly is she, then?” Viktor Montague asked from the head of the table that seated one hundred. His insolent tone did not go unnoticed by anyone present, least of all Lord de Vires.

Lord de Vires snapped his head around to look at Viktor, his eyes blazing with rage. Without answering, he raised a long-fingered hand in the air, which curled into a claw shape, and Lukas watched silently as his older brother began to gasp for breath. Viktor raked at the invisible fingers wrapped around his throat, his eyes wide as Lord de Vires held his gaze. The warning loud and clear for all in the room, Lord de Vires loosened his fingers and Viktor dropped to the floor. Curling his lip in distaste, the Leader of the Western Vampire Nation turned back to Lukas.

“I gave you a simple directive, Lukas. All you need to know is Astarla is bound for great things and nothing you or I do will change that. Have her at the Training Compound by eve tomorrow.”

With that decree, Lord de Vires turned his attention back to Viktor, who met his gaze with defiance.

“Heed my caveat, Viktor. Watch how you speak of Astarla. Do not insinuate anything that you cannot confirm. There will be no additional warnings. Next time, there will only be a slow, agonizing end for you.”

Viktor bowed his head submissively in token respect but he said nothing more.

Sweeping the room with his heated gaze, he directed one more look at Lukas before flashing out of Montague Manor.

Viktor opened his mouth to comment, but Lukas turned blazing ice-blue eyes at his older sibling.

“I do not want to hear it, Viktor. I will take Astarla to feed then we will leave this night,” he spat and turned to leave.

Before he could exit the hall, Viktor spoke. “Maybe you need to remember that Calais is your intended.”

Lukas spun around and faced his brother. “I need no reminder, Viktor.”

“Then why all of the concern for Lord de Vires’s whore?”

Lukas was across the banquet table before Viktor finished insulting Astarla. Wrapping his hand around his brother’s throat, his eyes became so stormy the ice overwhelmed the blue, making them appear silver. He allowed his anger free rein.

“Do not ever again refer to her in that manner,” Lukas ground out.

“Well, we know she’s definitely not going to be yours, little brother—” he rasped.

“She will be whomever’s she chooses,” Lukas growled. Before he was tempted to do something he possibly wouldn’t regret, Lukas flashed out of hall and into the bedroom that housed the baby vamp. Sucking in a lungful of air, he took a moment to centre himself. When his rage became a mere simmer, he walked to Astarla’s side. Lukas watched as she lay sleeping in his childhood bed. She was beautiful...but she wasn’t his. But she would never belong to anyone who wasn’t worthy of her. He would see to it.

Astarla was once again snoring, but it was the small smile that played around her plump lips that stopped him from waking her immediately. There was a strange...*innocence* about Astarla Hart. Lukas didn’t know how that was possible considering the many escapades in which he’d known she’d been involved. He didn’t even want to consider them. Astarla Hart was a hellion. Despite what he knew and heard, Lukas believed when one was asleep, there was no chance of deception; and what he read in Star was innocence.

Lukas gently donned Astarla in a black dress that he’d found in her luggage. Actually, it was the *only* feminine attire he’d found. Folding the shirt of

his that she'd commandeered, he placed it in her overnight bag. Taking a few moments to ensure they had everything, he gave the bag to the carriage driver he'd summoned. After instructing the driver to meet them in the next town, Lukas lifted Astarla and flashed them into a populated area before lifting the thrall Lord de Vires had placed her in.

Feeling Astarla awaken was an erotic moment. She moaned seductively and stretched languorously. Being that she was in his arms, he felt all of the above. Lukas's cock hardened and his body tingled where Star's body touched his. Just a mere touch from her had him craving her. Closing his eyes, he imagined her naked body beneath his, those bountiful curves writhing underneath his hardness as he slid into her softness again and again. He wondered how his name would sound in her passion. Breathing in deeply, Lukas called on his ever present control to stop him from reacting to the demands of his body.

"Where are we?" Astarla's husky voice slid through his body like warm syrup.

A whisper in Lukas's head told him he should let the baby vamp go but he didn't. Instead, he held her tighter. He was immediately punished for his disobedience, for she rubbed her cheek against his chest and sighed, causing his cock to harden even more.

“In a village close by Montague Manor. We need to feed.”

She nodded once again, still rubbing her face against his chest. As before, Lukas closed his eyes as he held the baby vamp in his arms. He knew she was still coming out of the thrall/sleep that Lord de Vires had placed over her, so she wasn't completely aware of her actions. Knowing that didn't make his cock any softer or stop his blood from zinging through his veins.

Star stretched some more as she woke up. She'd been listening to Lukas—kind of. It wasn't until he'd mentioned needing to feed that she realised she was indeed hungry.

Illuminated by the full moon, Lukas led her confidently through the dark passages of the village. Easily, he found perfect feeding companions. It was a novel experience to feed with someone like Lukas. Star found herself watching the Chief Locke Brother. He moved like a predator—silent, fast, precise, fluid, intent.

When they finished, Lukas took her hand and flashed them into the carriage that was thundering through the night. Instead of sitting across from her, Lukas sat next to her, his eyes glowing in the darkness. Turning so that she could get a better look at him, she almost sighed her pleasure. Lukas was a beautiful

vampire. Wrapped in thought, he was immobile, silent...and as always...dangerous. Star might be a baby vamp, but she recognized danger—not that she feared him turning his power against her. Still, she wouldn't want to fight the vampire who sat next to her. Smiling, she wondered if Lukas even realised he was still holding her hand.

After long moments, she finally felt him move. Though his movements were barely perceptible, the play of his muscles was evident. She could see his chest rise and fall as he breathed. Then there was his hair. That gorgeous, silken mane of his was temptation. Stark white, it seemed to flow; it caught the colours surrounding him so that it seemed to sparkle. Sometimes it appeared to flow like precious ores in their liquid state. Lukas was more than exquisite. Star couldn't look away anymore than she could halt her next action. Leaning forward, she touched her lips to his.

Lost in thought, trying to ignore the very feminine vampire sitting next to him, Lukas did not sense Astarla's proximity until she kissed him. His control snapped.

Lukas hauled Astarla onto his lap and kissed her like he'd been longing to, dreaming of, needing to. He kissed her completely, deeply, with desire and without

thought. When Star whimpered beneath his mouth, he almost shattered. Pulling back, he stared down into her heavy-lidded eyes.

Lukas called upon every ounce of his will to stop from making love to Astarla. He thought of duties, but then he heard the baby vamp sigh. Drawing upon more of his will, he ruminated on all manner of unpleasant things including the retribution that Lord de Vires would mete out should he act improper towards Astarla in any way. Even thoughts of a gruesome death did not quell his desire.

Lukas heard his brother's voice in his head reminding him of Calais, the vampire who had been decreed his mate. Briefly, he wondered how it could be that Calais didn't stoke his desire. Perhaps he was flawed. Perhaps he was meant only to serve and not to mate. Sighing, he eased the baby vamp on the seat beside him then moved so that he was across from her—where it was safe...for Astarla's future and his sanity.

Just as he'd calculated, they arrived at the Training Compound in the late afternoon. The carriage stopped just outside the gates so Astarla could exit. Due to some obscure rule that *The Society* had established, novice vampires had to enter alone. Never before had that rule bothered Lukas, but in this moment it did.

Astarla made quite a picture. Dressed in her standard outfit of all black—leather trousers, linen shirt, great coat, and riding boots all hand-crafted for her—she was beautiful. Her curls were almost tamed and lay in a somewhat neat braid that fell to her waist. Holding her bag, she stood outside of the imposing gates, defiance on her face and determination in her stance. Once she stepped from the carriage, she didn't even look back. Hesitation nowhere evident in her person, she strolled right through the gates oblivious to the silence, to the anticipation of her audience, to fear. Lukas knew this, for along with his myriad talents, he had keen hearing. Even over the decisive clang of the iron gates closing, he heard the steady rhythm of her heartbeat.

Lukas watched the baby vamp and silently bid her endurance. At first, he was going to wish her luck, but luck was for those without skill, and young Astarla had skill—wild, untamed, and latent—but skill nevertheless. A lot of rules had been broken for her to even walk through the gates of the Training Compound. She was the first female ever to be admitted onto the hallowed grounds that trained the Locke Brothers. Her mere presence in itself had been bad enough, but the fact she was *also* going to be trained only added to the insult. Lukas suspected Lord

de Vires no doubt had to fend off many a protest at his actions.

Lukas finally tore his eyes away from the only being that had ever managed to turn him inside out. Funny thing, the baby vamp wasn't even trying. His lips stretched into a smile knowing that regardless of the outcome, the Training Compound would never be the same now that Astarla had made her presence known. Tapping on the roof of the carriage, he followed the trail of chaos that the baby vamp would undoubtedly leave in her wake.

TWO POINT FIVE

Six weeks later

Paramount Invictus Vadoma watched the young female vampire he considered his niece. She demonstrated the strength that was the subject of many of his and Serafeim's discussions. She fought against the vampire soldiers in her training group without pause. The other trainees merely sparred with each other, but they outright battled Astarla, endeavoring to cause her the utmost pain.

All the trainees were the crème de la crème of vampire soldiers. Most of them had already been formally trained in some form of defence and combat. Astarla hadn't had anywhere near the training they'd received, yet all of her movements and even the way she carried herself hinted at a lethality that couldn't be taught.

While Invictus would usually put her up against any three vampires any day of the week, Astarla was injured. Badly. Sensing her vulnerability, her classmates managed to make each injury she had worse and worse with every blow. Because the trainees were all able to 'repair,' to an extent, their training was full contact—meaning the swords, knives, and axes

they used actually took out flesh and blood. The baby vamp had been injured so badly that she not only hadn't fully repaired, she hadn't come close to starting.

Invictus had seen enough. While her classmates hurried to return the weapons used for the session to their rightful place, Astarla remained where she was. The rest of her training class ignored her, some even walking directly into her before pushing her aside. Invictus knew why Astarla stood in the same spot. She wasn't simply being gracious by allowing her fellow students to go first. Astarla was in severe pain, even if her face didn't show it. Invictus couldn't even pinpoint where, but he felt it as if it were his own. And it was his own because he loved her.

~*~*~

Star managed to hold the tears back but she couldn't make her body move just yet. Her mind was trying diligently to convince the rest of her body that pain was nothing, but the rest of her body was screaming at her mind that it needed rest. And loudly. She just needed a moment to gather herself, but she thought she could make her body believe that most blatant of lies eventually.

She might hurt all over, but she would give no one the satisfaction of seeing her agony. Incidentally, the pain

didn't even stem from a training injury, but rather from a fight in the food hall five weeks ago. If she'd been prepared for the fight, the five vampires wouldn't have managed to get near her, much less the best of her. But they hadn't been just any regular vamps. Three had been trainers, and the other two were the best in her training class.

In the end, they'd settled on beating her rather than actually trying to rape her, but she didn't doubt they'd thought about it. When she'd crawled to her bedchambers that night, she'd flooded her bed with her tears for the first time for as long as she could remember, though she didn't make a sound. They'd known she wouldn't say a word about the attack too. She'd tried to repair herself before the next training session in the interim. Somehow, though, her injuries could never fully heal and her attackers had informed every other recruit about her injuries. Thus, each day was worse than the one before.

The moments directly after training were the worst. The sudden cessation of activity took her mind off of training and put it squarely on her pain. She couldn't escape it through screams, so she always waited a few moments to get a handle on the hurt. This day added a new task to her post-training ritual—quelling the need to retch.

Never before had she ever thought about the natural act of breathing; but today, her broken ribs seemed to pierce both her skin and her lungs at the same time. Maybe after a few more measured breaths, her body would feel like going up to her bedchambers so she could sleep and attempt another repair before the next training session.

~*~*~

Lukas watched his intended mate stroke his body with pale hands, her blue eyes dark with passion, as he lay in their betrothal bed. He was trying his hardest not to picture bright, dark eyes looking at him and smooth, dark skin caressing his. He really was. And it was only when Calais spoke that he was reminded of *where* he was and with *whom*.

“You are distracted, my love.” Calais’s voice was husky with her need. He saw her elongated fangs, her want, her lust and yet he felt...nothing.

“The Locke Brothers are going through some changes,” was his more than truthful answer.

Calais wrapped her pale hands around his flaccid cock.

“Well, let me help ease those changes, my love,” she said as she wrapped her thin lips around his cock.

As he watched her suck him, he knew it was useless. She was busy doing everything she could to bring him to hardness—using her hands, her tongue, even her fangs—but he knew before she'd even started it wasn't going to work.

His body no longer wanted Calais.

Though they'd shared a bed for over eight months after their betrothal announcement, Lukas had found it increasingly difficult to feel true passion for her. Calais had been getting particularly frustrated, if the look on her face was anything to go by, when Lukas's Commander summoned him back to the Locke Mansion.

I apologise for the interruption, Lukas, but we need you here. Costas Vadoma spoke directly into Lukas's mind in the way of the Locke Brothers.

Think nothing of it, Commander; I'm on my way, Lukas answered immediately, disentangling himself from Calais.

"I have been summoned," he said, trying to be as apologetic as possible.

"But Lukas..." Calais whined, then pouted. Lukas ignored his intended and willed his clothes and boots back onto his body. He was completely dressed by the time he got to his feet.

"I am a Locke Brother; you know this. If you are unhappy with my duties...maybe we should reconsider

this betrothal,” Lukas suggested as he flashed out of the room, missing the look of rage that had suddenly appeared on Calais’ face at his words.

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“There will be no ‘reconsidering’, Lukas. You are mine,” Calais snarled to herself as she summoned her usual playthings, and two of the nastiest *rogues* in existence proceeded to fuck her the way she demanded.

~*~*~

Lukas Montague appeared in the doorway of the Locke Brotherhood Mansion’s meeting room, and its atmosphere was sombre to say the least. Standing next to his father and Lord de Vires, Commander Cosmas Vadoma waved Lukas inside.

“Lord de Vires, Paramount Vadoma, Commander,” Lukas greeted each man as he entered, closing the door behind him. They nodded in return but said nothing.

“Have a seat, Lukas,” Cosmas advised, seating himself behind his desk. Lukas did as he was bid and concentrated on his Commander’s grave face.

“We have a long-term assignment that we would like you to consider.”

Lukas waited. This didn’t sound like any normal assignment, especially since he was being asked to ‘consider’ it.

“Lord de Vires and Paramount Vadoma have asked for my best Brother for this job,” Cosmas said, giving his usual brand of praise—never outright, but always somehow a sideways compliment.

Lukas took those rare compliments as he always did—silently.

“Commander, I am a Locke Brother; whatever you ask of me, I will complete.”

Paramount Vadoma and Lord de Vires shared a look but neither said anything.

“This is not official. You will be relieved of your duties for the duration,” Cosmas revealed.

Lukas couldn’t help the scowl that marred his features. “How long will that be?”

“It could take a matter of months or it could take years. Of this we are unsure,” Paramount Vadoma spoke suddenly.

Lukas looked at the two powerful beings. They wore their customary stoic expressions, although Lukas could sense a fury about Lord de Vires.

“I am aware you are betrothed, Lukas. This assignment will take you away from your intended,” Cosmas explained further.

“Commander, is my loyalty to the Brotherhood in question?” Lukas asked.

“Not at all, Lukas,” Lord de Vires finally spoke, his voice calm. “There has been a problem at the Training Compound.”

Lukas had an immediate image of Astarla Hart and his cock got hard. *Shit.*

“The young lady whom you took to the compound some weeks ago needs assistance,” Paramount Vadoma said.

Lukas’s frown returned. “That is forbidden,” he answered automatically.

The room suddenly became stifling hot and Lukas noticed the walls vibrating. Everyone turned to Lord de Vires. His eyes were literally flaming as he looked in Lukas’s direction, but his focus was clearly on something else.

“What is forbidden is the assault of a female! The disregard of her safety and her health! *That is forbidden!*” Lord de Vires practically roared.

Invictus placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. The walls ceased shuddering and the heat retreated. After a few moments, he excused himself and Serafeim from the room.

They strolled around the Locke Mansion grounds. The vast gardens gave the two men the privacy they needed.

"I made a mistake sending her there," Serafeim spoke softly, his voice full of pain.

Invictus shrugged. "You were not to know the treatment she would receive."

Serafeim stopped beside one of the many beds of moon flowers. "I should have taken her myself."

When Serafeim had proposed that *The Society* have physical Justices, the Locke Brotherhood had been born, and Serafeim had consulted with the landscaping team to plant these blossoms as a testament to his true love.

"And it most definitely could've been worse," Invictus said plainly.

"What have I done, Invictus?" Serafeim's shoulders slumped and he stared up at the night sky that was decorated by a sliver of new moon amidst stars that stretched far and wide. Though new moons were dark, Vamps' special sight made them appear spectacularly visible.

“You have done what any father does. You’ve raised your children the best you can; and though you’ve tried to protect them from everything, they’ve managed to still get into mischief.”

Invictus paused and he watched his friend lower his head, breathing deeply.

“If it were only mischief, I wouldn’t be concerned; but I had no choice, Invictus! They were nearly killed!” Serafeim exclaimed as he swung his head around to look at him.

“I know that, Serafeim, but this will be solved. Lukas will teach Astarla, and between the natural gifts she received from you and the street fighting I taught her, she’ll be a deadlier warrior than you or I ever thought about being.”

Serafeim looked down at the Moon flowers his fingers were caressing. “Of that, Invictus, I have no doubt whatsoever.”

~*~*~

Star felt the steel puncture her injured shoulder, but she was too busy holding off the attack from her right to do much about it. Stifling the scream that wanted to erupt, it took her a few moments to realise training had ceased. She had no idea why the session

had suddenly ended. All Star knew was immense relief that threatened to bring tears to her eyes.

“Trainee Hart! Report to the Director’s office immediately!”

This particular instructor had been one of her original attackers, so she nodded and held her head high as she returned the weapon she’d been training with to its rightful place. She began the walk to the Training Compound Director’s office and willed her mind to ignore the pain and persuade her battered body to obey her commands. Star was so involved in the simple act of walking and breathing that she didn’t note the arrival of Locke Brothers who stood behind her en-masse. She also missed the sight of her attackers being dragged from the group.

~*~*~

Lukas’s eyes never left the baby Vamp who’d been haunting him since their last encounter. She was in such pain it punched him in the face as hard as she had. But of course, she was stubbornly refusing to acknowledge it. Lukas turned to the Director of the training compound. He looked too smug for Lukas’s tastes, but he also looked mostly dead.

~*~*~

Star dragged herself into the Director's receiving room and sank down onto the plush seat. She didn't notice the silence or the fact there was no one bustling around the office, which was normally overrun with activity. All she knew was her pain was getting worse.

"Star?"

No doubt she was imagining Destiny's voice. Thinking of her sister caused her to smile despite the agony that scoured her body. Closing her eyes, she focused on the mischief they'd gotten into.

"Starbright, open your eyes. Come on, woman, you can do it."

Had Destiny's voice sounded joking, she wouldn't have paid it any attention; but instead, it was laced with worry.

"Dessie?" Star asked, her husky voice so breathless it was a whisper.

"It's me. Open your eyes, Starbright."

Star's eyelids protested, but she slowly lifted them and stared into the caramel eyes of her sister. Star tried to smile, but then her eyes rolled up into the back of her head and she blacked out.

Lukas managed to flash to Star and lift her from the chair before she slumped unconscious to the floor. Destiny stood and brushed her fingers across her sister's forehead, frowning at the fever that sizzled Star's skin. Destiny left the receiving room, uncaring that Lukas was right on her heels.

The seven Vadoma brothers, all of whom were Locke Brothers, surrounded the group with whom Star had been training. The Commander of the Locke Brothers stood by five males he'd culled out from the other vampires.

Strutting up to the nearest Locke Brother, Destiny pulled his sword from the scabbard and flashed so she stood in front of the biggest male. She knew he was an instructor. She knew he was well trained. She also knew he was the one who had instigated the attack on her sister. So she knew she was going to kill him...without remorse.

Before anyone could stop her, she smoothly removed his head from his shoulders. The jaws of his remaining cohorts dropped. Besides that physical demonstration of disbelief, silence echoed through the compound.

"Your first mistake was thinking you could defeat my sister. Your second mistake was thinking at all. But your third and most egregious mistake was believing you would get away with it, you

motherfuckers!” Destiny yelled before beheading the next in line.

Staring at the third of the five who had hurt her sister, Destiny saw what his intent had been. He had wanted to rape Star. Beheading was far too good for him. Dropping the Locke Brother’s sword, she snatched the dagger the piece of shit male had sheathed at his hip. Before he even knew what she was about, she proceeded to split him open from balls to throat.

She kicked him over and took great pleasure in watching him writhe on the ground and fail to enjoy the demise she’d gifted him. Annoyed by this point, she simply finished the last two off with twin balls of white fire she shot from her hand, not even bothering to watch their bodies disintegrated into fine dust. Going back to the vampire who lay dying, she knelt beside his head. His wide eyes stared up at her.

“You want mercy,” she stated rather than asked.

He gurgled some kind of answer but she really wasn’t interested in his response.

“My sister wanted only acceptance,” she said as she watched his futile struggle. He looked like a fish struggling to live on dry land. Extending her right hand, Destiny healed the male’s injuries. His pain-filled eyes relaxed and he attempted to speak. Though

she could hear him just fine, she moved so her ear was close to his mouth.

“Th-th-thank you,” he gasped out.

Destiny patted his cheek. “You’re not welcome.”

Touching her index finger to his chest, he suddenly burst into flames. He tried to roll on the ground to put out the flames, but they did not diminish despite his attempts. The flames burned every bit of his flesh from his body then greedily ate at his bones. Finally, there was nothing left of him.

Holding her hand out behind her, she willed the borrowed sword to her and handed it to the Locke brother who owned it. Destiny looked neither left nor right as she strode over to Lukas, who was still holding Star.

Paramount Vadoma appeared before her. “Ajali.”

Destiny flashed a real smile at him. The only time she ever heard her given name was when one of the Oldies (as she called the Paramounts and Lord de Vires) used it.

“Hey, Uncle Vic,” she greeted.

Returning her smile, he reached down and wrapped her in a hug, then flashed Lukas, Star, and Destiny away from the Training Compound.

Lord de Vires watched over his little Ajali as she healed her sister. Her powers were so infinite, even the *Mateo* were astounded by her abilities. The *Mateo* was a syndicate of the most powerful Healers of the Western Vampire Nation and a throwback to much simpler times when Lord de Vires had been but a twinkle in his father's eye.

Some (Ajali) would call the *Mateo* primitive because they lived in caves or small stone dwellings, and, only on the rare occasion, consorted with any other beings Vampire or otherwise.

And then they'd had Ajali thrust upon them.

He'd heard the complaints from both sides. The *Mateo* had grumbled mightily until they'd recognized her power. Excluding him and one other no one dared mention to him, none of the *Mateo* had witnessed such power in all of their years.

His Ajali was not easily impressed and thus, he'd heard an entire dissertation's worth of complaints about the lack of amenities during her studies with the *Mateo*. Of course, anything his little Ajali needed was immediately provided. Everything except for the presence of her sisters. And now...now this.

Destiny turned her head and caught sight of him. "Father!"

He wondered if she noted the slight shock on his visage. She'd never before used that title. He'd always been Lord de Vires or some sort of nickname when she was being cheeky.

"Little Ajali," he said softly as he knelt beside her as she healed Star.

"Someone poisoned her. I don't know who, but just like I dealt with the...*filth* that hurt her, I'm going to deal with them too," Destiny said, her tone cold and deadly, a side rarely seen by anyone.

"I heard about that," he responded.

"They hurt her! And they kept hurting her! Every single day! I should've tortured them like they did her!" Destiny muttered angrily.

Knowing her pain, he took her into his arms.

"They hurt her, father. They hurt Star," Destiny sobbed into his chest.

"And you punished them, Ajali. Commander Vadoma has asked if you would like a position in the Locke Brotherhood."

Destiny chuckled and hugged him tighter. "They couldn't handle me," Destiny answered.

That was probably truer than she realised. Sighing, he simply held her to him.

"I admit I was of the same mind," he said.

Destiny leaned back a little to look into his face. “Who taught you to joke?” she asked as she grinned up at him.

“I do not joke,” he began. She lifted a brow. “Only with you, my Ajali,” he amended honestly as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. Destiny sighed happily and laid her head back on his chest.

~*~*~

Invictus flashed out of the healing chambers of Serafeim’s palace and arrived at the Training Compound, calling the Locke Brothers to his side. He proudly watched his seven sons gather around him. As always, Cosmas stood to his right.

“The excess must be culled, and by ‘culled’ I mean ‘eliminated.’ The facility will be realigned,” he ordered.

With a collective nod, the Locke Brotherhood fanned out and went about tending his instructions. Cosmas was the only one who remained.

“I have found my mate,” he suddenly announced. Invictus turned to stare at his eldest son. “I will need to choose a successor.”

“You have already chosen?” Invictus asked with a smile.

Cosmas nodded. “When Lukas returns, I will hand over the title to him.”

Invictus grabbed his son and hugged him. “Congratulations, Son! So, when do your mother and I get to meet your mate?”

Cosmas looked him in the eye with a grin that reminded Invictus of his hellcat of a wife. “Soon enough. I will take over the Training Compound.”

“Ah, you do me proud, Son, so very proud.”

“Basilus and Galenos are joining me as instructors,” Cosmas said of his brothers’ involvement in his new plan.

Invictus ruffled his son’s hair, something he knew he hated. Cosmas smoothed his hair as soon as he finished but did not complain as he knew it would be futile.

“Your uncles will come in to help also.”

Cosmas grimaced at that announcement. “What? Do they have to? You know they’re crazy!” Cosmas stated with a straight face.

Invictus threw his head back and laughed heartily. “You sound like your mother.”

Realizing that was all he was going to say on that, Cosmas excused himself and went to help his soldiers deal with the Vadoma re-structuring of the hallowed Training Compound.

~*~*~

Lukas stepped into the healing chambers and found Star fast asleep. Not snoring, but she was close to it. At least her breathing was no longer punctuated with whistles that had indicated punctured lungs. He noted all her injuries were almost completely healed.

“So...you’re going to train Starbright” Destiny’s voice reached out to him from one of the dark corners.

Lukas was startled to realise he hadn’t even felt another’s presence. He was learning one should never underestimate Destiny Smith. She might be a healer, but she was nobody’s fool. And when she chose to destroy, she was colder and bloodier than all the Locke Brothers put together.

“Yes,” he answered, unable to tear his eyes from Star’s face.

“How’s that going to work when you want to fuck her all the time?” Destiny asked casually.

Lukas should’ve felt insulted, but he was too distracted at that moment to even consider such a thing.

“My duties—”

“Fuck your duties. I’m talking about my sister, Lukas, not some assignment you’ve been ordered to do by Cosmas, Uncle Vic, or Lord de Vires. I will destroy you if you hurt her,” Destiny threatened.

Lukas finally managed to pull his gaze from Star's sleeping form and turned to face Destiny.

"I will fulfill my assignment, Destiny. Star will learn only how to kill from me—nothing more and nothing less," he said sincerely.

"Yeah, right." Destiny scoffed, then her eyes fell to her sister. "Anyone hurt her and I'll go through you and whoever gets in my way to make their end torturous and painful. Understood?"

Lukas nodded. "Absolutely"

Destiny grinned at Lukas before she turned to leave the healing chambers.

"Good luck, Lukas. Trust me, you're going to need it," was Destiny's farewell, then she was gone.

Lukas smiled to himself. He knew Destiny wasn't warning him. She was only telling him a truth.

THREE

Present Day...

Star Hart was tired. Really fucking tired. Her mahogany-coloured skin radiated with health, yet her chocolate-brown eyes were wary and weary. All she wanted to do was go to sleep. And yet, here she was. Inside another club looking for another bastard that was breaking all of the rules.

Star was what human's termed a *Daywalker*. That was, she was half vampire and half angry/crazy woman, or so her last lover had claimed as he'd high-tailed it out of her apartment whilst pulling on his pants. Okay, so she'd come back to her apartment looking like an extra from a slasher film, but dammit, when you were the first *female* Justice—read: Assassin—for *The Society* you rarely had time to do the incidentals, like change out of your blood-soaked clothes. There was only so much one could do when she spent entire nights *disposing* of various non-human killers.

Star was a rarity being one of the few vampires who could kill without danger of being turned. Hell, almost everything about her was a rarity. Though she was considered a half-breed, Star was blessed with

uncanny skills that many ancient vampires coveted and would kill her for...if they thought they could get away with it.

Though she was almost four hundred years old, she was still young by vampire standards. And despite her youth and having much to learn, she was smart enough to be wary of other vampires. They coveted her powers; they coveted her relationship with Lord de Vires...strange as it was. It seemed the centuries had done nothing to stop the rumours that surrounded her and the Leader of Western Vampire Nation. Yes, the vampires coveted many things from her, but most of all, they coveted her destiny...and manufactured methods of taking it from her.

Few vampires would come straight out and attempt to take anything from her. No, they attempted to steal her destiny via subterfuge. The female vampires disguised their conniving under the guise of friendship; the male vampires (and even yet a few female vampires) disguised their conniving under the guise of love. Many male vampires had tried to seduce her, yet only few had the privilege of sharing her body, and none of those had ever succeeded in capturing her heart.

She laughed at the mention of her heart. Although there were rumours of her having one, Star didn't actually have a living, beating organ of that

kind. It was a good thing she didn't; else, she might care what others thought of her. Star was past giving a damn about that. She *was*, however, ready to knock someone the fuck out if anyone or anything else grabbed her ass as it walked past her.

Flicking her gaze towards the dance floor, she easily recognized the members of the Locke Brotherhood. They all had the distinct pleasure of being full-blooded vampires, thus placing them near the top of the vampire hierarchy, and a step above her when it came to their job. Being members of the Locke Brotherhood gave them the added boon of being both more admired and feared than other vampires. She didn't give a damn about admiration, but she wouldn't mind being more feared.

Star smiled at the irony of the situation. Though *The Society* relied on them to execute judgments, it was she who was most frequently summoned to research, locate, and occasionally deal with the often 'messier' situations. Star was the best at what she did. Though many questioned her pedigree and her past, no one ever questioned her ability to perform her job. Well, if people did, they certainly did not question her. Most vampires knew fucking with her was a sure way to be turned into a pile of ashes, which was among her favourite powers that she'd gained.

Though the Locke Brotherhood had more powers, she believed they were wary of her. That was why she did everything she could to avoid them like the Plague, especially after having lived through the Plague. If living through the Plague hadn't been enough, the presence of their all-seeing, all-knowing, arrogant bastard of a leader, Commander Lukas Montague was more than enough. Even though she loathed him, her eyes still locked onto him. As if sensing her watching him, he lifted his arrogant white-haired head and turned those ice-blue eyes on her. Blowing out a breath of disgust, Star raised her glass in mock salute before downing her usual drink—Coca-Cola, *sans* ice.

Turning her back to the dance floor, Star started to leave. Instead of the quick exit she anticipated, she walked directly into a solid, but warm brick wall. Raising her eyes, Star expected to be at eye level with whatever male she'd walked into being that she was five foot seven and was wearing boots with two-inch steel heels. Being that her mind was elsewhere, she didn't consider who it was standing in her way until she found herself looking a long way up into the eyes of Lukas Montague. *Damn.*

“My Little Star,” Lukas drawled. His voice was pure sex. *Bastard.*

Star didn't say anything; she merely continued to watch him as he stared down at her with eyes that turned silvery-blue when he was enraged. Biting her lip, she tried to keep her eyes from wandering to his hair. Damn, Lukas had beautiful hair. Pure white and falling to his waist, it was styled in his signature braid. Star knew his hair was silky...and dangerous. Lukas kept weaponry in his hair, as did she. Experience taught her Lukas wouldn't move away from her and her own stubbornness wouldn't allow her to back away from him. Her eyes narrowed when Lukas managed to crowd even further into her breathing space.

Star turned her head away from Lukas's penetrating gaze. "Lukas." It was neither a question nor a sentence; merely his name, but it was enough.

She was angry but she had only herself to blame. She'd been so lost in memories that she'd managed to get herself cornered by the one being she willed herself to avoid.

"You are unarmed?" he murmured against Star's ear. His breath was hot against her neck. Lukas phrased those three words like a question, but it was his roundabout way of warning her that he was going to search her to see for himself. *Oh, damn.*

Lukas didn't wait for Star's verbal answer before his big hands began to search her body. If one could call the sensual way Lukas's hands roamed down the

sides of her body, before curving over her ample hips, then smoothing over her ass, a search. Star averted her gaze from Lukas the whole time he “searched” her. She knew to look Lukas in the eye would betray what she was feeling—absolute *carnal lust*.

Star and Lukas had played this game so many times it was now second nature. Over the years, Lukas would appear out of nowhere and as always, she would be drawn to him. In all that time, Star and Lukas had only once ever done anything about the swirling sexual tension between them. Their lovemaking had been explosive and damned well nearly killed them both—literally. Even almost dying hadn’t stopped the lust between them. Instead of whatever it was between them waning and dying, it had increased tenfold. It seemed every decade that passed made it more and more impossible for Star to resist Lukas.

Lukas was almost an ancient. Star was sure that he was the last of his bloodline. He’d had an older brother, but when Viktor had turned *rogue*, he’d had to kill him himself. She remembered that night. He’d pursued her relentlessly, and that night she’d been unable to resist him. That was the night he too had almost joined his brother in ashes.

Being that Lukas was an ancient vampire, he was immune to many things; the harmful rays of the sun were the least among them. His family lineage, his

skills, his intelligence, his physical strength, all combined to make him powerful beyond belief. His blood was as pure as anyone who sat on *The Society*, yet it was known he didn't wish to be a member of the Justices for their people. Instead, he sought the physicality of punishment. His position in the vampire hierarchy, coupled with the fact he was the last of his bloodline, made Lukas a hot commodity to all single vampire females. Unfortunately, the only female he claimed to want was wary of him at the best of times and with good reason. A good two centuries had passed since their night of all-consuming, crazed lust, but Star could still feel Lukas every time she fucked some other male. She could still feel the tingling on her tongue whenever she fed.

Star was dragged out of her night-dream by the shrill voice. Star looked to see a woman being barred by Lukas's team. Though held back, the woman's tongue was under no such bondage.

Star gave a slight grin of amusement. This woman might loathe her, but she wasn't stupid enough to attack her physically.

"You better get back to your fans," Star said with a slight shove against Lukas. When she refused to look him in the eye, he gripped her chin and rubbed his thumb against her pulse. By sheer will, her heartbeat was steady; however, she knew Lukas could read

thoughts. He also knew she could easily block him, a fact that he detested. Star said nothing; she merely continued to stare at the crowd below them.

“Be careful, my little Star. Very bad things are arising,” Lukas spoke directly into Star’s ear as he rubbed circles over her pulse.

Continuing to block Lukas from her thoughts and keep her pulse steady beneath his touch was proving to be quite a task. It was even more so when Lukas used his fangs to nip at her earlobe before slowly scraping them down her neck to her collarbone. Star couldn’t help the moan that spilled from her lips. Feeling Lukas’s quick indrawn breath, she lost her tenacious hold on her powers, which allowed him to glimpse her thoughts and feel her staccato pulse against his mouth and tongue.

In spite of her momentary lapse, Star quickly re-gathered her powers. Forcing herself to find her sense, she pushed away from Lukas. The low growl he emitted directly in her ear and the erection pressing into her stomach let her know he wanted her. The protective way he shielded her body and hid her reaction from the rest of his unit told her he wasn’t letting go in a hurry. Shaking her head, Star leaned in for one brief moment and touched her lips gently to Lukas’s. *One kiss couldn’t hurt right?*

Star's fingers curled into Lukas's silky hair of their own will. She was careful not to cut herself on the razor-sharp blades he kept there. Damn, she loved this man's hair. She felt Lukas pull her tighter against him. They were so close it was as if they were naked. Determinedly, Star stopped fantasizing about what couldn't be and once again reigned in her lust. With a sigh of regret, she turned and walked away, head held straight. She made her way through the throng of beings, completely oblivious to both the invectives the woman hurled at her and the appreciation with which the Locke Brothers gazed at her.

~*~*~

"Lukas." Timothy, the second-in-command of the Locke Brotherhood, came to stand beside his commander.

Noting the question in Timothy's face, Lukas sighed.

"There are *rogues* everywhere," Timothy stated, expounding further.

Watching his friend's face, Lukas answered. "Take Boris and ensure that she reaches safety. She is not to be left alone under any circumstances."

Nodding, Timothy faded into the crowd.

Although he noted Timothy's whereabouts, Lukas's eyes remained on the retreating and tempting form of Astarla Hart. He noted that her spine was ramrod straight, her shoulders tense, and her tread confident. Lukas hid a smile.

Ah, his little Star was pissed at him but as always, she'd held her ground against him. Her defiance made him hard, but her lone figure amongst the crowd still had the power to make him forget he was the esteemed leader of the Brotherhood, that she was forbidden to him; but most of all, his little Star made him *want* to forget everything except for her and just fuck her like he knew she wanted and the way that he *needed*.

It is detrimental to your health... Lukas thought to himself. Feeling his body tense, he remembered the one and only time he and Star had been unable to deny their "attraction" to each other. The memory still caused him to go hard.

So lost in his memories he didn't see the statuesque redhead who ran her hand down his washboard abdomen, then grip his hardened cock within the leather pants.

"For me, darling? You shouldn't have," Calais said with lick of her somewhat cruel lips. Lukas removed her hand from his person and looked down at

the female vampire who had once believed they were meant to be together.

“I most definitely did not,” Lukas spoke softly. Calais curved her body around his so that she was now standing in front of him. She pouted at him trying to garner a more satisfactory response on his part. He knew her tricks and had long ago outgrown them and her, which was why he was able to look at her with dispassion.

Calais almost backed off from the look of absolute disdain and possibly hatred that glowed in Lukas’s eyes. Though instinct advised her to back away, she held her ground. Predictably, Lukas moved away from her. Calais sighed. She knew why Lukas hated her and she would feel the same way if she were in his position...but she *loved* him! Why couldn’t he see she had done it for them?! Why?!

“But, darling, who could possibly want you as I do?” Calais asked Lukas with a disappointed expression on her face.

Calais couldn’t suppress the shiver she felt as Lukas’s indifferent glare raked over her. In that moment—hell in every moment since that day, there’d been nothing inviting about Lukas.

“A stake through the heart would be more pleasurable,” Lukas said meaningfully.

Lukas watched Calais visibly pale, which was really saying something since she wore white pancake makeup atop her already waxen skin. Shaking his head, he wondered how he ever thought she was his true mate. Everything about the woman in front of him was artifice, opposite in every way to Star. How could he not see Calais was nothing more than a parasite—someone who garnered pleasure from someone else's pain? He could forgive numerous things, but he would never forgive Calais for her hand in the situation in which he'd found himself with Star for the past two centuries. Regardless of all of the facts, he laid the blame solely on Calais and nothing she did would ever convince him otherwise.

"Do not touch me," he said. Cold rage tightened his handsome features, his eyes going silver, making the break between his iris and the whites of his eyes indistinguishable.

"You used to love the way I touched you, Lukas. We can go back to that," she purred.

Calais stopped speaking upon seeing the tight line of his mouth. Lukas didn't react the way she'd expected. He didn't explode with anger; instead, he went ice cold. The grimace that spread across his luscious mouth held back fury she sure as hell didn't

want unleashed. Still, she couldn't stop the next words from her mouth. She never did subscribe to the maxim, "quit while you're ahead," because she was struck with avarice. Why accept part of anything when she could have it all?

"Has hell frozen over?"

Calais felt her cool slipping at Lukas's restrained question. She didn't have to look at his face when she could feel his fury, but she did anyway. Lukas was beautiful whether he was furious or passionate.

"Lukas, darling—" she began.

Lukas didn't move, but she felt the distance between them increase. Her beauty didn't affect him if his visage was any indicator. He regarded her as if she were something unpleasant he'd stepped in. In fact, he seemed he'd rather be dealing with something he stepped in than with her.

"Do not speak my name. Address me as 'Commander,' if you must address me at all. You have forfeited your right to be so familiar," he spat.

Calais was about to speak further, but self-preservation caused her to swallow her retort. Lukas didn't approach her. In fact, his only movement was a subtle shake of his arrogant head, but it was enough.

"No, you came between my true mate and me. You played with her life and yet you think you still have the right to speak to me, touch me? You have no

rights to do either, much less be in my presence. I'd even argue you don't have the right to live. You are nothing to me. If it were possible, you'd be less than nothing; but not even I, with all of my power, can manipulate the laws of nature or change the rules of existence."

"That bitch is not worthy of you! Astarla is a half-breed. She is not worthy enough to be your mate, much less fulfil your prophecy to become the leader of our nation!" she screeched.

Lukas moved so fast Calais didn't have time to back up as he loomed over her.

"Do not speak my True Mate's name, ever," Lukas snarled.

His fangs elongated, his eyes blazed white fire, and his anger robbed the room of warmth. Shivering, Calais knew then she had gone too far. She attempted to soothe him.

"Lukas..." she began. Backing up, she started again. "Commander Montague, there..."

Her attempts went unheeded. Lukas merely shook his head, negating her words and her.

"Leave. I am here on business," he spat before presenting his back to her. Lukas had effectively dismissed her. It couldn't end like this. Such a public rebuff by Lukas Montague would make her a social pariah.

Stepping forward she attempted to plead her case once more. Lukas silvery blue eyes blazed at her for a moment before he disappeared into the crowd.

Distance didn't make her feel any safer. His voice breeched her security and infiltrated her mind. *Stay away from Star. If anything happens to her, I will bring you to Justice in a heartbeat...and more importantly, I will enjoy it.* It wasn't his words that caused her to be wary. It was the accompanying laughter as he added the addendum. She'd received a similar warning every time she crossed Lukas's path, but this time it was laced with the kinds of promises that would put fear in any otherworldly being. She should know better by now.

A century ago she'd made the biggest mistake of her immortal life and every time she'd attempted to rectify what she'd done, Lukas rebuked her. Calais knew it would be safer for her to remain as far away as possible from Astarla Hart, but then Calais had never done things the safe way. She wanted Lukas and she'd never been denied anything in her entire, spoiled, immortal life. What Calais wanted, she got. Full stop.

FOUR

Though her posture belied it, Star walked the dark streets with confidence. Her assuredness was not due to her skill, but due to the fact she knew Lukas wouldn't let her leave the club alone. It just wasn't his style. Nevertheless, even though her physiology didn't allow the cold to penetrate her warm skin, she walked with her shoulders hunched against the icy wind. It was a habit she'd picked up from humans that allowed her to blend in. She was good at doing that, yet she didn't belong anywhere.

Shaking off her melancholy, Star rounded a corner and waited. Sure enough just moments later, Boris and Timothy appeared. They were so rushed that they literally bumped into Star. Lighting up a cigarette, she leaned against the alley wall and inhaled.

"Please tell your *commander*," she sneered the title in such a way that she might as well have substituted the word '*asshole*', "that I do not require your protection tonight," Star said softly as she took a last puff of her cigarette before flicking it away. Briefly noting the stunned looks that crossed their visages, she turned and went deeper into the alley.

She knew she'd surprised them, as it was the first time in nearly two centuries that she'd spoken to

them directly. In fact, she rarely spoke to any of the Brotherhood even though they nearly had the same job. Of course, there was no need for them to speak. Full-blooded vampires weren't all that talkative in the first place. When they did bother to talk, it was rarely to anyone below their station, which included most otherworldly beings. A half-breed like her didn't have a chance.

Luckily, she didn't need a chance or conversation. She just needed space to do her job. Usually, they gave it to her, even if they didn't fully understand why they should. They did know one thing, though—she had an extremely deadly protector even more powerful than their Commander.

It took Boris and Timothy a few seconds to catch up with her. When they did, they literally fell into step on each side of her.

Damn.

“So it's like that, huh?” Star asked without looking at either man. As she expected, neither of them answered, just nodded instead.

With a sigh, she stopped walking. Boris and Timothy stopped a few feet ahead of her. Star's head was bent so they couldn't see the anger and frustration on her face. Then again, those emotions were always there, she just normally didn't let them show. She should be used to it now. Somehow, the powers that be

always found a way to intrude upon her life without any thought at all about how she'd feel about it. Hell, her wants, needs, and desires never figured into the picture. They were afterthoughts...just like she was.

Sighing, Star pulled herself from those musings. Flicking her wrists, two long blades appeared in her palms. She tapped them together as Boris and Timothy stared at her wide eyed.

"Prin—" Boris stopped when Timothy elbowed him in the side.

"Astarla, we are under the order of Lord de Vires as well as Commander Montague to protect you."

Scowling, she asked. "Why?"

Neither Boris nor Timothy answered. They just blinked at her. Rolling her eyes, she exhaled noisily.

"Why am I being protected like this all of a sudden?" she asked patiently, although her expression clearly said, *men*.

"You've always been protected," Timothy said.

"But why do I suddenly warrant the protection of the second and third in command?"

"There has been a recent increase of *rogue* activity in the area—" Timothy began.

"Wow, I didn't notice," Star interrupted with sarcasm dripping from every word.

Timothy continued as if she'd not spoken. "These are not the run of the mill *rogues* that you are accustomed to. They are stronger, harder to kill—"

Star's raised eyebrow should've alerted the lieutenant to shut the fuck up, but of course being a *man* and an older pureblood vampire meant he was used to saying his piece. Despite her pissed-off-ness, she almost smiled; but the lieutenant's next words had her scowling again.

"And their prime target is you, Astarla," he finished.

"For real..." Star retracted the blades into the sheaths strapped to the insides of her forearms. "So why are they after me in particular?"

The two men shared a look before Timothy started to answer. "Unfor—"

Holding her hand up, she stopped him mid-word. "I know. You aren't at liberty to discuss that information with me. Whatever. Look, I've got to find some information. If you two are going to hover around like bad news, then at least loosen up a bit. The last thing I want to do is explain why two hulking guys are acting as my shadow," Star said before she turned and walked out of the alleyway. She didn't wait to find out if either man was following; she *knew* they would be.

Star walked into the all-night cyber café she frequented. A few of the steadfast gamers waved absent greetings as she passed them, not expecting them to do any more. Their ears covered by headphones, their eyes glued to the big-screen monitors that dominated the room, they were firmly immersed in the virtual world.

“What are we doing here?” Boris asked Star.

She turned to look at them before addressing the large Russian man. “This is where I find my information. Did you think that I just tripped over it, Boris?” Embarrassment or anger caused him to flush red. She noted the disapproving look Timothy threw her, but she was beyond caring. They were on *her* turf messing with *her* time. She didn’t have to like it and she couldn’t give two shits if either of them were less than amused.

Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you have to be a bitch. They’re just doing what they’re told.

Fine, Star argued with herself. Turning she looked the big Russian in the eye. “Sorry, man. Long night, you know? Don’t take it personal, dude.” She then moved to a spare monitor and keyboard and sat down.

The two men sat close by but didn’t interrupt her as she searched through the Internet for the facts that would bring her closer to the answers she needed.

Surfing through multiple Web pages, she garnered a little more information on subjects she was investigating, but nothing substantial. Sighing, she logged out.

“You guys hungry?” Star asked them as she waved to the owner of the cyber café. When neither answered, she looked back at them. They were staring at a particularly enthusiastic gamer who was killing...*vampires*. Laughing, Star squeezed in between the two men. Grabbing a hand of each, she dragged them out of the café.

“You can’t tell me that you two have never seen games like that,” Star said with a chuckle as they walked down the dark street. Not really expecting an answer, she dragged them towards the all-night diner she also frequented. As usual, she was greeted by name when she walked through the door. Instead of her customary booth, she selected a table so the two impossibly large males would have enough room.

“Hey, there, Star. Who’re your friends?” the amiable waitress asked as she handed out menus.

“Sue, meet Boris and Timothy. Guys, this is the most wonderful, amazing woman who shamelessly spoils me. She always has a few bags of O-negative on hand for me.”

Star watched as Boris and Timothy paled even more, which was quite a feat considering they already

looked like ghosts! Smiling, she watched as Sue grinned at her companions. Taking mercy on them, she gently squeezed Star's shoulder before admonishing her.

"Oh, stop it. You're going to scare these big fine men. Go on and decide on what you want to eat. Do you want the usual, Star?"

Star nodded and continued smiling at Boris and Timothy. She waited for Sue to leave, knowing they were dying to question her.

"How does this *human* know of our kind?" Timothy asked.

"You Locke Brothers need to get out more. Sue doesn't know anything. She used to tease me that I was like a vampire being that I'm always out at night. I joked back, cos' I have that thing called *a sense of humour*. That's our thing now. She teases and I joke," Star said with a casual shrug.

"Like sarcasm?" Boris asked so earnestly that Star didn't have the heart to diss his ass.

"Yes, like sarcasm, except it's just plain good old humour. Sue's knowledge of me doesn't go beyond what I like to eat in the middle of the night."

Timothy looked like he was about to say something else but the entry of three men stopped him. She noted that both he and Boris tensed and began visibly assessing the new customers Sue was

serving. The three good-looking men didn't seem out of the ordinary, but the slight red ring around their irises identified them as *rogues*.

"*Shifters* or vampires?" Boris asked Timothy.

"Both," Timothy and Star answered at the same time.

Boris looked impressed by her knowledge and his raised brow asked many questions.

Giving him a nonchalant shrug in response, she continued to peruse the three males who sat a few feet away.

"Should they be able to eat *human* food?" Star questioned as she watched the *rogue* vampires and *shifter* literally inhale the pie and ice cream they'd ordered.

"Like we said, Astarla, this new breed of *rogues* should not to be judged by the average rules of *rogues*," Timothy said quietly.

"They're up to no good. If they know I come here they've no doubt been through my place," she admitted.

"You will need to return to the Locke Mansion with us," Boris said softly.

Star shook her head. "That's not in the cards, boys. Let's just order, eat, and find out who's pulling the strings on these meat puppets," she said, using the derogatory name for *rogues*.

Sue returned to take Boris and Timothy's order and a few minutes later, she brought them their food. She also had a note for Star that was from one of the *rogues*. Deftly, she handed it to Star without Boris and Timothy seeing. Grateful for Sue's caution, Star read it quickly before screwing it up and throwing it onto the table with her napkin. Rising from her seat, she sighed when Boris and Timothy stood with her.

"Ladies' room, gentleman," Star said with a shake of her head. All three of them had noted the *rogues* hadn't stayed longer than it had taken to inhale their meals and pay their bill. They'd been gone for a good ten minutes by the time Sue had arrived with their food. Boris and Timothy had relaxed somewhat when the *rogues* had left...but *only* somewhat.

Walking though the door that led to the bathrooms, Star detoured right instead of left and walked into the kitchen. She was greeted by the two cooks who weren't surprised to see her in their domain. Before she got to the backdoor of the diner, Sue stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"I'm not sure you should meet them out there on your own, dear," Sue said with concern etched into her lined face. The lines were a testament that she'd seen so much, maybe too much, in her time as the owner and operator of the small, twenty-four hour diner.

Star grinned cheekily. “Sue, I’m fine. Just make sure that my two friends don’t take it upon themselves to follow.”

She knew Sue had doubts, but the other woman let her go with a quick hug.

As soon as Star stepped into the back alleyway of the diner, she felt the presence of the *rogues*. Though she couldn’t see them, she knew they were nearby. Sure enough, just as she rounded the corner that was lined with piles of empty boxes, she found them waiting for her.

“What’s the skinny, boys?” she asked as she came to halt a good five feet away from them.

They turned altogether and attacked without a word. Unsheathing her forearm swords, she prepared to engage. The *rogues* came at her left, right and dead centre. The one in the middle was the full *shifter* but he didn’t shift; he came at her in his human form. Star noted the *rogue* on her left was *shifter* and vampire and the *rogue* on her right was full vampire. None of them bared teeth or anything that was normal with *rogue* shit. Timothy was right—they really weren’t the average *rogues*. Star felt their rage as they attacked her and their combined power pushed her back a few feet.

SHIT!

Gathering her own powers, Star felt the familiar surge through her veins, and then she began to fight them in earnest.

Where is Astarla? Lukas's voice vibrated through Timothy and Boris's heads.

Both men answered immediately. *The ladies' room.*

Lukas's laugh was cold and angry. *Think again,* he snapped before disconnecting.

The two men rose from their seats and sent their senses searching. They felt the fight that was happening outside of the diner. Cursing, they threw some money onto the table as they rushed outside.

They found Astarla fighting two of the three *rogues* who'd been in the diner not more than twenty minutes ago. There were ashes showing where the third *rogue* had been vanquished. Both men unsheathed their weapons of choice. Boris fought with a Samurai sword gifted to him by a Japanese Warlord many moons ago; Timothy fought with two razor-sharp throwing knives.

It took no more than a minute of fighting before there was only Boris, Timothy and Astarla standing amongst swirling ashes in the alleyway. Astarla was breathing harder than normal but then, she'd been in the fight the longest. They were about to speak when

they heard the screams coming from the inside of the diner.

Star flashed herself inside of the diner. The entire place was full of flames. Sue was huddled behind the counter, trying to crawl away, but a *rogue* stood in her path. He kicked her in the face and Star heard the bones break beneath Sue's skin. She rushed the *rogue* and tried to stab him with her unsheathed swords, but he was able to deflect her parries. Star gathered her anger in an attempt to fight this motherfucker. Glimpsing Sue's pain-filled eyes, she redoubled her efforts.

What are you doing, little Star? Lukas's voice came into her mind as she ducked a deadly blow from the *rogue*.

Oh, you know. Just hanging, chilling, keeping it real. And you? Star answered as she tried again to ram both her short swords into the *rogue's* neck. He again deflected her attack. Cursing under her breath, she moved swiftly to the side as the *rogue* threw a punch that would've released her head from her shoulders.

"Run Sue!" Star yelled as she felt the *rogue's* big fist connect with the side of her face. Moving with the direction of the punch Star didn't feel as much of the impact, but she knew there was going to be a bruise. *Dammit!* Despite the sting of the punch, she saw Sue

was still sitting behind the counter, aptly watching the fight between Star and the *rogue*. Star had to finish this fight with the quickness so she could get Sue to safety.

She'd just stabbed the *rogue* in the throat when the support beams above her head fell and knocked the breath out of her. Feeling the lick of the hungry flames on her back, she was still able to see *and* hear Sue's screams. Though she attempted to claw her way past the oncoming oblivion, she was not successful. Her last thought before everything went black was *FUCK!*

~*~*~

Lukas bathed Star's burns gently with cool cloths. He knew her injuries would heal, but they were taking too long and he didn't want her feeling any pain—even if she were unconscious. His own anger blazed as hotly as the burns on his Star's body, but his touch was gentle and loving as he did what was necessary. Lukas looked up as someone *dared* to flash into the hotel room he'd reserved in order to tend to Star away from the Locke Brotherhood.

The ruler of the Western Vampire Nation appeared two feet from the bed where Star lay. The man who was both feared and revered moved

cautiously to the bed. Kneeling beside Star's prone body, he held one of his large hands just above the burning welts on her back and shoulders. Glancing at Lord de Vires, Lukas saw his expression revealed nothing, yet it was that nothingness that concerned him. Lord de Vires's black eyes were focused on Star. It only took Lord de Vires nanoseconds to heal her, but every moment she felt pain was a moment too long. When Lord de Vires finished, the sole reminders of her fight were the burnt clothes.

Only when she was completely healed did the ruler move, Lukas standing and joining his leader out the room and into the hall.

"You must convince her to stay with you," Lord de Vires said softly.

"Of course," Lukas replied.

Lord de Vires started to take his leave, but he paused and spoke quietly once more. "Thank you." He was gone before Lukas could answer.

Lukas frowned. Something about Lord de Vires's arrival and departure niggled at him. He couldn't put his finger on it but he knew it was important. He would have to solve that puzzle later. For now, he had a little vampire to take care of...and tell off good and proper. Stepping back into the hotel room, he found the bed empty and the window open. Shaking his head, Lukas gathered his clothes and left the room to

hunt the only female in existence who frustrated him to no end, yet remained the only female whom he'd never be able to let go.

In his haste, he failed to notice that the bathroom door was open and that Star's shirt and jacket were still on the chair by the window.

~*~*~

Star stared at the remains of the diner. She had no idea if Sue had survived and even if she had, whether or not she'd appreciate a visit from Star. After all, the shit had gone down because of her.

Star moved down the street away from the ashes that used to be her favourite eatery. She'd only taken a few steps when her cell phone began to buzz. Surprised it was still working she pulled it from her pocket and answered it.

"Yeah?"

"What's happening, Starbright?" Destiny Smith's husky voice asked cheerfully.

Star couldn't stop the smile that spread over her face. Of course, only her sister would call her at a time like this. It was as if the two of them had some kind of connection. Neither could be upset without the other knowing.

"Not much, you?" she answered.

“Blah blah, the usual bullshit, so how’s the only female Justice known to vampire kind doing?” Destiny asked.

“And if I said I was fine?” Star asked.

“I’d say that you were lying your beautiful ass off,” Destiny replied smoothly.

Star laughed. “And I bet you’re saying that while separating yourself from some clingy male.”

“Yeah well, that happens when you’re as hot as I am,” Destiny said. “Now stop bullshitting me. Something’s been clawing away at my insides and I saw an image of a burned-down building. Did you set it on fire? And whose ass do I need to kick?”

“No, I didn’t set it on fire and you don’t need to come kick anyone’s ass just yet.”

“How do you feel?”

“Tired, Dessie. Very, very tired,” Star answered as she slipped on her black sunglasses and continued down the street, heading home to an apartment she hardly ever saw anymore. Briefly, she wondered why she continued to pay rent. Oh, that was right—*she* didn’t! Star grinned to herself at the humourless thoughts that passed through her brain.

“Tell those old fuckers you want a break. It’s not like there isn’t anyone else to take up the slack!” Dessie yelled.

Stopping, Star pressed the button for the crosswalk.

“Destiny, that is not how things are done in *The Society*,” Star answered sarcastically.

“Oh, fuck ’em! Enough about those bags of bones. Hooked up with anyone lately?”

Star smiled as she crossed the street. Only her sister could get in a dig at the ruling heads of the Western Vampire Nation and her sex life in the same sentence.

“Sorry to disappoint, Dessie. I just haven’t had time—” she began and stopped when she heard Destiny snort rudely.

Star actually laughed out loud, completely missing the appreciative glances from the passing males intrigued by the sensual sound of her laugh and the sway of her impressive ass.

“Bullshit! You’re just so damned *focused* woman! Come out to my place for a while. We’ll party. We’ll feed. We can get some good fucking in while you’re out here.”

Finally reaching her apartment, Star knew the door had been kicked in at some point although it was closed. With a sigh, she headed inside before answering Dessie.

“Not everything is that cut and dry, Dessie,” Star said as she deftly stepped over her things that were

either broken or tossed willy-nilly all over her apartment.

“You know what, Astarla Hart? Your coochie is going to be cut and dried by the time you get around to some good loving. How’s Commander Montague? You let him lick you out like he’s dying to?”

Star howled with laughter as the one person she didn’t expect to be in her apartment lifted a dark blond eyebrow at her. She knew Lukas could hear what Destiny was saying. She also knew Dessie knew and didn’t care.

“You are too much, Dessie. Let me give you a call back later. I’ve got some cleaning to do,” Star said while holding Lukas’s gaze.

“Fine. Tell the Commander hello!” Dessie laughed as she clicked off. Star was left watching Lukas Montague standing in the middle of the rubble that had once been her semi-clean apartment. Stepping over the artwork that had come courtesy of some talented ten-year olds she’d befriended when she moved into the neighbourhood, she considered Dessie’s laughter.

Star thought about the secret she’d kept so well-hidden from...everybody—including her best friend and sister. So many years had passed since Star had allowed herself to think about the night she’d spent in Commander Montague’s arms. She hadn’t wanted to

keep it a secret but the resulting fallout had convinced her otherwise. She could still hear Calais's outrage, the vampire to whom Lukas had been betrothed. At that point in time, Star had thought it best to pretend that night had never happened.

And now?

She was right back in the thick of things and once again Calais was the problem in her relationship with Lukas Montague. Despite the need to be near him, guilt caused Star to stay away. She'd punished herself because that fucking bitch had made it near impossible for Star to go anywhere without being bombarded by constant rumours and questions—rumours she could neither fight nor deny, so she'd remained silent.

"Where have you been?" Lukas snapped the question.

Not even bothering to remove her sunglasses, Star looked at him for a moment. With a shake of her head, she moved towards the spiral staircase that would take her to the second floor of her apartment and her bedroom. Lukas grabbed her arm and spun Star around to face him.

"I asked you a question," he bit out between clenched teeth.

Star jerked her arm out of his grasp. "What do you want Lukas? As you can see, I'm more than aware

that there are *rogues* after me and that they're stronger than I've ever encountered, so I'm going to take a hiatus and wait this out," Star lied through her teeth. She could still smell the smoke of the fire that had engulfed the diner.

"She is alive and well *and* she wants to see you," Lukas said softly as she walked away.

Star stopped in her tracks. Slowly, she turned to face him. "Who?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Sue," Lukas answered.

Sending up a quick prayer of thanks, Star did her best to appear calm.

"I'm glad," Star said honestly before flashing herself into her bedroom. Just like the rest of her apartment, it was totally wrecked. She searched through the debris and picked out bits and pieces that she wanted to take with her. Nothing in her apartment was of importance to anyone else but her.

"That's all you have to say?" Lukas asked her as he stood close behind her.

She didn't even pause as she threw things into a leather satchel. Instead, she answered over her shoulder. "I like Sue. I'm glad that she didn't die," Star said.

Now that she knew Sue's fate, she could concentrate on other things such as packing and

getting the fuck away from Lukas Montague. She could go as soon as she found that one last thing.

Star began to search in earnest. After five minutes of muttered curses and mumbled conversation with herself, Star knocked heads with Lukas who was on his hands and knees looking with her. Their eyes met. The heat sizzled. Star blinked, trying to blank her thoughts, but it didn't work. She wasn't able to control anything in her body. Her nipples got hard and her breathing became laboured.

Dammit.

Looking up, she noticed Lukas's fangs descending and his eyes darkening. She was happy to see she wasn't the only one affected. Swallowing, Star broke eye contact.

"What are you looking for?" Lukas asked Star huskily.

"Pendant," she answered as she returned to searching.

"Your silver one?" he asked.

Star stopped searching and looked at Lukas with a frown. "Yeah," she answered as she swept her hand beneath some broken frames that had once held pictures of herself, Destiny, and Jaylee. Finally, Star found it. The chain was broken, but the pendant remained unscathed. Quickly pocketing it, she got to her feet.

Lukas knelt before her. Looking up into her face, he slowly rose to his feet and stepped forward. They stood scant millimetres apart.

“Star—” he rasped as he reached for her.

Sidestepping his touch, she flashed out of her apartment and literally hit the ground running as she reappeared in an alleyway a few blocks from her wrecked home. She slowed as she rounded the corner and lost herself in the throng of people walking on the sidewalk.

You cannot run forever, little Star Lukas’s voice whispered huskily in her mind. She ignored him but couldn’t help the tiny frisson of desire that raced through her blood at the sound of his laughter. She walked faster.

~*~*~

Star was back in the nightclub she’d been in twenty-four hours ago. No sleep and nowhere *to* sleep made for a very cranky vampire. She was contemplating the fact that the Fates seemed to love fucking with her peace of mind when she caught sight of the person she’d been calling in every favour to find—her other sister, Jaylee Sorenson.

Star watched her casually stroll through the horde of people packed onto the writhing dance floor.

She was so focused on Jaylee that she missed the *rogues* who had entered the nightclub. Descending the stairs to get to her sister, Star forgot everything in her overwhelming joy that Jaylee was not just alive but healthy by the looks of her. Star grabbed her sister's arm as she finally caught up to her. Jaylee turned, her teeth bared, and snarled in Star's face, but Star simply dragged her sister off of the dance floor and out through one of the back doors.

Jaylee sneered. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Star turned to finally face Jaylee. "Where have you been? I've been trying to find you—"

"Why?" Jaylee cut Star off. The two women stared at each other. There was something off about Jaylee. Star felt it as she watched her sister look at her. It was the slight curl of her lip as she spoke to her; it was the scowl on her face as she looked at her; it was the...hatred that burned inside of Jaylee, which suddenly came at Star full force. But more than that, it was the fact Jaylee's eyes had a red ring around them. Star shook her head, not wanting to believe it; but her eyes and her heart confirmed it. Her sister was *rogue*.

Star was so stunned. For almost an entire century, Jaylee had avoided contact of any kind. Whenever Star had brought it up to Destiny, she'd changed the subject; but now, finally seeing her sister

properly, Star knew there was more to Jaylee being *rogue*. However, she doubted Jaylee was going to be so forthcoming with any answers anytime soon—if ever.

“How’ve you been?” Star knew it was a lame question, but she was unsure as to how to approach *this* Jaylee.

“What do you want Star?” Jaylee asked her coldly.

“It’s been a while since—”

“Oh, please,” Jaylee said angrily as she held up a hand to halt Star’s speech.

“What?”

“How’s Destiny?” Jaylee asked instead.

Star frowned. “She’s fine—”

“Of course she is, considering the fact she’s a traitorous bitch,” Jaylee spat.

Star scowled at Jaylee. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jaylee threw back her head and laughed. It was by no means a happy sound.

“Of course, Princess Star wouldn’t know what’s going on. After all, you have to be so proper being that you’re the big man’s only female Justice after two thousand years I might add,” Jaylee said bitterly.

“Jaylee, talking in riddles is not—”

Jaylee got in Star's face and continued. "Stay away from me Star."

"We're sisters."

"The hell we are! When Destiny literally handed me to the wolves on a silver platter any connection we all had died. You can thank your precious *sister* for that. Now leave me the fuck alone!" Jaylee snarled and turned, walking away.

Star caught up with Jaylee and yanked her arm until she stopped. She saw the attack coming. Moving deftly to the side to avoid the clawed hand Jaylee swiped her way, Star retaliated with a swift and deadly sword without thought. Jaylee only *just* managed to avoid the razor-sharp edge. The two women separated and stood five feet away from each other, warily watching the other for any sign of an impending attack. Jaylee sighed and with a curl of her lip, she turned and walked away again without another look at Star. And Star just let her go, knowing one or both of them would perish if she did not.

Star thought Destiny was indeed right and maybe she did need a vacation. Hmmm, how did one ask *The Society* for some vacation time?

Yeah, so, look, I've been working pretty much every single day since being born. Ah, I was wondering if, you know, I could get some time off? Maybe a month or two? I mean, what's a month or two of vacation when I've really been working my tail off for the past four hundred years and I've yet to get a break?

Star shook her head. She wasn't going to get a vacation regardless of how good of an argument she presented. She knew she could argue a point to death, but the shitty part of it all was *The Society* knew she wouldn't even ask.

Silently, she continued to stare out of the window of the café that was brimming with people even though it was out of the way. People were having brunch and chattering away happily. There were even a few babies thrown into the mix and their happy gurgling made Star clench her teeth together.

Babies. They were the favourite meal of *rogue* vampires. The pure and innocent blood of a child was irresistible to them. And this was the reason for Star

being in the café. There had been a message left on her cell phone informing her of the new developments. It seemed the band of *rogue* vampires that had infiltrated her city was the most lethal anyone had ever faced. Star knew she was going to have her work cut out for her. That thought only made her more aware that she hadn't slept since her earlier encounter with Lukas Montague at the club.

Dammit, the man was like a drug. Star wanted him *bad* but was smart enough to know that was *not* going to happen any time soon. She had work to do; and regardless of how many different positions she could twist into whilst riding Lukas, regardless of the myriad ways he could make her come like it was her first-ever orgasm, regardless of the number of times she'd dreamt of how good it would feel to have Lukas one more time, she knew she and Lukas could never be. She needed to get away from all of this, yet she needed it so much.

Almost as much as you need Lukas to scratch that itch, girl! the mocking voice in her head piped up. Funny how that voice sounded like Destiny. Star shook her head back fast. The prickling in her scalp warned her that she wasn't the *only* Otherworldly being in the vicinity, but she was beyond listening. Star threw some bills on the before table rising. With a grace and elegance she didn't know she had, she walked out of

the café. Standing on the footpath, she watched the steady stream of traffic pass. Big hands gripped her hips from behind as hard muscles moulded to her back.

“Let me go,” Star said through gritted teeth.

She felt Lukas smile against her ear. “You don’t mean that, my little Star.”

His deep voice making goose bumps rise and sprinkle all along her arms, Star thrust a lethal elbow backwards that connected with the solid concrete that was Lukas’s abdomen. Of course his fucking muscles did not give...at all. Frustrated, Star attempted to wiggle out of his grasp. Not looking where she was going or what was coming, she tried to step off of the curb. Using his preternatural speed, Lukas’s arms wrapped around her from behind and pulled her out of the way of an oncoming truck. His body was tense and battle ready. Star pressed her thighs together in an attempt to stop herself from rubbing against the arrogant motherfucker’s amazing body.

“Cease this *now*,” Lukas commanded, inserting compulsion in his voice, trying to bend Star’s mind to his will. Lukas held her still with one arm whilst his free hand threaded into her hair, pulling so her head lay on his chest.

Star ignored the compulsion and started to bring her clenched fist up, but Lukas just pulled on her hair

a little more. It didn't hurt; it only served to remind her he literally held all of the control in their little power struggle.

Gnashing her teeth together in frustration, she ordered, "Let go of me, Lukas."

Star, you are in danger. I can't allow you to execute justice on your own— he began mentally. Star ripped herself away from Lukas and turned on him so fast he didn't have time to grab her again. Star stabbed a finger into Lukas's chest and responded out loud.

"No! I know what I'm doing, Lukas. You have no right to interfere. I answer only to *The Society*! I'm not part of the Locke Brotherhood, so you do not get to command me!"

Lukas wrapped a hand around the back of Star's neck. He towered over her and she couldn't help but see his eyes shifting between silver and bright blue.

Do not defy me, little Star! he rasped softly inside her head.

She lifted her chin as the grip Lukas had on the back of her neck tightened.

"Do not order me around, Lukas," she responded.

Lukas lowered his head so that his lips rested against Stars. She was about to speak when Lukas used all of his restrained power to say one word out loud and in her head.

“*Sleep.*”

Lukas watched Star’s eyelids slowly lower. He smiled triumphantly but his glory was fleeting. Raising her head a little, her chocolate eyes stared at him for a moment before she suddenly disappeared. Lukas closed his eyes. He’d lost her—again.

~*~*~

Destiny felt the shift in the air around her as someone flashed into her house. Well, her apartment, which was located above her beloved four-car garage that housed her tools and project-of-the-moment, a 1968 Plymouth Barracuda. She knew whoever had flashed into her home wasn’t a threat. Getting up off her bed where she’d been reading *her* version of porn—a muscle car magazine—Destiny padded through her apartment. She found Star sitting on the veranda railing cool as a cucumber.

“Hey, Star,” Destiny said, as if her sister appearing out of nowhere was *normal*, which for the *Troika*, it was. At least for Star and Destiny, Jaylee however, Destiny pushed the thought out of her mind before Star got wind of it. Grabbing two cans of Coke,

she handed one to Star as her sister gave her a sad smile.

“How can I want the one man who could kill me without a thought?” Star asked.

~*~*~

Star lay in the fading moonlight in Destiny’s spare room, which was really a nice way of describing the room that was full of magazines and books Destiny had collected over their extensive years. Every single one of them was about cars. She had spotted one particular book that was leather bound that she was sure that Destiny must’ve purchased when the combustible engine had just become a reality. Sitting amongst Dessie’s numerous books and magazines, she wondered if Dessie was obsessed. Star wished her own obsession was something inanimate. Of course that would’ve been too easy. Oh, no, Star Hart had to have a *big* thing for Lukas Montague!

Dammit.

Little Star, you cannot hide forever, Lukas’s amused voice came into Star’s head.

While she decided to ignore her feelings for Lukas, she wasn’t about to ignore his laughter. *Fuck off, Lukas. I’m on vacation.*

Lukas's laughter made her nipples harden. Being able to communicate telepathically with the man she lusted after was such an intimate thing.

Why so cruel, Little Star?

Why do you care, Lukas? Don't you have better things to do than stalk me?

Oh, Star, if I were truly stalking you, then you'd have no idea that I was right beside you...

Star sat up and looked around the small room made smaller by the mountain of books and magazines. Chiding herself silently, she lay back down on the cot and pulled the coverlet over her head, intending to fully ignore Lukas's hypnotising voice.

No rebuttal? Lukas asked her.

I'm tired. I just want to sleep, Star said with a touch of petulance. She couldn't believe the damnable man had reduced her to hiding beneath the covers!

Then sleep my, Little Star. We shall continue our conversation when you are more rested, Lukas said.

Star made herself more comfortable. She was just about to doze off when the bastard whispered one last thing.

Dream of me like I dream of you, Little Star. Sweet dreams.

Star punched her pillow, wishing it was Commander Montague's face, and closed her eyes

knowing Lukas was finally gone from her mind. Making herself comfortable once more, Star drifted to sleep with the memory of how Lukas's body and voice could make her come.

☛☛☛ **YEARS EARLIER**

Star thought training with Lukas Montague was a mission in patience and torture. She washed the days sweat and dirt from her body in the mountain stream that was really just a smidge smaller than a river.

The freezing cold water was a result of the ice on top of the mountains in God-only-knew-where melting. And really it should've dulled the ache inside of Star that was constantly throbbing where Lukas was concerned. Of course it didn't. And Star's nipples pebbled painfully as she closed her eyes and groaned while picturing Lukas before he'd finished their training that day.

Since it was early spring, it was still quite cool in the mountains; yet, working out all day had them both perspiring. Star knew her sweat wasn't all because of the rigorous training Lukas demanded of her. As soon as Lukas had removed his shirt and continued with training, she was one-hundred percent sure her sweaty, hot body had *nothing* to do with the training.

But she'd continued, using her frustration at wanting what she shouldn't to spar with the skillful

Lukas. He was a taskmaster when it came to her training—a taskmaster who didn't tire or give a damn if she were tiring. He didn't allow her a respite from his constant training. And though Star wanted to protest, she knew what he was teaching her was invaluable. So she kept up, kept pushing; and after four weeks of their training, she realised how her body had changed.

Destiny's healing always had a way of making patients stronger than when they were injured. It was a subtle change, but it was there. Star felt the muscles in her body strengthen threefold with each day that she trained with Lukas. Funnily enough, it wasn't as much of a physical change as it was an internal change that amazed Star.

The first week with Lukas had been spent testing her limits, and he'd been cordial and polite the entire time. Not once had the Vampire she'd met three months ago made an appearance. One part of Star was thankful. The remaining parts of her were yelling and screaming she was a liar.

Star had never been attracted to another Vampire quite like Lukas Montague. He was a pure breed, meaning one-hundred percent ancient Vampire blood ran through his veins. He was also a Locke Brother. That in itself was more than enough to make

Star run in the opposite direction. Locke Brothers were the elite of the elite.

The Locke Brothers hunted and executed *rogues*. When that was seen to, they hunted and pleased women so much so that their carnal activities were as legendary as their Locke duties.

Lukas was definitely the kind of Vampire Star usually avoided, outside of the Vadoma family who'd always been at the home Lord de Vires had made for herself, Destiny, and Jaylee.

The Vampire males Star had known before Lukas Montague were loners and/or outright outcasts. She'd appreciated they didn't want to gain a name for themselves by being with her. Sure, there had been a few who'd tried to use her connections, but her sisters had dealt with them severely. Star had never regretted taking the necessary actions to avoid a messy break-up.

That thought brought a smile to Star's face;, she doubted many thought a break-up with a partner ended in death, but then they probably weren't *Otherworldly* beings.

Star was so lost in her thoughts she missed the deeply indrawn breath and sudden groan of frustrated pain emitted from the male watching her.

Lukas balled his hands into fists as his eyes devoured the naked, wet Astarla Hart who stood mere feet away from him. He knew he should walk away like something chased him. He also knew he wasn't going to do that, either.

For four weeks, he'd remained cold and polite with the baby Vamp. For four weeks, he'd walked, slept, and trained with a raging hard on. The voice in his head mocked him every night as he lay pretending to sleep when just a few feet away the female that broke his concentration just by breathing lay deep in slumber.

The colder he was with the baby Vamp, the better she was when they trained. The more skilful she became, the harder his cock grew in her presence, and the more Lukas had to work at keeping his professional appearance. But it was taking its toll.

Just that morning, he'd flashed to the top of the mountains where the hidden ice lake lay. The ice particles bobbed on the surface of the unfrozen lake, and Lukas had spent at least an hour fully submerged in the sub freezing water. It was his purpose to dull the pounding blood that was constantly making him hunger for the baby Vamp.

Star had done nothing to encourage his ardour. But as Lukas had finally admitted to himself,

everything Star did made him insane with need for her.

Lukas closed his eyes and allowed one of his fists to unfurl to reach into his leather trousers and pull his painfully hard cock free. He gripped the rock hard flesh in his fist and groaned at the pleasurable sensation his own hand gave him.

“*Lukas!*” his eyes snapped open and what he saw had him literally shaking with the need to mate with the baby Vamp. With her body turned to give him a side view of her voluptuous curves, Lukas almost came all over his own pumping fist as he watched the baby Vamp slowly finger her pussy.

“*Lukas,*” she moaned again and Lukas knew he wasn’t going to last another moment, but he used every ounce of willpower left in his slowly malfunctioning brain to slow his strokes. He wanted to hear and watch his baby Vamp orgasm before he gave over to the same pleasure.

He didn’t have to wait long for Star’s other hand to come up and pinch and pull at her stiff, pointed nipples. Holding his breath, he had to bite down on his lip in order to prevent himself from biting his tongue off. With two more pulls and pinches of those no doubt delicious nipples, his baby Vamp threw her head back so her hair literally whipped against her

mouth-watering ass; and she gasped, shuddered, and groaned in orgasm as she yelled his name.

“*LUKAS!*” Hearing his name spill from her mouth, he almost yelled his triumph aloud.

~*~*~

Destiny was working on her car, yet she knew the second Lord de Vires flashed into her garage. Taking the time to wipe her hands, she faced the only man she'd ever had to call *father*.

“Lord de Vires,” she greeted him with a kiss on his cheek.

Lord de Vires placed a finger under her chin and made her look up into his eyes.

“What is wrong, Ajali?” he asked her.

“Star’s here and she’s not doing too good. You guys work her too hard,” Destiny said with raised eyebrows in his direction.

Lord de Vires had the graciousness to look sheepish, well as best the undisputed leader of Western Vampire Nation could.

“Did she speak of the threat to her life?” Lord de Vires asked.

“You mean apart from the normal ones she faces every *other* day?” she asked.

Lord de Vires scowled. His black eyes searched Destiny's expression. "What do you mean?"

"Forget it. Yeah, she told me about that cunt Calais using super-powered *rogues* to get to her," Destiny covered her past comment. She watched as Lord de Vires's mouth twitched at her method of expressing her dislike for the vampire who'd been instrumental in making her sister's life hell.

"She was injured..." Lord de Vires let his sentence hang.

Destiny turned away from him then and walked back to the Barracuda.

"I helped her with salve and other products. She's doing fine. No discomfort."

Lord de Vires shook his head slowly, but Destiny didn't see the movement since she had her back to him.

"Ajali, you are the greatest healer—" he began.

Destiny slammed the bonnet of the Barracuda with a decidedly loud bang before she turned to face Lord de Vires.

"How's Jaylee?" she asked him angrily.

Lord de Vires reached out to Destiny, but she sidestepped around him.

"Ajali, it was unavoidable—" he said.

Destiny shook her head as she placed her tools into the velvet-lined tool box. She snapped the lid

down and placed the padlock onto the heavy box before answering.

“Yeah, that’s what helps me to sleep at night,” she said sarcastically. With a sigh, she turned to face Lord de Vires, missing the fleeting look of sadness that had passed over his face at her words.

“I will take my leave now. I have two of my own personal guards on each entrance and exit; they will ensure that you and Astarla are safe. And they will report to me, so no shenanigans,” Lord de Vires said, showing his dry humour.

Shaking her head, Destiny responded. “I can neither confirm nor deny that won’t happen.”

Lord de Vires pressed a kiss to Destiny’s forehead; then with a sliver of a breeze, he was gone.

Destiny walked through her apartment and grabbed a bottle of ice-cold Coke, walking out onto the balcony. Usually busy in the daylight hours, the street was now virtually deserted except for the four hulking figures that stood sentry at her doors downstairs. Destiny didn’t argue with Lord de Vires when it came to him always providing guards or protection. After four hundred years she was used to it. Destiny sighed as she felt her loneliness creeping up on her. Taking a long swallow of her soda, Destiny pushed the feelings back where they belonged and walked back into her

apartment, ensuring to leave her melancholy mood outside.

SEVEN

Lukas watched the gentle rise and fall of Star's chest as she slept. His body clenched at the sound of Star whispering in her sleep—the sleep he had placed her under. She would want to kick him in the nuts when she woke up and he would fully understand that, but he wouldn't hesitate to do it again. She obviously needed it as she muttered and moaned while she slept.

Lukas...Lukas...Lukas...

Lukas heard her whispers before they left her sweet, full-lipped mouth, and he groaned as he saw into her dreams.

Oh, god...

He saw himself rutting the living daylights out of Star in *her* dream. He stood and moved away from her tempting body. He loved this woman above all else. As hard as she pulled at him, as much as he desired her, he would do nothing to ever break his True Mate's trust—no matter how many threats and demands his body made.

☾☾☾ YEARS EARLIER

“Viktor Montague, you have been charged with treason against Lord de Vires, ruler of the Western Vampire Nation and insurrection against the Locke Brotherhood. How do you plead?” Cosmas asked.

Lukas watched his brother’s features tighten at the standard question asked of all who were on trial. In reality, the question was a mere courtesy. Once it got to trial, the next step was usually an execution adjudication.

“Guilty of killing the weakness that permeates our once great Nation!” Viktor yelled defiantly as he raised his hand that held the dagger, and he would’ve plunged it into Star’s chest if a delicate brown hand hadn’t come out of nowhere and stopped him.

~*~*~

Destiny and Star sat with their feet propped up on the railing that surrounded Destiny’s balcony while sipping their sodas and contemplating the full moon that hung low in the horizon in front of them.

“Do you ever wish that you were human?” Star asked her sister as another group of drunken teenagers stumbled past Destiny’s house.

“Nah, too many problems,” Dessie revealed.

Star smiled and gave her sister a pointed look. “Oh, and our lives are just peachy right?”

Destiny shrugged casually. “We want for nothing. We’ve lived through times that humans can only refer to in history books. We’re sexy-ass bitches and smart as all get out. What’s *not* to like about that?”

Star sighed. “We’ve seen and lived through *too* much. Hell, yeah, we’re sexy and damned straight we’re smart...but it would be easier to be human. You live your lifetime and die. Sure, there’s other shit that goes on in between but you don’t watch everything that’s familiar to you die—friends, the earth. And you definitely don’t have as long to pine after a man that you can never have.”

Destiny grinned. “So, the Commander is still pissing you off, eh?”

Star grimaced. “When is he not? He’s so fucking arrogant and bossy—”

“And hot,” Destiny threw in.

“And he never ever listens to what I have to say—”

“But so sexy,” Destiny countered.

“I want to stab him more often than not,” Star said.

“As much as you want to suck his co—”

Star threw a cushion at her sister’s head. Destiny avoided it and burst into laughter that easily drew Star in. “You are so bad.”

“And you are, for some unknown reason, denying your coochie a good fucking! Okay, so the Commander isn’t my type *per se*, but even a blind, deaf, mute, and zombie woman would see how hot he is for *you* and *you* only!”

Star shook her head, staring into the darkness.

“You can’t deny it forever, Star. You *know* that you want the Commander...*hard*,” Destiny continued when her sister didn’t speak.

“I saw Jaylee,” Star began.

Though Star met her eyes head on, Destiny’s expression didn’t change. “Is she all right?”

Star shook her head. “I think she’s *rogue*.”

Destiny’s eyes slid shut and she rubbed the heel of her hands against them. She looked decidedly defeated.

“What happened with you two?” Star asked softly.

“How do you feel about Chinese for dinner? I’m dying for some fried rice,” Destiny said instead of answering the question.

“Dessie,” Star prodded.

Destiny shook her head. “I don’t want to get into it. Now, come on, I promised my sister a good time and the best place to start—”

“Jaylee said you handed her to the wolves. What does that mean?” Star asked in a no-nonsense tone.

As if a cloud had suddenly covered the sun, Destiny's good humour disappeared. Her jaw clenched and she looked away from her sister her profile stone cold.

"I have no idea—"

"Dessie, never lie to me," Star warned.

"And don't treat me like I'm a child. Don't you think I would've told you if I wanted you to know, Star? Leave things alone," she said before stalking into her apartment, leaving Star stunned, alone, and wondering what the hell had gone on between her sisters to make them so angry at each other.

~*~*~

Leaning back in his plush leather swivel chair, the man contemplated the red-haired woman sitting across from him. With an evil twist of his lips that was meant to pass as a smile, he spoke in a thin, raspy voice.

"And why should I help you?"

Even though she'd entered into this agreement with her eyes wide open, Calais could barely meet the grotesque man's gaze. When he'd approached her and offered a chance at revenge, she hadn't predicted *this*.

“You said you would,” she said. Though she attempted to insert assurance in her voice, her words sounded feeble to her own ears.

Expecting compliance, she wasn’t prepared for his response. He laughed—kind of. It was a horrible sound, as if the air from his lungs was being forced out. She tried her hardest not to flinch.

“Well, Calais if I said I would, then obviously I must, eh?”

Even if there was a joke somewhere in his words, the humour was lost on her although his emphasis on the word ‘said’ was not. Before Calais could contemplate his laughter, a female entering the office disrupted her. The woman didn’t acknowledge her. She simply walked around the desk and spoke softly in the vicinity of where the grotesque man’s ear should’ve been. Nodding, he made a gesture with his hand and the woman turned and left the office as silently as she’d arrived...and without acknowledging her presence. Though Calais was angry, she remained stiffly seated and quiet, waiting for him to speak.

“It seems that you’re in luck, Calais. The Justice has been found. You will get another chance at removing this woman from your life. Go home. I will call you with the details.”

Smiling, she stood. ”Thank you.”

“Don’t forget, Calais. You are indebted to me.”

Though she was basking at the chance to exact revenge on the object of Lukas's fascination, she couldn't help the shiver of unease that spread through her body at his words. Nodding jerkily, she hurriedly left the office without looking back. She got the distinct feeling those five words were going to come back to haunt her with a vengeance.

~*~*~

Star had no idea what awakened her. Though she was surrounded by silence, as soon as she opened her eyes, she sent her senses probing. She could feel *something* in the air.

Dessie are you all right?

There's something or someone in my fucking house! Destiny answered.

Star slowly slipped off of the bed before asking her next question. *Where are you?*

Bed. I can't contact the guards.

Okay. Stay where you are. I'll check the house.

Yeah, like that's going to happen, Dessie said.

Star could finally sense the *rogues* roaming through her sister's apartment. Reaching for her backpack, she withdrew the two short swords that had been idle for a whole three days. Holding them loosely, Star crept through the door leading into the main area

of the apartment. Star spotted several pairs of glowing red eyes. She didn't waste her time trying to figure out exactly *to whom* those eyes belonged, she simply attacked.

~*~*~

Destiny saw at least three pairs of glowing red eyes watching her. Feigning sleep, she got a feel for what was going on around her. Hearing Star attack who or whatever was in her living room, Destiny sprang into action. Gathering the powers she'd denied for the past century, her body rose out of the bed and she hovered above the heads of the *rogues*. Two were shifters, which she could easily handle, but the last one was a vampire—an ancient vampire. Taking a deep breath, she focused, knowing she would need to use *all* her strength to get rid of the intruders.

“Don't you know that it's rude to enter where you're not invited?” she asked with a grin as she blasted the closest *rogue* with a ball of white energy that literally disintegrated it where it stood. He didn't even turn into ashes; he just went up into a white flame and imploded into nothingness. The two remaining *rogues* charged Destiny as she made a dash for the door. She flashed into the room where Star

was. Surrounded by ashes, she still had two *rogues* hot on her heels.

“Oh, man, I’m going to have to vacuum again!” Destiny cried as she looked at the state of her living room.

“Sorry, I tried to make them die out on the balcony but you know how these shits are,” Star said with a grin.

“You are to come with us,” the former ancient-vampire-turned-*rogue* ordered Star.

“I’m on vacation,” Star answered.

“We could always kill her here. Mistress said that we could,” the *Shifter* said with a toothy grin at them.

“And exactly who would your mistress be?” Star asked the two *rogues*.

“Lady Calais,” the two *rogues* answered.

Both Destiny and Star started laughing.

The two *rogues* looked perturbed at their reactions, which only caused them to laugh harder. A few more moments passed before they were finally calm enough to speak.

“Sorry ’bout that. Fuck, it’s been at least a century since I’ve heard anything so funny,” Star said as her laughter died down to just a big grin.

“Are you ready to die, whore?” the *rogue* vampire asked a still grinning Star.

The room was suddenly full to bursting with *rogues*. The sisters moved so that they were back to back.

Wow, I think we're a little out of our depth, Destiny said without any real fear.

FUCK! Star exclaimed.

Feeling Star call on her powers, Destiny turned to her and grinned. *Let's do this, Starbright.*

Seeing Star nod, she took a step forward to attack when the room went ice cold as the Locke Brotherhood in their entirety flashed into the room and pretty much took out *all* but one *rogue* before they'd even finished fully materializing.

"Lady Calais will not rest until you are dead, whore" the *rogue* vampire warned seconds before Lukas lopped his head from his body and ashes occupied the space where it had stood mere seconds ago.

Lukas and those he commanded surrounded Destiny and Star and before either of them could protest, he placed one with hand upon Star and the other on her and flashed them to the Locke Mansion.

Lukas heard Timothy calling to him as only one of his team and Star could. He ordered the two vampires under his command to remain focused on protecting Star. Both men nodded solemnly and Lukas placed a protective spell over Star to ensure she remained in deep slumber and no one but he could approach her.

“What is it?” Lukas asked without preamble as he flashed into the large study that made up half of the bottom floor of the Locke Brotherhood’s headquarters. Immediately, he sensed the power in the room. He knew without looking it was Lord de Vires. Turning elegantly in mid-stride, he acknowledged the presence of Serafeim de Vires.

Lord de Vires turned and looked at Lukas.

“Lord de Vires,” Lukas greeted while giving the customary head bow in recognition of his leader.

Serafeim inclined his head before asking, “How are they?”

“Astarla is fine; Destiny is busy dissecting my vehicles,” Lukas answered softly.

Lukas never questioned *The Society*, being that they were ancients. He doubted after living through most of vampire history they would ever endanger the

people they led, but he knew there was something more to Lord de Vires when it came to his Star. It did not sit well with Lukas that another male had interest in his Star—even if that other male was among the most powerful beings walking this earth.

“Calais will not stop until she is dead,” Lord de Vires commented.

Another thing Lukas noticed was Lord de Vires’s reluctance to call his Star by her given name. It was most disturbing. Lukas could feel the vampire ruler probing his mind.

I have nothing to hide, Lord de Vires, Lukas said telepathically.

“That is good,” Lord de Vires answered softly.

“May I ask why you have come? You could’ve sent one of your men to check on Star and Destiny,” Lukas said as he watched Lord de Vires steadily.

Lukas had seen Lord de Vires many times, but in this instance he looked at him as another male, not simply as his leader. They shared many physical similarities. Both vampires were comparable in height, but Lord de Vires carried considerably more bulk. Both wore black. Both sported ridiculously long hair. Both were elegant; but unlike most of their male counterparts, everything about them was masculine.

Physical similarities aside, it was the ancient power radiating from Lord de Vires that set him apart

from Lukas. Being the younger of the two, Lukas's emotions were much closer to the surface, even though he was known to be even-keeled. Lord de Vires remained cold and cut off from everything. *Except his Star*, Lukas thought as he waited patiently for Lord de Vires to answer his question.

"Both Astarla and Ajali are special. I am always concerned for their safety."

"I am sending hourly reports," Lukas answered.

Lord de Vires's eyes flashed briefly. Any other vampire would've missed it; however, Lukas was *not* any other vampire.

"Do not question me, *boy*," Serafeim snapped.

Lukas's spine stiffened at the insult. "I am not a boy, Lord de Vires," Lukas said softly. He said it quietly because regardless of how insulted he felt, he wasn't stupid. Lord de Vires could turn him into a pile of ashes by merely thinking it; and though Lukas wasn't narcissistic, he liked his *almost* human form, and had grown quite attached to it in the past six centuries.

"Indeed you are not. I apologise, Lukas. I am worried about the *rogues* being led by Calais, who is hell bent on destroying our only female Justice."

"Is that all who Star is to you?" Lukas asked his leader.

Lord de Vires turned his back to Lukas and looked out over the compound of the Locke Brotherhood.

“I will ensure my men keep you updated at all times, Lukas,” he said and with that, Lord Serafeim de Vires flashed out of the study.

Lukas was left with an unanswered question lingering in his mind. It was also the moment he heard Star’s voice in his head. She was disoriented and she stumbled. Before she could fall, she was steadied by the strong and powerful hands of Lord de Vires. Lukas flashed into the foyer.

~*~*~

Star looked up into the black eyes of the ruler of the Western Vampire Nation. They were flicking over her as if checking for any imperfection. Of all of *Otherworldly beings*, only Lord de Vires made her uneasy. He rarely spoke to her and when he did, it always felt as if he were delivering an admonishment.

“You are well, my child?” he asked her.

Star met Lord de Vires’s pointed gaze defiantly, which was a categorical *hell no* when it came to dealing with not only the Leader, but any of *The Society*, yet Star was beyond caring.

“If by that you mean am I alive? Yes. Am I happy about being held prisoner? No.”

Lord de Vires did something strange then. He gave her a small smile. Looking into his fathomless black eyes, Star felt herself being pulled into a memory. She had known Lord de Vires for a long time, but this memory was one she had never visited. She shook herself free of it.

“You must remain here. The Brotherhood is well equipped to guarantee your complete safety,” Lord de Vires advised softly.

“They just have more testosterone. That’s not being equipped. That’s just genetics,” Star said scathingly.

Lukas suddenly appeared beside her and placed his large hand at the small of her back.

Lord de Vires recognized the gesture for what it was. Lukas was staking his claim. Lord de Vires gave the small smile again. Stepping away from Star, as if knowing she was safe with Lukas, he watched the couple; and conversely, the couple watched him.

“That they do, my dear, but you are to remain here with them. Ajali is coming with me.”

Star panicked. If Destiny was in the mansion with her, she had a buffer between her and Lukas. If she left, Star didn’t trust herself to resist the

Commander. She was about to protest when Destiny flashed into the foyer of the Locke Mansion.

Destiny looked from Lord de Vires then back to Star before speaking.

“What’s up?”

“You’re to go with Lord de Vires,” Lukas announced.

Destiny frowned. “Oh, man! Do I have to? I was going to put a turbo in one of the cars,” Destiny said. Sounding every bit like a teenager, she turned her caramel-coloured eyes on to Lord de Vires.

“Yeah, what she said,” Star rejoined whilst turning her chocolate-coloured gaze to Lord de Vires. She noticed none of the males in the room could resist smiling at Destiny’s antics. Lukas couldn’t help but smile watching Star and her sister shoot pleading looks at Lord de Vires. He and the few Locke Brothers who were present were amazed to see the soft expression that crossed their leader’s visage. It was a look that bespoke love. It didn’t last long, but it showed a side of Lord de Vires none of the males had ever witnessed.

“Come, Ajali,” he said. Turning to Lukas, he ordered, “Keep her safe.” He was gone before Star could say anymore.

Star stepped away from Lukas as soon as Lord de Vires vanished. "I don't want to be here, Lukas," she said quietly as she met his eyes.

"Too bad. You are here to stay until the situation is dealt with," he informed her steadily.

Star felt panic rising in her. She was on Brotherhood protected grounds, yet her powers felt drained. She was unable to fight without her full ability; and even with it, fighting Lukas was a monumental task. Dammit, she hated being weak.

"You are nothing of the sort," Lukas said as he trailed his finger down her cheek.

Star jerked her head away from his touch. "Get out of my fucking head!" she snarled at him.

Lukas shook his head before speaking. "Why do you deny what is between us?"

Lukas *the Seducer* was back. Star made to walk away from him, but he moved so he pressed his body into her and backed her against the heavy oak door.

"No, my little Star. You are not going to run from me again," Lukas whispered against her mouth.

Star struggled against the kiss she knew was coming, but Lukas changed tactics on her. Instead of forcing her, he coaxed her. He encouraged a response and he got one. Star moaned and he swept his tongue into her mouth and felt her fangs. She felt his surprise.

Star only ever let her fangs show when she was...*furious or aroused.*

Lukas instantly went stone rock hard. What began as a soothing gesture turned into something that was intensely inevitable. He felt his own fangs descend. Pulling Star against him, he lifted her higher in his arms and ground his hips against her intimately. Frantically, he slipped his hands into the back of Star's jeans, desperately needing to connect with her flesh. Indulging in the skin-to-skin contact, he began to knead her firm ass.

Needing to breathe, Star tore her mouth away from Lukas. She gasped as he nipped at her skin. Her head thumping, her heart racing, she frantically dug her hands into Lukas's back, urging him closer even though they were fully clothed. He was hard, she was wet, and they were putting on a show for five of the Locke Brotherhood who were watching with wide eyes as their esteemed leader practically ravished Star against their front door. Timothy was the only one brave enough to interrupt. A discreet cough halted Lukas's grinding but not hers. Wanting to cuss everyone and everything that had interrupted her pleasure, Star buried her face into Lukas's chest and ground her hips into him harder.

“Commander, there are intruders,” Timothy said softly, Peeking around Lukas’s shoulder, Star saw Timothy was somehow able to control the grin that threatened to break free even though his eyes twinkled.

“Deal with them,” Lukas rasped. Nodding their understanding, the Locke Brothers left them. Lukas remained wrapped around her, shielding her from the males he commanded.

“Let me fight,” she said.

Lukas shook his head even as she sensuously slid down his body. She thought to make a run for it, but he clamped a hand around her wrist when she started to move away and dragged her out of the foyer and into the study.

“You will stay here,” Lukas ordered. Placing a brief kiss on her mouth, he flashed out of the room.

She was about to argue when she felt the weight of the spell he’d cast to keep her in the room. Star sat down heavily and watched the scene from the safety of the house. All the while she was plotting how she could escape. Seething, Star watched as Lukas appeared right outside the window of the study where she sat. He pulled one of the deadly blades from the braid that hung to his waist and plunged the razor-sharp weapon into the *rogue’s* heart. The rest of the Locke Brotherhood was fighting quickly and

efficiently. Star could tell the *rogues* were there for her as they kept running towards the study. When one managed to throw himself against the window, she leapt to her feet and awaited the fight.

Lukas didn't let the *rogue* complete the leap he'd made through the window that he had crashed. He flashed Star to a distant point in the room, placed a protective shield around her, and then slit the *rogue's* throat before it landed. By the time Lukas was back by Star's side, the rogue was nothing but a memory. He couldn't help but grin noticing the pout on her lips, knowing she wanted to fight.

Star made sure to mask her thoughts as she watched Lukas fight. Seeing him in action, she knew she was observing a master. There was choreography and then there was just natural talent. Graceful wasn't the descriptor she'd normally apply to Lukas, but during a fight, the attribute fit. All of his moves were fluid, and he was amazing. Star didn't want to, but she loved seeing him battle. He was a heady mixture of adrenaline and testosterone; and though she'd like nothing better than to ignore him, right now, he was...orgasmic. Pressing her thighs together to stop them from trembling, she bit her lip, forgetting her

fangs had descended. Feeling the sting, she licked at the small wound.

Be careful, Lukas rasped.

Star rolled her eyes and flipped him off. In her lust-clouded haze, she couldn't focus on him, but she knew he had her in his line of sight.

Be careful, little Star. I might have to punish you for being insubordinate, he warned.

Shut up, she answered Lukas while hiding a grin.

After all that I do for you? I am offended, little Star...

No, you're not. Hey, watch that dude on your blindside... Star said now that she had her lust under control. Focusing in on Lukas, she directed his gaze to the *rogue* brandishing a large pick axe. Lukas dealt with him swiftly, then raised a single brow.

Star couldn't help but laugh. As always, Lukas's arrogance was firmly in place.

Ah, my little Star finds this amusing, Lukas said with a smirk on his face and a grin in his mental voice.

Considering that the man was trying to kill you with a pick axe of all things. I mean, honestly dude, who the hell uses a pick axe nowadays? He was practically begging you to kill him.

Lukas's laughter caressed her and she warmed at the sound. Star hated sitting on the sidelines while the "men" did all of the work. She was a Justice for

goodness sake! She dealt with *rogues* all of the damn time! Dammit, she didn't need rescuing.

Of course you don't, my little Star, but you are dangerous to yourself. You would not ask for help even if you needed it.

Star didn't respond to his admonition. There was no need to. Lukas was right. Damn it all to hell.

~*~*~

Although it felt like a half of an hour, in reality the fight lasted no longer than two or three minutes. Immediately after Lukas had dispatched the last *rogue*, the Locke Brothers began to filter back into the mansion. Pausing their conversation, Lukas threw out directives about the window and security. Perched on the arm of the couch, Star absently swung her foot as she glared at Lukas and two of the highest-ranking members of the Brotherhood. When all three males turned to look at her, she rolled her eyes at them. Assholes. Dismissing the warriors, Lukas climbed through the broken window and whispered the words to break the spell that kept her prisoner in the study.

As soon as Lukas was in touching distance, Star jumped up and round-house kicked him before finishing it up with a flourishing upper cut. Of course Lukas took the blows as if they were delivered by a

child and damn it all to hell they probably felt like they were too. Her powers were severely drained whenever she was at the Locke Brotherhood Compound. Shaking her head in disgust, she plopped on the sofa, disgusted by her own weakness and knowing that Lukas hadn't missed anything with his damned all-seeing blue eyes.

Silently, they stared at one another. Lukas had a thin line of blood running down his right cheek although there was no wound. That was one of the perks of being an ancient—wounds tended to heal instantly. *Good way to save on Band-Aids*, Star thought scathingly.

"Why are you angry with me?" Lukas asked Star softly.

Tapping her foot agitatedly, Star looked away from him.

"Little Star, I asked you a question," Lukas said as he moved closer.

Long moments passed, but Star still refused to look at him. It wasn't until she heard him sigh that she bothered to answer.

"Why all of this sudden concern for me, Lukas? Be honest," Star demanded as she looked at the one male who made her weak in the knees; the one male who could make her doubt her sanity whenever she denied him entry into her bed, into her body that craved him on a daily basis.

“I am always concerned about your safety, little Star” Lukas answered quietly.

Star looked away from him. “*The Society* wants to rein me in,” she said vehemently.

“You have been unnecessarily hurt on your last two assignments. Since you are the only female Justice, *The Society* has asked me to secure your safety—”

“*The Society* or Lord de Vires?” Star interrupted.

Lukas’s eyes widened slightly. “Lord de Vires is *The Society*, little Star.”

Snorting rudely, she noticed Lukas bit back a smile. “He’s just fucking scary. Every time he’s around me, I feel like I have to be on my best behaviour. He’s like the meanest school principal ever,” Star mumbled, relaxing a bit as she leaned back on the couch.

“I don’t know too many school principals who can turn people into nothingness with just a thought,” Lukas said.

“Ain’t that the truth?” Star muttered the words under her breath, but she was sure Lukas caught them. She looked up into his eyes. Mistake. Regardless of what she said, her body had known Lukas and wanted more of him. Biting back another moan, she licked her top lip before sucking the plump flesh of her bottom lip into her mouth. Even though she was needy; she hadn’t failed to notice Lukas’s reaction to her.

“So what now, Boss Man?” Star whispered.

“It will be sundown in a few minutes. My crew must investigate various sightings,” Lukas rasped.

Hearing the strain in his voice, Star unconsciously kicked her sensuous display into overdrive. She might’ve been horrified had she realised that she sent out “fuck me” signals...then again, perhaps she wouldn’t. Tempting Lukas was as natural to her as shielding her thoughts from him.

“And me?” she purred.

“You will remain safe within the compound—”

“What? C’mon, Lukas, I still have an assignment that needs to be completed!” Star protested heatedly.

Seeing Lukas shake his head, Star’s eyes narrowed on his face.

“Timothy will complete it for—” he started.

Hearing his words, Star stood then and started to leave the study. She so wasn’t trying to hear this shit.

Feeling Lukas snag her arm, Star spun and attempted to kick his legs out from under him. Lukas easily sidestepped the manoeuvre and dragged her into his arms. She tried to head butt him, but Lukas wrapped her hair in his fist and pulled her head back fast. The stinging in her scalp warned Star that Lukas was serious, but she was beyond listening.

“Cease this *now*,” Lukas demanded, inserting compulsion into his voice in an attempt to bend Star’s mind to his will. Star ignored the compulsion and tried to bring up her clenched fist, but Lukas just pulled on her hair a little more. Star gnashed her teeth together in frustration.

“Let go of me Lukas,” Star ordered angrily.

“I wish I could, little Star...” Lukas murmured as he brushed his lips over her face. He swiped his tongue along her pulse. Lukas smiled against Star’s delicious skin, feeling her pulse speed up under his mouth, “but you are in my blood. I know you like no other male in existence knows you.”

Lukas felt his fangs descend as he buried his nose in the curve where Star’s neck met her shoulder. The blood was rushing to his cock and his mind was left swimming as he felt the veins beneath his mouth begin to pump vigorously.

“You are *mine*,” Lukas whispered into Star’s collarbone. The hand holding her hair loosened as he ran his other hand over Star. Pressing his hand over the rounded curve of her ample breasts, he worked his way down. Reaching the waistband of her black jeans, he undid the button then lowered the zipper.

Star's eyes closed when Lukas began his slow exploration of her mouth and body. Instead of closing off her thoughts, for once, she allowed herself to feel. The sensation of Lukas's lips and hands on her made her blood pulsate through her body. She shared his need. When his fingers slipped beneath her panties, he removed his mouth from the soft skin of her shoulder and began to feast at her lips. He sipped from them as if she were thirst-quenching water. Though everything about him indicated great want, he partook slowly, savouring the taste of her, savouring the feel of her, savouring her, full stop. And though she appreciated the way Lukas loved her, Star wasn't in the mood for slow. When two of his long, thick fingers found her clit and began to slowly stroke it, she was on the expressway to pleasure and hurtling a thousand miles an hour to an earth-shattering orgasm.

"More," Star moaned into Lukas's mouth.

In her orgasm-laced haze, she realised Lukas was staring into her eyes as if the whole world lay in them. Star felt the slight movement as Lukas flashed them into another room. She didn't know where she was and she didn't give a damn. And she would keep on not giving a damn about where they were as long as Lukas kept his fingers on her clit and his tongue in her mouth. Feeling Lukas pulling off her jeans, she helped him by standing still. By the time Lukas guided her to

the bed, her lower body was completely exposed. Stripping off her T-shirt and bra in one move, she stood naked before Lukas, proud of her full figure and relishing that she could make him react.

Lukas's eyes were almost blindingly blue as he took in her full-figured, mahogany body. He lifted his fingers that had been inside of her and slowly licked them. Star shivered when his tongue swept over the digits like he was swiping at an ice cream. She bit back a groan, knowing from experience just how talented *that* tongue was.

Feeling the back of her knees hit the bed, Star sat heavily upon it. Lukas stood above her, his fingers still in his mouth, his blazing eyes heavy with want, need, and perhaps demand. Star leaned back on her elbows and lifted her eyebrows at Lukas in sensuous invitation. He didn't need a second invite. Falling to his knees, he spread her legs, kissed each of her knees, then slowly ran his palms up the inside of her thighs.

Looking up, Lukas watched Star's reaction. She was watching him back, her eyes as bright as he knew his to be, her full succulent lips parted as she breathed heavily in anticipation. Lukas decided to tease her some more. He nuzzled the area between her thighs, always staying a mere breath away from her pussy. He smiled when he felt Star's thighs tense beneath his lips

and continued running his fangs alongside her thigh. Her aroma was so intoxicating that he could almost taste her swollen parted lips.

“No teasing. That’s not fair,” Star groaned as Lukas ran his index finger from top to bottom of her pussy.

Grinning, Lukas licked his finger. “Hmmm, so good, little Star,” he groaned. His deep voice vibrated with want, need, and hunger. Using the same fingers that had brought her such pleasure earlier, he pressed them into the depths of Star’s pussy, her cream making his entry all the easier. Star’s head fell back as she voiced her pleasure. Her moans spiralled towards the ceiling. Finding her spot, Lukas massaged her with firmer strokes and smiled broadly when Star gasped and lifted her hips to take his fingers deeper inside of her. Lukas knew he couldn’t wait anymore; after all he’d already waited centuries.

With a growl, he buried his face in Star’s pussy. His lips latched onto her clit and began to lash at it. His fingers pistoned in and out of her. The multiple sensations of his strong fingers and skilful tongue turned her moans into screams. Being that her thighs were wrapped around his head, he felt her tremors. He was drowning in her essence and he didn’t care. Star’s body bowed up off of the bed, her pussy

tightened around his fingers, and her clit pulsed in his mouth.

“Oh, god! Oh, god! Oh, god!” she chanted breathlessly as she came. Panting, she felt the second wave of her orgasm building before she even had time to absorb her first climax. Lukas didn’t let up and as she crashed through her second release, his tongue gently laving at her clit and his thrusting fingers continuing to delve deep inside of her. Finally, Star felt the waves of pleasure receding. Breath shuddered from her body, and her mind slowly returned to her. Unable to move, Star watched Lukas undress. She was laid out on the bed, her arms akimbo, and her legs following suit. Lukas held her gaze as he ripped his shirt from his body. His lightly tanned skin glowed in the half light of the bedroom. Slowly, she caressed his body with her eyes. She started at his broad shoulders, lingering at the Brotherhood tattoo that covered his left shoulder. Drawing in a deep breath permeated with Lukas’s scent, her eyes travelled downwards to his chest, which was heaving as he watched her watch him.

Her eyes widened as his hands went to the waistband of his black leather trousers. He undid the button and slowly slid the zipper down over his jutting

cock. Realizing he was naked beneath his pants, she almost came all over again.

"You need to watch yourself there. You go commando all of the time and one day you might get it caught in the zipper," Star said with a grin, which was about the only movement she could make being that she was so sated.

Lukas threw her a smirk that said *as if* before answering. "Getting my cock caught in my zipper isn't a possibility when I'm near you, Star."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm always hard when I'm in your presence.

Oh, damn, Star thought as she sucked in another lungful of much-needed oxygen. She went back to watching Lukas disrobe. Stepping out of his trousers, he then began to remove the deadly blades from his braid. Once that task was finished, he untied his hair and let it fall around him. Star, who had a thing for males with long hair, could only salivate as she looked at Lukas. He stood at the end of the bed, looking like an ancient god as he regarded her.

"Are you sure, my little Star?"

Even though his breath was rough with desire, Star heard the seriousness in his tone.

Scowling at him she asked, "You're kidding, right?"

Shaking his head, he stepped forward, determination in his steps, his large heavy cock protruding from his body like a beacon.

Sitting up, she reached for him. Noting the precum leaking from the tip, she swiped a finger across his sensitive cockhead and brought it to her lips. She sucked her finger into her mouth, sucking on it like she wanted to do his cock. Licking her lips, she smiled, hearing Lukas's growl and seeing his eyes widen then darken with desire.

"Stand, my little Star," he whispered hoarsely.

Star did as bid. Lukas turned her and quickly undid her braid. Freeing her hair, he buried his face in her locks. Leaning her head forward, she turned it to the left, giving him access to her neck. Feeling him breathe in her scent, she leaned into his strength and basked in his. Rumbling his appreciation, he took her hand and led her to the bay window seat. Now that it was dark outside, their reflection glowed ghost-like in the window. Their passion was almost a visible thing.

Lukas stood behind her, his large body dwarfing hers, his hands smoothing over her breasts. He squeezed and tested their plumpness before teasing her nipples until they were so hard they could cut glass. Star rested her head onto Lukas's hard chest. His face buried in her neck, he licked her like a lazy

cat, simply sweeping his tongue back and forth over her sensitised skin.

Gripping her ample hips in his large hands, Lukas pushed her forward, pressing his chest into her back so she bent at the waist. One of his hands drifted down her body and stopped to pluck at her still sensitive clit. Her hips bucked back into Lukas's thighs and she moaned out her pleasure. Looking at their reflection in the window, she watched his hands traverse her body. His hands appeared pale against the dark skin of her body. Even in the midst of her pleasure, she couldn't help but appreciate the erotic picture they made.

They were beautiful together. Lukas's long, gorgeous white locks set off the lightly tanned skin that covered his thickly muscled body. His hardness outlined her softness, making her appreciate his greater brawn instead of bemoaning the fact he was physically stronger than she. It was easy to do in this moment when he was touching her so intimately, his fingers strumming her clit in time to their breathing.

Seeing the passion on Lukas's face, she couldn't help but let go. Several things happened all at once. Lukas bared his fangs before kneeing her legs apart. Calling her name, he plunged his thick, long cock into her pussy. A pleasure-laced scream was wrenched

from her throat and what she guessed was a roar of possession tore from his.

Pinching her clit between his forefinger and thumb, he gave her no quarter. Even after he elicited her unguarded reactions, he continued to pound into her. Her experience with his love-making two centuries ago had taught her she could take everything that Lukas had...and still beg for more of him. From her current vantage point, she knew he would make her take it all. She could only brace herself on the window seat, spread her thighs wider, and gasp his name as he pounded into her.

When Lukas sank his fangs into Star's exposed jugular, the room went blindingly white. He felt his earthly body buzz like a thousands bees and his eyes closed in ecstasy. Hammering his hips into Star's, he lost himself in the pleasure that surrounded him. He gasped as he drank from her. Her blood was so invigorating that he could not stop himself from drinking from her.

Star's head fell forward, and her hair tumbled over her right shoulder as she moaned in pleasure. Her movement, coupled with her moans, caused him to open his eyes. Staring at their reflection, he lost his tenuous grasp on his control and gave her everything. Throwing back his head, he roared at the ceiling as he

came. Star's pussy pulsed and gripped his cock so tightly that he could do nothing but slump atop her. Careful not to crush her, he held the majority of his weight off of her while he recovered.

Raining soft kisses over her back, he felt Star's complete exhaustion, which was tempered with shallow breathing. Pulling out of Star, he spun her to face him. Though she attempted to smile at him, he noticed her eyes were dull and that her muscles would no longer sustain even the slightest facial movement.

"Star...baby," he whispered desperately. Looking at her prone body, Lukas felt the beginnings of panic. He had almost drained her!

"Baby, keep your eyes open," he demanded. Feeling for the presence of the closest Locke Brothers, he put an arm beneath her knees and one around her shoulders and flashed them out of the bedroom to appear between the two guards who stood sentry outside his office. He threw out his demands, not giving a damn about anything except for saving his woman.

"Close your eyes if you want to keep them." Though he'd already issued the command via their telepathic link, he reiterated his command verbally as he appeared before them.

"She must feed," he said. It was a plea wrapped in a command.

Though they were not required to see to his woman, he would kill them if need be to gain their compliance. His worry for Star heavily upon him, he would do all within his power to save her, including execute his own personal judgment on any and everything that stood in the way of her safety. He would execute judgment on himself later. Taking a breath, he waited as the first Locke Brother stepped forward and presented his wrist to Star. Her breathing was shallow and becoming more so with every passing second.

“Feed, little Star,” he commanded.

Star opened her mouth, but it was obvious she couldn’t summon the energy necessary to take her nourishment. Producing a small dagger, the Locke Brother cut a line over his wrist and held his wrist over Star’s mouth.

Though Star was exhausted, she immediately roused as soon as she felt the first drop of blood hit her tongue. Savouring the life-saving droplets of the necessary food source, she felt the energy beginning to build within her body. A moment later, she was using her own power to hold the proffered wrist to her mouth as she hungrily fed.

Lukas drew her back before she was full so she wouldn’t drain the guard completely. She grumbled at

the sudden absence of sustenance, even though her rational mind knew Lukas's intervention was necessary. Whenever vampires were so close to the edge, their primary focus was satiating their hunger.

The next guard stepped forward. Star slid from Lukas's arms and stood before them in all of her full-figured glory. She smiled up at the guard and without preamble thrust her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck and pulled him down so she could sink her fangs into his jugular vein. Though the guard groaned from the eroticism of the act, he didn't dare put his hands upon her.

The guard sent a plea to Lukas. With a growl, Lukas stepped forward and placed his hands on Star's hips, breaking the intimate contact between his woman and the guard. Though jealousy was beating at him, he allowed Star to feed for a few moments more before pulling her completely away from the guard. She protested with a growl, but he simply pulled more forcefully, detaching her from the guard. He brought her hips so close to him that she was almost impaled upon his stiff cock once more. Taking a moment to get his cock under control, Lukas nodded at the two guards who both looked dazed.

"You are relieved of your duties. Go and feed. I thank you for your assistance," he said.

The two guards bowed their heads respectfully before turning and walking away. Seeing the guards he'd summoned to take their place, he gave them a command. Before they'd even rounded the corner, he flashed himself and Star back to his bedroom.

Lukas laid Star beneath the covers then slid in beside his woman. She was truly exhausted. Settling her across his chest, he kissed her forehead and issued a command for her to sleep. While she slumbered, he thought of their lovemaking and he admonished himself. This was the second time their joining had ended with one of them almost dead.

Lukas ran a hand down his face. He couldn't help but close his eyes and think of what could have happened. The last time they'd made love, Star had almost killed him. It was obvious there was something powerful within them and when they came together, it threatened to consume them. Whatever 'it' was held them both enthralled as it drained everything from them.

Lukas shook his head. He had been unable to fight the compulsion to drain Star. He had never been like that—even when he'd been starving for blood.

Lukas decided then and there he needed to know what it was that caused him to lose total control over his faculties. That he could be the one to kill the one woman he loved disturbed him on every level. On the

other hand, continuing to exist without her as entrenched in his life as she was in his heart was not a prospect Lukas found attractive in the least.

Lukas was still thinking on this when slumber finally came. He pulled Star tighter against him and kissed her. Closing his eyes, he went to sleep with Star's taste in his mouth, her lush body draped over his and her breath skittering across his chest.

NINE

Help me! Help me, someone! Anyone! The plaintive call struck Star even as she slept in Lukas's arms. Opening her eyes abruptly, she felt for the direction from whence the voice came. *Help! Help me, please!*

Without knowing the how of it, she used a power she didn't remember she had and had only used once before. Two hundred years ago to be exact.

Fluently speaking ancient words she didn't understand, she ran a hand down Lukas's body as he slept deeply. She knew he couldn't feel her. The spell she'd spoken was strong.

Help! Please! Someone help me! The panicked voice spurred Star into action. Locating her clothes, she quickly dressed. Feeling the cold that raged outside of the walls of the Locke Mansion, she moved to Lukas's wardrobe in search of something heavier. Sliding back the intricately designed glass door that led to his wardrobe, Star grinned as she surveyed the contents of the immaculate closet.

Arranged by style, a sea of black clothes lined the walls. Normally, she would've admired them, but the pain of the person called to the defender part of her, forcing her to delay her foray into his attire. Grabbing

a long woollen overcoat, she turned and flashed to the place where she felt most of the agony of the faceless victim.

Huddled inside of the overcoat, Star tried not to allow Lukas's lingering scent to distract her. Lifting the heavy collar higher around her neck, her face was practically hidden as she hurried through the dark streets. Her eyes were covered by sunglasses, and her loose hair whipped around her body as she moved through the very early morning.

STAR! Where are you? Lukas's voice thundered in her head.

Star pointedly ignored him.

Star, answer me! he roared.

Star used all of her powers to ensure he couldn't get a lock on her. She could feel his throbbing anger at her abandoning him while he slept. Star bit her lip as she moved into an alley.

Star! You are in danger. You need to come back now! Again, Lukas attempted to get inside of her head to figure out where she was going and what she was about.

Determinedly, she ignored him once more. Blocking Lukas, she looked upon the scene before her. There were a group of approximately eight *rogue* vampires at the end of the alley. They stood over the prone body of a woman who was lying face down on

the filthy asphalt. The group looked up at Star as she stood rooted to the spot. A split second later the *rogues* rushed her.

Throwing off the overcoat, Star held her arms out at a forty-five degree angle and summoned all of her strength. These *rogues* were fast and mere inches from her. Deploying the swords gifted to her by *The Society*, she held her arms in front of her, crossing elbow over elbow, as she allowed the power she summoned to flow through her body. Just as one *rogue* was about to touch her, she swung her arms wide, taking several *rogues* by surprise. Their heads came off in one fell swoop. Four down, four to go.

One of the surviving *rogues* pulled a gun from behind his back and fired. Showing her flexibility, Star dodged the bullet elegantly. Using her preternatural speed to burst between the remaining four, she bent her head forward and waited half a breath for them to attack her from behind. With an imperceptible twist of her wrists, she extended the blades of her swords so they were a good five inches longer. Spinning, she extended her arms out wide, taking the *rogues'* heads with her motion. When nothing but ashes swirled around her, she retracted the deadly weapons.

Star could hear the stuttering heartbeat of the woman the *rogues* had been feeding upon. Kneeling beside the woman's head, she gently turned her over.

The sight was anything but pleasant. *Rogues* were named such due to their complete disregard for pretty much everything, especially their food source. Pulling out her cell phone, she called for emergency assistance. She knew to use her powers in front of the woman would be a mistake, even though she was barely conscious. In her state, she'd see Star and think she was of the same ilk as the *rogues* that had attacked her.

"You left your specified protection, Justice," Lord de Vires said softly.

Hearing the voice of Lord de Vires, Star bit her lip. *Oh, hell.*

Knowing Lord de Vires waited for her response, Star took her time speaking. Cradling the badly injured woman's head in her hands, Star looked up and found Lord de Vires standing just a few feet away from her. He held the overcoat she'd borrowed from Lukas.

"My lord—"

Lord de Vires hushed her by raising his hand. Moving forward, he towered above her and the injured woman. Bending his knees, he squatted beside Star and laid his hand upon the injured woman's shoulder. Star felt the warmth beneath the woman's skin. It diminished, but traces remained. Lord de Vires straightened, and before she could ask the question on

the tip of her tongue, two of his many personal guards appeared. One of them came to a stop beside her, waiting for her to stand. The other bent and lifted the woman and strode to the black limousine that was idling at the mouth of the alley. It didn't escape Star's notice that although many guards had been sent to guard/retrieve her, none ever touched her. Since training, only Lukas or Lord de Vires had touched her.

Lord de Vires continued to hold up the overcoat. It was obvious that he wasn't going to proceed until she put it on. Once she had complied, he turned and waited for her to accompany him to the limousine. It pulled away and revealed a black custom-made, high-performance Mercedes. He waved open the doors and Star smiled, knowing that one didn't simply go to a garage and ask for that and some spinners. He waited until Star was settled before starting the powerful car and peeling away from the curb.

"It is not wise for you to be alone, Justice. I believe I made myself clear yesterday," Lord de Vires said softly as the car ate up the miles. Star was unsure of what to say to that comment, so she remained silent as Lord de Vires expertly manoeuvred the vehicle through the streets without the benefit of headlights to lead the way.

"Did you not understand my warnings, Justice?"

Star tried to think of a suitable response, and when she couldn't, she felt her ire rising to battle with her brain.

"Have I not proved myself in the past, my lord? How is it that I am under sudden house arrest because of a band of *rogues*? Does *The Society* not believe I am able to handle myself anymore?" she asked as she felt her blood pumping angrily through her veins.

"You have been injured not once, but twice during your preceding assignments. You were not simply injured, but gravely injured, Justice. This is not something to be taken lightly," Lord de Vires finished.

The modulation of his voice did not once change. Then again, rarely did the tone of his power-charged voice change, and the one time it had was more than enough for her. Regardless of how angry she was that her skills were being called into question, Star knew she had to watch her tongue around Lord de Vires.

Trying not to sound like a sulky child, Star answered, "So I had some bad days."

Seeing the small smile that flashed across Lord de Vires' face, Star knew she had been unable to get all the petulance from her tone.

"Justice, you are too important to *The Society*. We look after our elite and you are aware of this."

Star couldn't prevent the rude snort that escaped. Worried about her lapse, she clamped a hand down over her mouth. Lord de Vires came to a screeching halt outside of the gates of the Locke Brotherhood compound. Normally, she would appreciate his driving skill, but considering his displeasure, she simply tried not to wince. As soon as the heavy iron gates creaked open, Lord de Vires sped through with scarcely a millimetre to spare on either side of the car.

Star was silent as Lord de Vires stopped the car beside the steps that led up to the heavy oak doors of the Locke Brotherhood mansion. She had been rude to the leader of the Western Vampire Nation. Very rude. Really, she should be dead, but she wasn't. Raising her head, she met Lord de Vires' questioning gaze.

"I am nothing but a half-breed Justice, my lord. I know my status. Thank you for the compliment, but we both know exactly what is thought of me," Star said. Though her voice was soft, there was not even a trace of pity in it.

Up to this point, Lord de Vires had remained still, simply sitting with his hands on the steering wheel. Hearing her response, he swung his head around to look directly at Star. His eyes were a little on the wild side, and though Star should've been afraid, she wasn't.

“Who has said this to you?” he demanded.

Star recognized Lord de Vires’s anger but she couldn’t place it. *Why was he angry?* she wondered silently.

“Who *hasn’t* would be an easier list to spout, my lord, but that should not concern you in the least,” Star said dismissively.

“If someone disrespects one of my elite warriors then yes, Astarla, I am concerned. I am deeply concerned,” he stated.

Before Star could think of a suitable response, she felt Lukas standing right outside of the car door, his anger radiating off him—and that was *without* using any of her powers. *Damn*. Obviously, she wasn’t about to receive a warm homecoming from him. Sighing, she exited the vehicle.

“Lord de Vires,” Lukas greeted their leader. Though his deep voice held respect, his eyes remained on Star.

Concentrating on the lesser of two evils—no pun intended—Star kept her eyes on Lord de Vires.

“Lukas, it seems our Justice has taken into disobeying direct orders,” Lord de Vires said with a small smile. Well, if you could call lifting one corner of his mouth when speaking a smile.

“Yes, she has, my lord, and I can assure you it will not happen again,” Lukas answered.

Lukas's biting tone pricked her temper. Whipping her head around she came face-to-face with Lukas's ire; but in that moment, she didn't give a shit.

"Excuse me?" she asked acidly.

Lukas's smile was feral. "You are *not* excused. I will speak with you in the house."

Star opened her mouth to argue, but Lukas stopped her words by stepping forward into her breathing space and gripping the lapels of the coat she wore. Being that she couldn't back up, their bodies were plastered against each other. Letting go of the lapels, he held her hips in one hand and traced the curve of her cheek with the other.

If you dare defy me, my little Star, I will not hesitate to take you over my knee and spank you silly—right here, right now.

Though his voice in her head was calm, his eyes were swirling almost silver, which meant he was beyond angry.

That didn't matter to Star, though.

Glaring at him she said out loud, "Fuck you, asshole!" Then with a slight nod to Lord de Vires, she slid out from under Lukas and walked up the steps to the mansion. The two guards she'd fed from the night before stood sentry. Nodding at them, she walked in. The doors automatically opened as she approached

and closed behind her as soon as she entered the house.

Lukas looked at Lord de Vires watching Star's defiant stomp up the steps and into the house. Once the doors were closed safely behind her, he turned his gaze upon Lukas. It was obvious he was not amused. For that matter, neither was Lukas.

"What happened, Lukas?" Lord de Vires asked softly as he moved around to Lukas's side.

The two men silently agreed to walk the grounds of the compound whilst discussing Star.

"I was distracted," Lukas admitted.

Lord de Vires nodded. Pausing, he looked out over the immaculately manicured grounds before resuming speech. "You are in love with the Justice?" he asked.

Lukas shook his head. Lord de Vires scowled and turned burning eyes on Lukas who met his gaze calmly. "No, I am in love with Astarla, who is more than just a *Justice*," Lukas said almost coldly.

Lord de Vires didn't take the offence he should have at Lukas's tone. He merely turned his head and watched the sun rise in the horizon.

"She is important," Lord de Vires said quietly.

"Important enough for you to never use her given name?" Lukas said scathingly. He was tired of

the unknown feelings Lord de Vires displayed towards his woman and he wanted to know what they were.

“It is not your business to judge me, Lukas.” Lord de Vires’s menacing voice was accompanied by a warning gleam.

Lukas knew he was pushing his luck, but he’d awakened alone. He’d sensed his woman feeling pain and didn’t know where she was. He’d panicked not once, but twice in the course of twenty-four hours, and he wanted answers.

“That may be so, my lord, but I believe there is more to Star than just being a Justice, and it is obvious to the other members of *The Society* that you have a soft spot for her. There is talk,” Lukas revealed, menace infused in his tone.

Instead of reprimanding him or worse, Lord de Vires sighed. Lukas was surprised at his reaction, though it didn’t show on his countenance. Nevertheless, he knew Lord de Vires felt it.

“I have known Astarla a very long time,” Lord de Vires admitted. He looked away from Lukas then, visibly tensing as he spoke Star’s name. “Her mother was the most powerful of all mages to ever walk the earth.”

Lukas scowled. “You knew her mother and yet she knows nothing of her heritage?”

Lord de Vires nodded. “Her mother disappeared a few months after she was born,” Lord de Vires said as he pushed his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

“If you knew her mother so well, why did you not raise Star yourself?” Lukas’s knew that his tone was accusing, but he didn’t care. His woman had suffered.

Lord de Vires didn’t look at him as he answered. “There was no chance for me to do that, Lukas. Circumstance did not allow for me to even contemplate it.”

“And your relationship with Star’s mother was...*personal*.” It should’ve been a question, but it came out as a statement.

Lord de Vires simply nodded.

“And Star knows nothing?” Lukas asked.

“It was not conducive for her to know,” Lord de Vires responded.

“And now?”

“These are changing times, Lukas. *The Society* is struggling for a foothold in this new millennium. Our people are questioning the old ways more often than not,” Lord de Vires answered. Though emotion showed on his face, nothing was reflected in his tone.

“What does that have to do with Star? Why all of this protection for her now? She has been a Justice for *The Society* for almost two centuries.”

Lord de Vires took his time answering, but Lukas waited patiently.

“*The Society* will not survive these changes, Lukas. We will perish and there must be leaders strong enough to take our place, or our Nation will be ruled by hunger.”

Lukas was taken aback that Lord de Vires would be so candid with him. But as open as the other man had been, he had not answered his question. Lukas remained silent.

Lord de Vires shook his head slightly and gave him a wry grin. “You are a persistent adversary, Lukas,” he complimented.

“I understand your concerns for our Nation, my lord. I share them. Our people cannot govern themselves. We are an ancient culture that requires our history in order to remain more human than *rogue*. What I don’t understand is what the demise of *The Society* has to do with Star,” Lukas stated and waited with bated breath.

“She is the *Chosen*,” Lord de Vires finally revealed.

Lukas’s eyes widened in surprise. Of all of the things he’d expected to learn about Star, that was not it.

“To take the head of *The Society*?” Lukas asked, frowning.

Lord de Vires shook his head and turned to look Lukas in the eye once more. "To lead the Western Vampire Nation."

Lukas's surprise turned into full-blown astonishment. "Alone she will rule?"

"She will lead with her True Mate," Lord de Vires said.

"How can that be?"

"She was destined from birth."

Lukas shook his head, trying to find space in his brain to comprehend all he was learning.

"You say you knew her mother. Who was her father?" Lukas asked, anxious for the answer.

Lord de Vires sighed and turned away from Lukas's probing gaze. Once again his eyes swept grounds of the compound. Lukas thought he was about to answer when a disturbance in the air turned their attention back to the mansion. A kaleidoscope of colors spilled from the study's window as if a laser light show were taking place.

"What is that?" Lukas asked more to himself than to Lord de Vires.

Commander, there is a problem, Timothy mentally called to Lukas.

Before he could finish his sentence, both he and Lord de Vires flashed inside of the mansion. The entire Locke Brotherhood stood outside of the study staring

at the door. No one moved. Lukas reached for the door handle, Lord de Vires directly behind him. As soon as Lukas touched the door, it exploded off of the hinges. Everyone took cover except for Lukas and Lord de Vires.

Ignoring the danger and shaking off the debris that had exploded all around him, Lukas rushed into the study. He was just about to cross the threshold when Lord de Vires stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Let me go,” he snarled at Lord de Vires.

“That I cannot do, Lukas,” Lord de Vires answered calmly.

Lukas tried to move but Lord de Vires simply tightened his hold.

Lukas knew his leader was trying to protect him. He knew there was danger, but again, he didn’t care about himself. He cared about Star. He needed to get to her. He’d never seen her like this.

She was on her knees, head bent, and her luxurious hair framed her body to conceal her expression. What had looked like a laser light show from the outside of the mansion was in fact a swirling multi-coloured mist interspersed with arcs of electricity that all seemed to emanate from Star. Though he couldn’t see her face, Lukas could feel her struggling to breathe. It was as if he were in her body with her, feeling her chest expand as she tried to suck in air and experiencing her body’s shudder when she

failed. Lukas had to get to her. Regardless of the danger to him, regardless of the consequences for disobeying his Leader, he was going to her. In this, he had no choice.

“She needs me—” Lukas said as he utilized all of the power available to him and wrenched away from Lord de Vires.

Quickly, he moved across the room. Kneeling, he reached for Star. Before he could touch her, she threw her head back and revealed sorcery the likes of which he’d never seen. The body belonged to Star, but there was another face super-imposed over hers. Even Star’s eyes were affected. White completely obscured the chocolate brown of her irises. Lukas tried to step away but discovered that he was unable to move.

“You are a powerful one,” it said as it looked at the world around it through his woman’s eyes.

This voice dripped venom. Lukas didn’t know what thing inhabited his woman, but he was afraid for her. And that was really saying something considering there were few things vampires feared. That was not to say vampires took their existence for granted. One always had to be concerned about a stake through the heart or turning *rogue*, but these concerns were part and parcel of being vampire, millennia old. What Lukas was staring at in this moment was timeless evil.

“What are you?” Lukas asked, unable to comprehend all that he witnessed.

He was both transfixed and concerned as the thing manipulated Star’s face, looking him up and down. It scoffed at him instead of offering a reply.

“You inhabit our Justice for what reason?” Lord de Vires spoke gently, as if trying to soothe an unruly child.

The thing in Star’s body turned to face him. “Serafeim,” it sneered.

Inclining his head slightly in acknowledgement, Lord de Vires spoke in a voice devoid of emotion. “Garamond.”

The thing possessing Star grimaced in pain and the face super-imposed over Astarla’s faded out. Serafeim could now see the face of the woman beneath, could see the pain in her chocolate-brown eyes. Tears of blood coursed down her cheeks as she looked at Lukas and himself. Though he was her leader, it was the Executioner’s name she called.

“Lukas.”

Star’s hoarse voice was scarcely above a whisper, but he knew Lukas heard her, not the abomination that had taken hold of her body. Without thought to his own safety, Lukas took the final steps that would bring him into contact with his woman. Once again,

Serafeim was forced to restrain Lukas. Ignoring the warning, Lukas issued one of his own. Snarling over his shoulder, he attempted to go forward.

Quietly, he spoke to the Executioner. “The demon will take her over completely. You are strong, Lukas, but I am stronger. Your judgement will be clouded when she calls to you.”

Looking at his beloved, Lukas lifted a hand to wipe the blood tears from her eyes, ignoring the fact her eyes were swirling, alternately blinking between chocolate brown and milky white. Lukas was ready to argue, to destroy, to do whatever it took to save her. He couldn’t stand by and let anything happen to his True Mate. Even if he died trying to save her, he had every hope Lord de Vires wouldn’t fail.

He started to step forward but found that he couldn’t move. Lord de Vires used his power to not only stay him but to physically force him back. Star reached for him, her outstretched arms mingled with the symphony of her sobs. Though her eyes were still flashing between brown and white, when her eyes were her own, it broke his heart, for her tears ran clear then and he knew it was his Star. He knew because he could see the entirety of his existence (past, present and future) in her eyes. She was hurting and he was powerless to help her. In spite of his training,

immense power, stealth, cunning, and battle experience, he was impotent.

Lord de Vires stepped forward. “Garamond,” he called once more.

Star’s body began to spasm. Lukas had to clench his fists tight to stop himself from moving to his woman, knowing that to touch her would unleash something almost no one he knew could defeat. The tendons in Star’s neck tightened, the ragged spasms that represented her breathing calmed, the laser light show dimmed slightly, and Star opened her eyes. And in that moment, Lukas felt the thing that inhabited his True Mate’s body.

“Yes, Serafeim?” The demon spoke slowly, as if talking was a physical act to which it was unaccustomed.

“You must let our Justice go. She is not for you,” he said.

An inhuman bark of laughter fell from the demon inside of Star. Lukas was practically shaking with the need to smash the abomination out of his woman’s body.

“You presume to know *me*, Serafeim? You are as insignificant as you have always been,” the demon spoke scathingly.

Lukas saw Lord de Vires tense before answering. “The Justice is more powerful than you can ever imagine, Garamond,” Lord de Vires said softly.

The demon once again spat out sound that posed as laughter. “Your *Justice* is only half vampire. She can’t even fight little, old me,” the demon taunted with a grin.

Lukas had had enough of the thing possessing his woman’s body. He had enough of the thing taunting his leader. He had enough—period. Before he finished that thought, Lord de Vires spoke to him.

Be still, Executioner.

The demon turned its attention to Lukas. “He has power. I want it,” the demon whined.

Something shifted in Star. Whereas she had been bent over from pain, her body was now slowly unfolding. It seemed as if strength began to gather in her limbs. Slowly, it spread so that she was almost upright. Lukas could feel the internal battle she waged as she tried to gather a full breath. Star lifted her head, and though her pain fell from her eyes in the form of her tears, only a minimal amount of blood was present. Her eyes were her own and though they bore traces of distress, they also bore equal parts determination.

“What’s in me?” Star’s voice was only slightly breathless as she spoke to Lord de Vires.

“A soul demon,” Lord de Vires answered.

Star struggled to gain her feet. Her eyes closed and hurt momentarily flashed across her features. Taking a deep breath, she began to mumble in a language Lukas had never before heard.

“What language does she speak?” Lukas asked Lord de Vires.

“Ancient Egyptian,” Lord de Vires responded with a look of surprise on his normally blank visage.

No one moved. All eyes were riveted on Star as she murmured slowly in the ancient language. Closing her eyes, Star held her arms out by her sides with her palms facing up.

Though Star was in the midst of battle, Lukas couldn't help but notice her beauty. Her head lolled from side to side...and he thought of how he'd like to kiss a trail up her neck. Her body undulated with power and determination...and he thought about her under him. Her voice rose from the barest murmur of sound to a whisper...and he thought of her calling out his name in passion. And as he witnessed the battle his woman was fighting... he vowed to find a way to destroy whatever had approached her with ill intent.

The spectacle that took place next interrupted his musings. It seemed as if the whole world went silent right before all hell broke loose as symphonies of shouts and gasps echoed while Star threw the

abomination from her body. It was a horrendous thing that stood taller than every man in residence. Its scaly skin rippled as it slithered towards Star, wanting its host.

Star's eyes opened and they were almost hazel. She smiled at the demon as it tried to capture her again. Standing her ground, she held one palm out towards it as she continued her chant. The other occupants of the room could only watch in wonder as Star wielded her power and the demon began to screech its displeasure.

"How is she doing that?" Lukas asked Lord de Vires.

"I do not know, Lukas," Lord de Vires said, never once taking his eyes off Star.

The demon continued to howl. It wasn't clear if it were voicing pain, anger, or disbelief, but it was clear that it was not happy...and Star was not playing by the mercy rule. As if in slow motion, the demon fell to its knees, which still made it taller than the tallest male present. Howling louder, it fell facedown and curled in on itself. Star raised her hand slightly and the demon rose off of the floor. Summoning her sword, she embedded it deep into the demon's chest. There was a piercing scream from the demon and then it was gone. Everything in the study stilled.

Star turned dazed eyes to look at the males around her. She gave them a small smile, then her eyes rolled back up into her head and she fainted. Lukas flashed forward and caught her before she even started the fall.

Lifting her into his arms, he flashed to his bedroom. He gently laid her on his bed, knowing Lord de Vires stood beside him as he completed his task. Walking into the master bathroom, Lukas returned with a bowl of warm, soapy water and a washcloth. Carefully, he removed her clothes, not wanting any remnant of that abomination touching her soft skin. Though his mind was on his woman, he felt his Leader turn his back to give both him and Star a measure of privacy.

When he finished undressing her, he lightly stroked the soft cloth across Star's face, removing the blood and tears from her cheeks and chin. He did not know how long it took to bathe her; he only knew there was an endless supply of warm water and fresh cloths. When he finished his task, he wrapped her in one of his shirts and placed her under the covers. Gently kissing her lips, he rested his forehead against hers. Though no tears fell, he silently cried into her hair, frustrated that something so dirty, so evil, had touched his woman. When he could bear to part from her, he turned to face Lord de Vires.

The other man was watching Star with a hooded gaze.

“I think it’s time you told me exactly what my Star has to deal with, my lord,” Lukas said softly.

Lord de Vires looked at the Commander whom had been selected by the former Commander to lead the Locke Brotherhood. Lukas didn’t flinch under the scrutiny, but then, he didn’t expect the younger vampire to do so.

“What would you like to know Lukas?”

“Everything. Let’s start with how a soul demon came to possess my woman and work our way down from there,” Lukas said pointedly.

Lord de Vires considered the suggestion, then nodded. The two males walked away from the sleeping Star to have their talk. It went unsaid that neither was leaving Star alone.

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Star sighed in her sleep. With a smile, she rolled onto her side, revelling in the sudden feeling of safety. Her eyes shot open as she whispered the one word that always made her feel warm, safe, loved—“Mama.” Sighing, she closed her eyes and returned to her slumber.

Meanwhile, a ghostly hand brushed the hair back off Star's temple, and murmured in response, "My baby."

ELEVEN

Lukas sat in a large armchair facing the floor-to-ceiling window. Absently, he swirled his finger in a glass of one-hundred-year-old whiskey as he contemplated all he'd learned about his Star from Lord de Vires. The Leader had supplied him with copious information, but he still had not answered the one question that continued to plague Lukas: That being the question of *what* Lord de Vires was to his woman.

Lukas stared unseeingly out of the window. For the moment, Star was safe; but according to Lord de Vires, it wouldn't be long before many otherworldly creatures inundated her with visits...all wanting a part of her...a part she had no control over. It was something so powerful that it would kill her if she didn't master it. He would see to it that she would, and with the quickness, because there was no way in hell or anywhere else that any of those damn things were taking his Star from him. Everyone and everything would die first. It went without saying that he would die protecting her. There was no other choice.

Lukas was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't feel the broken shards of glass slicing into his hand. When he'd finally remembered he'd held a glass,

it was not only broken, but the glass was nearly ground into sand. He gathered the broken particles and relegated them to a wastebasket before dealing with his minor injury.

Lukas questioned himself internally. He was the Commander of the Locke Brotherhood—the most feared and respected physical justices in their Nation, and arguably in the entire realm of otherworldly beings—and yet he had twice been unable to protect his woman. Even with all of the safeguards littered around the property, Star had not only managed to escape (again), but an unwanted presence had infiltrated their compound hell bent on consuming his woman's soul. It had been a hell a thirty-odd hours.

When Lord de Vires had questioned him about Star's safety, Lukas had been insulted, but Lord de Vires had been right to do so. It was obvious to Lukas that he was ill-equipped to safeguard his woman, even on the protected grounds of the compound. Lord de Vires had offered up his own residence to help shield Star. Once again, Lukas had felt insulted.

The very thought of her being harmed was like a metaphorical stake in his heart. Her last two assignments had been the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. He'd been the one who had found her when she'd been unable to take anymore. Knowing she was in trouble and not being able to prevent harm

visiting her, had caused him to curse all that he knew and adhered to. He had fought down the urge to tell *The Society* to shove both his and Star's positions up their pompous asses every time Star had opened her eyes and not known who she was, what she was, or where she was.

And now Lord de Vires had entrusted her complete safety to him once again. Lukas needed help; he needed to know what he was doing was right. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. He had to make the decision he didn't want to make. On one hand, if he didn't accept Lord de Vires's offer and Star was hurt, it would kill him. On the other hand, if he did, it would make him appear weak in the eyes of the entire Nation. *And possibly Star*, his psyche threw in. Sighing, he knew there really was no choice at all. He had to protect his woman at all costs...even if the costs were his pride, his position as Executioner, his woman's confidence in him.

"What's up?" he heard Star ask as she sat on the arm of the chair, her plump backside a mere breath away from him. Before he could admonish her for being out of bed, she leaned over him and pressed her full lips to his. He groaned from the sensations of her hair caressing his cheek and her hands stroking his hair. Breathing in her scent, he had to talk his cock

down when her tongue swept across his bottom lip before quickly dipping inside of his mouth.

She pulled back when he tried to deepen the gesture. Leaning away, she smiled at him. “Tsk-tsk, Commander. Drinking so early in the morning? People will talk.”

Lukas swallowed the doubt he felt and turned his head to look at his Star properly. “You look tired. You should still be in bed.” He reached a hand out and threaded his fingers through her hair. Using her long tendrils as a hold, he tugged her forward and brought her luscious lips closer to his. Star’s mouth opened under his and they challenged each other with their tongues. It was a hot, wet, and thoroughly enjoyable battle.

Without breaking their kiss, Lukas dragged Star onto his lap. He felt her squirming and guessed she could feel his want. But this wasn’t just about his; it was about their mutual desire. Lukas took his time and feasted on her mouth. Soon, Star was fully relaxed against him. Still, he did not rush. He simply held her tighter and nipped at the soft skin that was exposed.

Fully in his arms, Star had her head tucked into his shoulder. Lukas revelled in the sensation. He didn’t want to let her go...ever. A vision of Star being hurt caused him to momentarily tense. A silent snarl formed in his mind and his lip curled ever so slightly.

“You’re not going to bite me, are you?” Star’s voice penetrated his anger.

Lukas blinked and looked down into Star’s eyes. “Not unless you beg,” he answered with a gleam in his eye.

He couldn’t help but smile watching his Star roll her eyes at his words. Lukas couldn’t take his eyes off of his woman. She looked thoroughly kissed and if she kept looking that beautiful, she’d soon look thoroughly ravished. He smiled, noting he’d marked her. The small trail of abrasions his teeth had left were warnings to other males that she was taken. Though they were quickly healing, she looked good wearing them.

Lukas wondered what Star would think about his primitive views. Before he could ask, she suddenly grinned at him, showing fangs, and his entire body responded. His eyes went bright; his cock went hard; his beast roared. He was about to flash them to the bed when Star snuggled into his arms and spoke.

“Thank you.”

He paused and tightened his hold on her. Before he could respond, he felt Star’s lips against his throat. His blood thundered through his veins, his heart beat overtime as he settled her on the massive bed.

“For what, my little Star?” he asked.

“For caring about me,” she answered.

“Star...” Lukas began, scowling, needing to set her straight about his feelings. He didn’t merely care about her; he loved her.

She sat up abruptly and pushed him back. Placing her knees on either side of his thighs, she kissed away his words. Lukas let himself go headfirst into their shared passion, sure that he would be able to remember what he was going to say later. Right now, his woman wanted to seduce him and he was going to let her have her way...for a little while. He might not know everything, but he wasn’t stupid.

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Alone in his study, Lord de Vires paced slowly. Considering the way he moved about the darkened room, his pacing could just as easily be called a stroll. His movements were unhurried but his expression was full of rage. His features were tightly drawn over his pale skin; his eyes blazed with discontent; his mouth held invectives; and, his tongue was primed to issue death warrants. It was an expression he rarely wore. In fact, the last time he’d worn it was when he’d first met his True Mate.

A movement by the window cause him to turn his head. Few could penetrate his fortress without

invitation. And even fewer received one. He watched as the ghostly figure became solid.

“*Serafeim*,” the woman with the darkest skin and hair said softly. Chocolate brown eyes full of wisdom and heartache watched him. It had been a very long time since Lord de Vires had heard his true name spoken aloud by someone who was not an enemy. His heart stuttered for a moment before damn near beating out of his chest. Only his woman could do this to him and she did it every time she returned to him.

Lord de Vires blinked once before flashing to stand in front of his woman. He lifted his hand to the tiny, intricate braids laced with vibrant colours. She was almost as tall as he, and he stood six foot eight. Her eyes held mysteries the world had yet to solve. Her presence illuminated the darkened room. He couldn’t help but smile knowing that the shimmering light was beneath her skin, in her blood.

He stared into the eyes that drowned him in heat, love and compassion, and gently addressed her in her native tongue. “*Merit*.” *Merit* meaning *beloved* in Ancient Egyptian.

As always, she smiled at him when he addressed her thusly. It was a tiny movement at the corner of her luscious mouth, a mouth he loved, a mouth he had

tasted throughout the millennia...and still it was not enough.

It never would be.

“She is in constant danger,” she said softly in ancient Greek, which was his native tongue.

He rested his lips against her forehead for a moment before answering. “Yes.”

“You entrust this man with her?”

Lord de Vires said nothing for a moment. Leaning back slightly, he looked into the eyes of his True Mate.

“He loves her. He is her True Mate,” Lord de Vires said softly as he ran his thumb over the fleshy bottom lip.

“As you are mine, *Serafeim*. Still, the fact he is her True Mate does not appease the worry in my heart,” she said equally soft.

Lord de Vires gathered her voluptuous hips in his big hands. Backing against the wall, he pulled her with him so that she stood between his legs. He watched her eyes heat with passion. He groaned when she tangled her hands in his hair, loosening the thick, glossy, midnight strands from the severe style in which he wore the waist-length locks.

“He protects her *Merit*. He has always protected her. He will die to protect her,” Lord de Vires promised. Still, his woman didn’t seem convinced.

“You pledge?” she demanded as she gripped his hair in her hands and tugged him down to her...so close to the bountiful cleavage in which he wanted to be buried.

“My darling Nafrini, I, as your True Mate, pledge Astarla’s complete safety.”

Having given his vow, he groaned as Nafrini leaned into him. She captured his mouth and moulded her voluptuous body to his. Immediately, he crushed her in his embrace. Fate had taken so much from them, but they had these moments. They were going to make the most of them as stolen and forbidden as they were.

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Calais screeched at the top of her lungs as one of her *messengers* told her of the activities at the Locke Brotherhood compound. She threw her hand out in a gesture of dismissal and the *messenger* quickly scurried from the room. Her eyes momentarily flashed red before she calmed and seated herself on the bed that dominated the room.

She began to pet the heads that came to lie at her breasts. The beefy twins, her playthings of the moment, looked up at her askance, and she smiled gently at them before guiding their mouths back to her

nipples. As always, they did as she demanded and did it well.

Calais looked away from the twins and turned her eyes to the two rough men who stood on either side of the bed. Both dark-haired, the dockworkers looked like the rough men they were. Even impeccably groomed with the hand-tailored clothes she'd provided them, the workers, whose names she wouldn't lower herself to learn, looked like the only kind of sex they engaged in was aggressive and dirty. But besides that? They were violent, bordering on psychotic, and could fuck like battering rams, which was only a small part of their appeal.

"How can a useless fucking *Justice*," Calais spat the word, "possibly avoid you? She has no powers! She is *The Society's* bum-girl! How is it you can't capture her? All I asked was for you to set the scene in the alley. We all knew that fucking bitch would show up as soon as one of those precious *humans* was in pain. You had the perfect opportunity. She wasn't on protected land, she was away from Lukas, and yet what happens? You fucking miss! And on top of it all Lord de Vires was present! Are you all fucking incompetent? I want that fucking bitch *now*!" Calais said urgently to the two *rogues* she had turned but a month ago.

The brawny men had been drunk off of their asses when she'd found them on a grate at the docks. That was how she'd turned them into sexual minions. And now they were drunk on her cunt. She watched them look at each other then down at her naked body.

Beneath her pale skin her veins throbbed with hatred. Despite being pleased by her twin playthings, she knew—as did the other two males present and under her command—she was going to need *more* than they could give her. She spread her legs and the two dockworkers who stood beside her bed answered the invitation. And even though they could satisfy her sexual urges, the *rogues* slaked her violent proclivities also.

They climbed onto the bed with her. She grinned at the prospect of a thorough fucking. Her fangs descended as she brought one of the brawny dockworkers to her mouth. Pulling his head to the side, she sank her teeth into his vein. He groaned as he thrust his hips against her hand. Oh, yes, this was a good start. She knew she was going to need all four men to pleasure her out of her bad mood.

The four men—all *rogues* she'd turned—worked simultaneously to pleasure her. Each twin possessed one of her breasts. The dockworker lifted her so that she was on her hands and knees at the end of the huge

bed. He opened his pants and hefted his thick, purplish cock into his hand.

Calais's head was in just the right position for her to take him between her lips. She was unsure if she would be able to fit all of that man meat into her mouth, but the decision was taken out of her hands, or rather, into her mouth as the dockworker thrust his hips forward and impaled her head on his cock.

Calais gagged but he was past the point of caring as he fucked her mouth with his big cock. She was enjoying the attentions of the three big-cocked men when she felt the other dockworker approach. She felt the scrape of denim against her thighs as he spread her legs.

He ran his big meaty hand through the red curls at the junction of her thighs, then jammed two thick fingers inside her. Calais gasped at the intrusion, inadvertently taking the first dockworker's big cock further down her throat. She groaned as the second worked her pussy like he didn't give a shit whether she enjoyed it or not. Calais smiled inwardly as the two big dockworkers used her for *their* pleasure. They didn't care. Their coarseness and blatant disregard for her brought her to the brink of orgasm. The twins were pretty but the dockworkers were raw fucking machines...the kind of men mothers warned their

daughters about and the kind of men that made her breasts tingle and her pussy wet.

The pretty twins that were enamoured with her breasts continued to suckle her like she were a damned sow. She needed the stinging pricks of slight pain. It helped her ride through the pleasure coursing through her from the two *real* men who were working her mouth and pussy.

Her pleasure almost complete, Calais was on the border of her orgasm when the *rogue* thrusting his fingers into her wet pussy paused. She was about to growl her displeasure when he swiftly stabbed his meaty cock into her. The roughness of his action coupled with the size of his cock caused her to gasp in ecstasy.

The dockworker in her mouth grabbed the back of her head, forcing her mouth deeper onto his cock. And what a cock it was. Shame it was attached to such an asshole. He made a couple more quick thrusts into her mouth before shooting his cum down her open throat.

The twins had to hold on for dear life as the three people above them went into orgasmic overdrive. The dockworker in her pussy gripped her hips so hard that she knew she would have bruises later. The dockworker in her mouth fucked so hard she worried he'd dislocate her jaw. Still, she didn't care.

She simply wanted to be pleased like there was no tomorrow.

Calais screamed out the beginnings of her orgasm as the *rogue* in her pussy slapped her ass until it was as red as her hair. Roughly grabbing her hips, he battered her pussy with his big cock before pumping her full of his cum. The room bounded with sounds of fucking—not lovemaking but straight fucking, raw and rough—just like she liked it. Her keens of rapture intermingled with the dockworkers' grunts, the twins' moans, and the slap of sweat-slicked skin against sweat-slicked skin.

Calais tossed her head back and howled at the overwhelming sensations before collapsing onto the twins beneath her. Finally sated, for the moment anyway, she rolled over onto her back. The twins remained at her breasts, swiping at her body with their flattened tongues. She closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath while riding out the waves of residual pleasure.

"We will get her, mistress," the dockworker who had been in her pussy said as he zipped himself back into his jeans. The dockworker who'd been in her mouth patted her on the head like she was a fucking pet. She shook his hand away. Damn, the last thing she needed was a group of *rogues* who thought they ruled her just because they knew how to fuck well.

“She is protected, mistress,” one of the twins said when he finally took his mouth from her breast.

Calais glanced down at him, her eyes again flashing red as she licked her lips. “What do *you* know of it?” she snarled disbelievingly.

“She is the True Mate of Commander Montague—”

All four men were thrown from her bed. Rising, Calais grabbed the formerly speaking twin by the throat. Her fingernails extended into sharp talons and she soon felt the young man’s blood begin to flow over her hand as she choked him.

“She is no such thing! *I* am Commander Montague’s True Mate! *Not her!*” Calais screamed in the twin’s face.

The young man’s eyes rolled back into his head as his air supply was broken off. With a sigh of disgust, Calais let him go and he fell to the bedroom floor. Walking to the wardrobe, she calmly opened it and pulled out a silk robe. Wrapping it around herself, she turned and gestured for the two brawny dockworkers to follow her. All amorous feelings having long fled, she led them to the front door.

“You are to bring her to me. I don’t care how you do it. Just do it. Take as many men as you need. If she is not here within the next twenty-four hours, I will rip

you limb from limb. Do you understand me?" Calais asked as she stared pointedly at the two men.

They nodded and the largest man asked, "And when she is brought before you, mistress, what shall we receive as a reward?"

Calais grinned and ran her hand suggestively down her body. "All of this. Now go, but remember, no one is to harm Commander Montague."

The two men shared a look before answering. "Of course, mistress," they answered in unison before walking out into the darkness.

TWELVE

Lukas had Star wrapped around him like the hottest, softest blanket in existence. He took a deep breath and savoured their combined scents. It was a heady combination. They were seated on the large armchair Star had found him in hours ago. Of course, now, they were in a very different state of dress and in a different position. He was still embedded inside of his woman...and he was still hard being that the little minx continued tempting him with her softness.

They'd made love and neither of them was dead. They had both fed but this time they'd been able to stop themselves. He had looked into his Star's eyes as she came apart...and seen his whole life. Hopefully, she'd seen the same in his eyes as he held her hips down and thrust into her as deeply as he could go before groaning her name in absolute pleasure.

Sighing from satisfaction, he ran an open palm down Star's back, enjoying the feel of his woman in his arms. He lazily caressed the muscles beneath the silky skin, his hand coming to rest on the rounded flesh of her ass. Fascinated with it, Lukas moulded his hand around the plumpness before lightly smacking it. Star moaned in her sleep and snuggled closer to him.

"I can get off of you..." Star murmured against his shoulder.

Lukas smiled, knowing Star wouldn't be moving in a hurry. "Oh, no, my little Star. I want you just where you are," he whispered into her hair.

He felt Star smile against his skin before she opened her mouth and gently nipped the skin where his shoulder met his neck. Lukas's cock tightened and he moaned in anticipation.

"How about I get you *and* me off?" Star asked him as she leaned back a little and grinned into his eyes.

Lukas smiled in return. "Do you know how I love you, my Star?" he asked seriously.

Star sighed in response. "You don't need to—"

Frowning, Lukas placed his forefinger against her lips, effectively stopping further words. He watched Star drop her eyes. His woman, his warrior, was *shy*?

"Why do you think this way, little Star?" he asked.

Star's eyes flicked up and met his, and then with a grin, she nipped at Lukas's finger with her fangs.

"I don't know why you insist on calling me '*little*' anything, Lukas, since, as you well know, I'm not little anywhere," Star said as she made to leave the sanctuary of his arms.

Lukas stayed her hips and forced her to remain seated atop him. He would not let another minute pass without her knowing the true depth of his feelings.

“Why, Star? Why do you act as if there is nothing between us?”

Star swallowed and looked away before answering. “Well, I know there’s the whole great fucking between us, but I can have that—”

“With no one else but *me*,” Lukas quickly interrupted Star’s declaration.

Star raised her eyebrows at him. He looked back at her, waiting for anything else she had to say on the matter. “We are not exclusive, Lukas—”

Lukas’s eyes took on a silvery glow, but Star didn’t back down or shy away.

“On the contrary. We are definitely exclusive, my Star. You are *mine*,” he declared.

Star sighed and shook her head. “You just never want to listen, do you? All this blind faith has got to be bad for you,” she joked, but sadness crept into her eyes.

She felt Lukas’s stomach clench with tension. “I listen, my Star. I hear your heart. I know your dreams and most of all I know more than you could ever believe. You and I are meant for only each other. There is no one else for either of us.”

Star shook her head. “We are creatures, Lukas. We feed from humanity. We crave sex like normal people crave chocolate. How can you say with a straight face that there is no one else for us? Have you forgotten about your ex? She certainly hasn’t forgotten about *you*.”

Lukas’s face tightened. “Do not sully your mouth with talk of her,” he spat.

“So I should just forget she went psycho? Should I simply forget she sent those *shadows* after me and almost succeeded in killing me?”

Lukas sucked in a breath and exhaled through his nose. “You are a survivor, my Star.”

Star closed her eyes and opened them again only to glare at him. “Maybe I’m sick of simply *surviving*, Lukas. Maybe I just want to be normal for once, to be able to sleep all the way through the night without the help of a spell. Maybe I want to be able to call the police when some thugs are beating the shit out of someone. Have you ever thought about that, Lukas? You may be a full-blooded vampire and born into this shit, but I wasn’t.”

“You don’t know that,” Lukas said softly.

“What are you talking about?”

“There are things you don’t know—”

Star laughed bitterly. “There are too many things I don’t know, Lukas, and that’s the problem,” she said sadly before lowering her eyes.

Lukas moved a hand to her face. His finger softly stroked her cheek. It was a gesture that brought comfort to them both. Sighing, she raised her eyes to meet his.

“We are real, my little Star. We are meant to be,” he breathed.

“All right, for argument’s sake, let’s say I am *yours* and you are *mine*. That doesn’t erase the fact we are *not* good together. All of the factors in our history point to that—”

Lukas raised his eyebrows at Star. “What factors would those be? The fact you find me irresistible? The fact you are the only woman who can connect with me? We are in each other’s blood, my little Star, and it is meant to be this way. The fates have deemed it so. Do you doubt them?”

“C’mon, Lukas. You and I both know that whatever it is between us—”

“Love,” Lukas inserted.

Star shook her head. She tried to move again yet Lukas still wouldn’t allow it. A snarl rose in her throat but she could see from Lukas’s set expression that he was unrepentant...and unmoving. With a sigh, she looked him in the eye as she began to speak.

“Lukas, I am not the one for you. Sure we have great sex, but that’s about it. Have you noticed that every time we come together something catastrophic always takes place?”

“Did we not just make love without incident?” Lukas asked.

Star shook her head. “The one and only time, whoop dee doo! Lukas, the first time we fucked—”

“Made love,” Lukas interjected.

Star rolled her eyes but continued. “I nearly killed you. You were nearly drained and I couldn’t stop myself, Lukas. Hell, I didn’t want to stop myself. Two centuries ago when I fed from you I *could not* stop! I nearly killed you because we had sex! How many vamps do *you* know do that? None. Except us. Why is that? Because I’m cursed and don’t fucking shake your head at me! You know that what I’m saying is true!” Star declared vehemently.

“You are far from cursed, my Star. Lord de Vires explained to me exactly *what* you are and it is not—”

Star finally managed to remove herself from Lukas’s person and began to dress. “I don’t want to talk about *him*,” she snapped as she pulled her black sweatshirt over her head. She paused to watch Lukas stand in all of his naked glory before turning away. He gently grasped her wrist, preventing her from running from their conversation.

“My little Star, Lord de Vires is knowledgeable of things that neither you nor I can even begin to comprehend. He can answer questions that burn in you.”

Star spun around to face Lukas. She was again momentarily distracted by the amazing picture he made all naked and such.

Goodness she loved this man’s body. His beautiful hair draped his beautiful physique. His blazing eyes melted her with just one look. His muscles were as tight as if he were about to engage in battle while he argued his point with her. A part of her wished he would continue arguing so she could continue watching him. Her eyes traced the elaborate tattoo covering his left shoulder, spreading halfway across his chest and dipping towards his hip. The designs were the history of the Locke Brotherhood, from its bloody beginnings right up until this moment in time. The tattoo was a living thing; every decade, more was added to it.

Star loved trailing her fingers over the lines and swirls of that tattoo. She loved his body art, and on Lukas there was just that added...*something*. Oh, damn, he was still hard, even though he’d made love to her for nearly three hours. Star smiled wryly. He was right when he said she couldn’t resist him.

Bastard.

“And what would Lord de Vires know about what *burns* inside of me, Lukas? I am a Justice. I do what I’m told like the good bum girl I am. I do the job; I make sure not to pass go; and, I go on my merry way with the pat on the head that I’m meant to be okay with,” Star said.

She hated the fact her voice shook, but dammit, she was angry...and sad, not that she’d admit the latter. Lukas reached for her, but she avoided his touch. Shaking her head, she spoke brokenly. “No, Lukas, don’t touch me. I can’t think straight when you touch me...”

She knew any other time Lukas would gloat at such an admission, but this was not one of those moments.

“Star—”

Her eyes widened slightly and before Lukas could say anything else, she turned and punched her fist through the *rogue’s* chest, cracking bones as she reached inside and yanked out what was left of its heart. For added effect, and just because she was still a whole lot pissed off, she ripped out damn near everything in its chest too. Defeated, the *rogue* screamed and turned into ash.

“Get some fucking clothes on!” Star yelled over her shoulder as she saw Lukas turn to fight yet another *rogue* who’d come from out of nowhere.

Lukas looked all set to argue when she vaulted around him and kicked the *rogue* hard enough to send it crashing through the window. Star was right behind it. She didn't even bother to look back to see if Lukas was all right; she didn't have time to do so. Another *rogue* appeared suddenly and tried to remove her head from her body with an axe of all things. *Fuck!* Where were these motherfuckers coming from?

Keeping one foot firmly planted on the throat of the *rogue* she'd kicked out of the mansion, she pulled one of the weapons from her hair and threw the razor-sharp instrument and pierced the *rogue's* voice box. She didn't even need to look to know she'd taken it down, but she did so just for shits and giggles. Glancing at the *rogue* wheezing beneath her foot, Star plunged her dagger into its chest. Before it'd had a chance to turn to ash, she executed a perfect back flip that brought her face-to-face with the *rogue* wearing her blade in its throat. Twisting the blade to ensure that it was in deep enough, she pulled it out and smiled when the *rogue* gasped for breath and turned to ash.

Run Star! Lukas yelled in her head.

Star ignored that and ran in his direction. It was a good thing she did because an entire horde of *rogues* had descended upon him. Lukas was severely outnumbered. Summoning a strength she didn't have,

Star leapt up into the air and crashed through the window feet first.

She took a moment to glance at Lukas, needing to know he was okay. She noted that although Lukas wore pants, his chest was still bare. Damn, he was fine, but at least he didn't have his *stuff* all out there for the world to see.

As soon as the *rogues* noticed her presence, they immediately switched their focus to her. Good, that was what she needed. Grinning wildly, Star bounced on the balls of her feet and issued a challenge.

"Defend yourself," she said. Though her eyes sparkled with mirth, her tone was dead serious. The entire army of *rogues* marched her way, forgetting Lukas was present...and pissed off.

Star heard him calling for the two leaders of the Locke Brotherhood. She felt his heart thumping in his chest. She knew his panic was due to concern for her and not cowardice. Though the battle raged all around them, she couldn't help but admire Lukas. She had seen none equal to him on the battlefield. He hacked at heads, killing *rogues* left, right, and centre. Ashes were swirling all around him to the point that he almost choked on them. He was a machine, but there were still so many.

Run, Star.

No.

If you care anything at all for me you will run.

I do care, and that is why I will not run. Hell, even if I hated you, I still wouldn't run.

Dammit, Star. Run and don't look back!

Lukas, you know me better than that. To run is to show weakness and I am not weak. I believe it was you who first told me that.

Star's smiling voice echoed in his mind. He was about to comment on her words when he saw something he couldn't believe. A *shadow* appeared behind Star and before he could do even speak, it snatched her through the open window.

"*STAR!!!*" he roared as he tore a path through the *rogues* that stood between him and his woman. He fought as he never before had. He was faster, deadlier, and more violent than he'd ever had to be. There were scores of *rogues*; still, they stood no chance against his anger. In the end, he killed them all with a quickness that even he couldn't believe, but it wasn't quick enough. His woman was gone. Shit!

~*~*~

Lord de Vires held Nafrini's naked body against his as he breathed in the scent of his True Mate. These moments were what made his existence worth it. For

almost two millennia he'd ruled over the Western Vampire Nation. It had been his destiny; however, it hadn't counted on him falling in love with the most powerful Mage ancient times had ever witnessed.

Looking down into his beloved's face as she slept soundly and safely in his embrace, he allowed himself to savour the moment, peace washing over him. Only when in Nafrini's presence did his duties become secondary and the world around him fade. Only Nafrini; always Nafrini.

Absently, he traced the burn marks on his beloved's left shoulder blade. Shaped like a sun rising in the horizon, it was the only blemish on her flawless skin. He knew should she choose, she could remove it; for that matter so could he, but Nafrini had steadfastly refused. To her, the mark was a reminder of the day they'd first met. To him, it was that and a reminder of her absolute courage. Closing his eyes, he revisited the day that had forever changed his life.

Two and a half millennia ago, he'd been a young vamp. Born of ancient Greek vampires, he had been living in the lap of luxury and enjoying every second of the debauchery that were the accoutrements of his privilege. Never had he heard the word, "no", and never had he expected to hear it. He'd been spoiled and expected nothing but complete compliance from any and all who came into contact with him. He might

have been young, but he knew who he was: sole heir to the ancient vampire throne.

There'd been nothing for him to do except wait for his father to pass the title to him. He hadn't even needed to select a wife as one had already been chosen for him. He hadn't known anything about her, not even her name. His mother had told him the name once and had even pointed her out, but he'd just as quickly forgotten it. There'd been no need to remember it. Besides, he'd known what he needed to—that she was beautiful, obedient, fertile, and aware of how lucky she was for the honour of being his wife.

Yes, his life had been a paradigm of debauchery and excess...until he'd glimpsed a statuesque ebony beauty outside the gates of his family palace. She'd raised her head and looked him in the eye, and he'd fallen instantly. His heart had stopped for so many moments that he'd worried it would not re-start. Her luminous chocolate-brown eyes had stripped him bare of all of his earthly trappings.

Her style of dress marked her as untouched. The vibrant-coloured clothing that made up her attire had marked her as a member of a wealthy family. Surely, she graced someone's castle, but he hadn't known whose. His attempts to find her had nearly driven him mad. He'd made one of the palace artisans paint canvas after canvas bearing the likeness of the ebony

lovely. After hearing of his obsession, his father had reluctantly allowed his son to continue pursuing the unknown woman. No one had believed he would find her. A few had even thought her an apparition of his imagination, though they'd never said it to his face.

Before he'd found her, the wars of man had erupted around the vampires. Many had wanted to intervene, but they'd promised the gods to stay out of the fray. No one, however, had predicted the Pharaoh's daughter from his most-favoured concubine would be captured and held for ransom. After trying and failing to gain his daughter's return, Pharaoh had reluctantly turned to his powerful neighbours. Though a proud man and wary of the vampires, he knew of the strength that lay in *The Land of Shadows*.

Pharaoh was desperate for his child's return, not simply because he loved her, or because she was his only daughter, but also because he loved her mother. She had begged, pleaded, and finally resorted to threats. And not just any threats, but the one threat that moved him. She had threatened to take her own life if her child were not returned to her.

Pharaoh had kept the existence of a daughter a secret from many, especially the members of Western Vampire Nation. Knowing he could not be killed by mortals, and that he was growing in power every day, his father had sent his son to retrieve the Pharaoh's

child. His father had known what such a gesture would mean to the Pharaoh. Without trying, the vampires had become involved in the wars of man.

Serafeim had set out without much thought except annoyance that this mission was interfering with his leisure. He stalked through the camps of mortals, disgusted they would inflict such harm over mere pieces of land. After a short time, he found the camp he'd been seeking, noting with irony the hideous crimes that were being administered in the name of God.

Serafeim had reluctantly borne the presence of the human creatures, and the longer he sat, the more disgusted he became. He was unimpressed with the vile humans who'd gladly crucified their people. Although he'd tried, he hadn't been able to keep the revulsion from his face. Wanting to hasten his leave, he'd asked the men how he was to retrieve the Pharaoh's child.

The mortals had laughed in his face. Mistake number one. Well, actually it had been mistake number three. Mistake number one had been involving him in their war. Mistake number two had been kidnapping a defenceless child.

The sun had been setting and the smell of burning flesh had permeated the camp. Watching the sun finally dip behind the horizon, Serafeim had given

the men of war one more chance. He'd even offered the gold the Pharaoh had sent for his child's return.

The men had once again scoffed at his attempts to negotiate peace. Usually Serafeim was easygoing and approachable, but the appalling behaviour of the humans, coupled with their defiance, had stoked his temper. He had killed the men around the negotiation table without remorse. Going out into the night, he'd felled scores more before finally being directed to the tent that held the child of the Pharaoh.

Pulling back the tent flap, he had entered. Expecting to find a child of no more than five or six summers, he'd been absolutely astonished to discover his elusive ebony beauty was none other than the daughter of Pharaoh. Instead of being kept in comfort, she'd been stripped bare and tied to a post in the middle of the tent. He would never be sure of what they had planned; he only knew what atrocities they'd already perpetuated. They'd hurt his woman.

Though no tears had fallen from her eyes, he could feel them. On her face she'd worn a mask of dejection; her eyes had been dulled with pain. Still, nothing could conceal her beauty, just as the humiliating posture they'd forced her in could not detract from her grace.

He hadn't had to see the men strike her to know they'd been doing so. Her body had displayed the

evidence of their violence. With the exception of her face, there had been almost no place on her person that had not witnessed her abuse. Their violence had practically been a living thing. He'd flashed to stand before his woman, needing to see to her. Before he could speak, she'd looked into his eyes and smiled.

I have been waiting patiently, my Prince, she'd said right before the light in her eyes had extinguished and she'd fainted from the pain of her injuries.

Catching her, he'd freed her from her bindings and covered her with his own cloak. Flashing her to safety, he'd left her in the care of his healers. Never before had he been so livid. The audacity of the humans had set his temper ablaze. Unable to fathom the powers that had remained untapped in his person, he had swept through the camp like a plague. Systematically, he'd wiped out men in multiples of a hundred with nothing more than a thought. It had been fitting he'd lost his tenuous hold on his temper just as the sun was setting. In that moment, he'd been the living embodiment of his name—*Serafeim* was *burning one* in Greek.

Though he didn't consider himself violent by nature, he had been filled with a grim satisfaction as he'd exacted revenge. It went without saying he'd killed every man in the tent. As his ebony beauty had suffered, they suffered. He had spilled so much blood

that it had literally dripped from the walls of the dwelling.

All that for his woman, a woman he'd been searching the entire desert for...a woman he would soon find out was completely forbidden to his kind or, most importantly...forbidden to *him*. There were rules about this sort of thing, but his heart hadn't listened and frankly, he hadn't given a damn.

This woman was *his*. She was worth any consequence he'd be made to suffer, even if it meant having to abdicate his titles or having to surrender his privileges. Even though he'd felt the weight of his decision, he'd known there had really been no choice at all. How could there be when her description had dominated his conversations; when her image had been the first thing, the only thing, he'd seen when he closed his eyes; when the possibilities had haunted his every waking moment. Relentlessly, he had pursued her...and had enjoyed every single moment.

The time he'd spent travelling with her had been the most torturous block of time he'd ever endured. He had searched so long for her that he'd forgotten she'd known nothing at all about him. She had known of him; but she hadn't *known* him. All she'd known was his father's palace had laid on land her father had deemed *The Land of Shadows* because of their frequent night activities.

Truth be told, he hadn't known anything about her other than the fact she had eyes that rivalled the sky at night; she had lips that rivalled the most luscious fruit; she had hips that were made to cradle him; she had legs that went on for days; hell, she even had beautiful feet. Everything about her was regal.

Nafrini was the living embodiment of dignity, grace, beauty. She was to him like the Nile was to Africa; like the Amazon to South America; like the Mississippi was to North America. She just was.

As they'd travelled towards her father's palace, he'd told her about himself; desperately, he'd revealed the secrets of his heart and hoped she could be moved to love him in spite of who and what he was. No woman, no game, no riches, no nothing. He'd enjoyed those experiences; but though they'd brought him pleasure, they'd been fleeting. His life up to that moment had been one big orgy of excess. Those things had satisfied his physical cravings, but they'd never satisfied him. Nafrini, however, had satisfied every craving within him. Even saying her name had brought him unparalleled joy. Nothing he'd ever experienced had come close to moving him.

Nafrini's injuries had been severe; and many times, he'd had to walk at the back of the caravan in order to unleash his temper unobserved. Every other moment had seen him lying beside his ebony beauty.

After two days of travelling, he'd noted her injuries hadn't been healing as they should. For that matter, they hadn't been healing at all. He'd ordered the caravan to make camp and had called for every healer amongst them.

All had tried time and again but none had succeeded. Serafeim had been on the edge; and with every unsuccessful attempt to heal her, his edginess had only increased. Not only had Nafrini not been healing, she'd been deteriorating, wasting away before his very eyes. In his heart, he'd known his woman was dying, and he'd also known he would do anything, attempt anything, and fight anything, to save her...even if it meant she'd hate him forever.

He'd realised the only chance he had of saving Nafrini would require him to make her vampire. She'd have all of the benefits of the vampire race, but there was a great chance she would turn *rogue*. Still, he had no other choice, and so he'd done the forbidden and bonded with her.

The caravan had been attacked before he'd been able to complete it as he'd had to pause and rid them of their adversaries that night. There had been many. *Rogues* and men of war all had wanted the treasures within the caravan.

There had been only one fortune he'd been protecting and it had not been the wealth used for the

ransom. Nafrini had been the only treasure for which he'd cared. He hadn't coveted her because of who her father was, he'd coveted her because of who she was to him. She was his woman and no one would harm her with impunity; none would lay a hand on her and keep it. He had fought like a man possessed and a vampire in love.

To his surprise, his Nafrini had risen from her sickbed to help him against the army that had attacked them. It had been only after they'd dispensed the last threat that she'd dared look at him. She'd had to know not only had he not been pleased she'd been out of bed, but she'd been fighting. Still, she had the nerve to look at him with mirth in those beautiful eyes.

He had immediately snatched her up, albeit gently. Stalking to the tent that had been set up so the caravan could get some much needed rest, he'd let loose. He'd paused in his tirade only to ask her one question: *Do you want me to have to kill a lot of people?* Of course, he'd never given her the chance to answer because every time she'd opened those tempting lips he'd kissed her. Nafrini had remained calm until he'd finished. Then she'd smiled at him, inhaled slowly, and tore into him with all she had. Smiling, he remembered she'd had a lot. He'd been staggered, never before having been told off or jabbed in the chest.

He'd simply caught her in his arms. That had been the moment they'd both went still. Her soft breasts had been pressed flush against his chest. His cock had gone hard and the scent of her arousal had perfumed the air. Without thought they'd attacked each other, demanding, pleading, savouring. Their first time together had been full of passion and urgency. He'd had lovers before, but none had come close to satisfying him as Nafrini had with a single touch. When he'd slid his body into hers and felt that barrier, he'd known with certainty that Nafrini was the last woman he would *ever* be with regardless of how long "ever" was.

His beloved pulled him from his memories. Nafrini sat straight up; and since she was straddling his hips, Serafeim went hard...well, harder than he already was. She looked up at him, her chocolate-coloured eyes wild. It was as if a mist were slowly slipping across them, making them appear almost grey. He tensed, knowing this was not going to be good.

"Serafeim...the *shadows* have taken her. They have our daughter!"

THIRTEEN

Star's skin felt like it was on fire. Though she was aware of her surroundings she kept her eyes closed. She felt around in her mind for the source of the pain and realised that it was all over her.

Was someone burning her alive? she wondered.

"Not at all," a deep voice answered softly.

She recognised the voice. *Lukas?*

"Wrong again, whore."

Star's body finally caught up with her mind. The first thing she saw upon opening her eyes were the red ones of...*Viktor Montague*? Hadn't Lukas destroyed him? Though she wasn't sure of the details surrounding Viktor, there was one thing that she was sure of: He was *rogue*. Oh, shit!

"Nothing to say, Justice?" Viktor asked.

Star took in his appearance. Though he was wearing a long robe similar to that of monks, his skin was blistered. It was painful for her to look at so she could only imagine how painful it was to live with.

Yet, Star's eyes widened slightly as she belatedly realised Viktor was able to hear her thoughts. Only Lukas and her sisters could do that...and only when she allowed it.

Looking up, she met Viktor's enraged gaze even as he grinned at her. He might as well have been sneering considering how scary his expression was.

Though a bit distracted by his presence, Star knew what Viktor was doing. He was transferring his pain onto her. That explained why her skin was burning. It was an agony he lived with every moment of every day.

That could partially explain his bitchiness....

Damn, he could read her thoughts and transfer physical feeling to another; he was power beyond belief. Star swallowed. She was truly worried.

"What now, Viktor? We fight?" Star asked fearlessly.

Viktor's mouth curved into a semblance of a smile. "*Ohhh*, the brave little Justice unleashes her claws, hmm? This has nothing to do with *you*. You are simply a means to an end," he spat.

Star started to sit up and discovered her arms were shackled.

Viktor laughed before quitting the room leaving her alone. Despite his exit, the burning in her body not only continued, it intensified. Star gasped in pain as something tried to pierce through her mind. The something was a white pulse. She reached for it, but a black wall slammed into her mind, shutting the pulse down. Gasping for breath, she slowly lowered her head

and closed her eyes. Lying prone, she suddenly felt the reality of her situation. She was completely alone. *Shit.*

~*~*~

Lukas threw Timothy against the wall of the study. Flashing so that he was beside his guard as he slumped to the floor, Lukas bent to snarl into his lieutenant's face. He was so angry he knew that his eyes were bright silver with not even a hint of the blue they were when he was calm.

"Where were you, Timothy? I called you. You were meant to be here. We have been under attack twice in as many days and you were unavailable each time!" Lukas exclaimed, his voice vibrating with rage.

Timothy looked into his Commander's face. He saw how furious Lukas was; and though he'd seen him angry before, he'd never seen him like this. He was a living fury; and regardless of what Lukas thought, Timothy knew he didn't want to tangle with Lukas in this moment.

He made no sudden moves. Knowing his Commander well, he knew Lukas the man even better. It wasn't simply the silver that had replaced the normal blue of his Commander's eyes or the vein that

throbbed at his temple that concerned Timothy. It wasn't even the rage that tightened the muscles in Lukas's face. It was the calm violence that lay beneath Lukas's buzzing aura.

Timothy knew Lukas was out of his mind with worry for his woman. Timothy knew Lukas would rip him limb from limb and not blink. Lukas's rage was so absolute he was unable to keep the beast that fed on the emotion under control. Timothy was determined not to do anything to provoke the Commander as he enjoyed breathing; however, he knew he had to use all of his skills to find Star. His life and the life of the entire Locke Brotherhood depended on it.

"Boris and I were securing the perimeter when we were be-spelled," Timothy said calmly.

"By whom?" Lukas demanded.

Timothy was thankful Lukas had managed to keep his rage from engulfing him entirely thus far. Meeting his eyes, he answered. "Your brother, Commander."

Lukas's eyes shifted so that they became as dark as thunderclouds heavy with rain.

"You are mistaken. I destroyed Viktor two centuries ago," Lukas said, his breathing ragged.

"I am not mistaken in this, Commander. Viktor has been summoned and is now a *shadow*. He is the one who took Justice Hart," Timothy pressed on.

Lukas stepped away from Timothy's slumped body. He walked to the study door and yanked it open without physically touching it. Boris and the rest of his crew stood on the other side.

"Is it true?" Lukas questioned Boris.

The dark-haired man nodded before answering. "It was him, Commander."

Lukas looked at his brethren. The men stood waiting expectantly for his orders. Timothy came to stand beside Boris. Lukas stepped out of the study and walked towards the foyer of the Locke Brotherhood mansion. When he was dead centre of the symbols that were carved in marble, he turned to look at his two leaders.

"Boris, take the men and find my Star. I don't care how you do it. Question, bully, fucking kill if you have to. I want my woman found," Lukas whispered.

When no one moved fast enough, he snapped. "NOW!"

Boris and the crew flashed out of the foyer. Lukas turned to look at his Timothy, who'd been his friend and brother for so long. Though he did not speak, he did give him a grimace of apology. Timothy gave him a nod of acknowledgement in response. No words were spoken, but none were needed between

them. Lukas exhaled noisily through his nose and raised his chin slightly.

“What of me Commander?” Timothy asked.

“Let’s go and pay an old friend a visit,” Lukas said as he thought of someone he needed to check on, someone he’d not thought of when everything had begun to go wrong.

“At your command,” Timothy said as he came to stand side by side with Lukas.

Nodding, Lukas flashed from the mansion to find Calais.

~*~*~

Lord de Vires flashed into a bedroom with his True Mate Nafrini by his side. His anger was all encompassing. He was angry at Lukas for allowing this to happen. He was angry at the vamp who lived in this house for thinking *she* had the right to do this to Astarla. He was angry at himself for things too numerous to name. Only one other time in his long life had he been this angry and that time had involved his woman. This time it involved his child. He was livid, but when he looked into Nafrini’s eyes, he was lost. In spite of the current circumstances, he knew he was not going to be able to let her go again.

He pushed that thought to the back of his mind as he found Calais surrounded by naked *rogues* servicing her. Calais was no doubt enjoying herself as she moaned and writhed under the mounds of mouths, cocks, and fingers. Lord de Vires shook his head. Without much thought he killed Calais's multiple partners and raised Calais off the bed. He choked her to the brink of death using only his mind.

Calais's eyes threatened to bulge right out of her head and the sudden loss of air caused her to scratch in vain at her throat. Of course, her fingers made contact with nothing. She grew very afraid.

"You dared to take my child, *tripornos*," Nafrini sneered at Calais from across the room. Calais dangled naked from the wall where Serafeim had thrown her. Nafrini knew Calais's oxygen-depleted brain might be struggling with her presence, but the quick flush of anger that spread over her body let her know Calais understood the insult. It wasn't everyday Nafrini had reason to call someone a whore in Greek. Then again, it wasn't everyday she ran across someone who was so deserving of the title, and she always preferred to insult beings in their native tongue.

"Answer, Calais," Serafeim demanded, brooking no argument. Calais tried to croak out something, but

no air meant no sound. Unfortunately, that meant Serafeim had to loosen his hold slightly.

Calais sucked in a deep breath before gasping out, "I know not whom you speak of, my lord!"

"Lying *tripornos*!" Nafrini spat.

Taking his eyes from Calais, Serafeim reached out and gathered her in his arms. Nafrini snuggled into his strength and sighed. Only he could bring her peace when she was so disturbed. Still, as much as she loved him, she could not conceal her sadness that bordered on rage. She knew he felt it and despaired that she caused him more pain.

"You have only brought me joy, *Merit*," he whispered into her ear as he drew her even nearer.

"Serafeim," she almost sobbed.

"We will find her, *Merit*," Lord de Vires whispered in her native tongue.

Nafrini nodded and after their intense but brief moment, they both turned to look at Calais who was still pinned against the wall. Her face was going a lovely shade of red, and before she turned a deeper shade, Nafrini took over from Serafeim and slammed that bitch to the floor. She smiled upon hearing Calais noisily gasp for much needed air.

"We speak of Astarla. Where do you have her?" Nafrini asked.

Calais looked at Lord de Vires who stood next to a statuesque ebony-skinned woman who shimmered in and out of focus. Calais believed her lack of oxygen made the phenomenon possible; but as her breathlessness ceased, she realised the woman was indeed shimmering. She had never seen such a thing, although she had heard of demons and *shadows* that could do so. Still, for Lord de Vires, the absolute ruler of the Western Vampire Nation, to be...

Calais abruptly cut off that thought when she finally got a good gander at the woman next to Lord de Vires. The woman looked exactly like that fucking Justice!

Oh, fuck!

“My Lord, I do not—” Calais began but was interrupted by Lukas and Timothy flashing into the room.

Immediately, Lord de Vires had Lukas up against the wall where Calais had been just moments before.

“Let me be!” Lukas snarled at the ruler of the Western Vampire Nation, his eyes once again swirling silver.

He looked from Lord de Vires to the woman next to him. A woman who looked exactly like his Star!

“You did not protect her, Lukas. I warned you of the consequences—” Lord de Vires started, but was interrupted by the woman who resembled his Star so much it almost hurt Lukas to look at her. She seemed almost like an apparition, though she would solidify every few seconds.

The woman put her hand on Lord de Vires’s arm, who turned his attention to her.

“He is more enraged than you and I put together, *Merit*,” Nafrini said. Although Lord de Vires’s lip curled at the comment, he let Lukas go.

The woman smiled at Lord de Vires before turning to look at him. He couldn’t hold her gaze and looked away.

~*~*~

You can be angry at me, but you will show deference to my True Mate or die, Lukas, Lord de Vires spat in his mind.

I am showing deference, Lord de Vires.

Then why do you gaze anywhere but at her when she speaks? Lord de Vires asked.

I cannot look at her. It hurts, Lukas said.

Nafrini regarded the young man whom her child loved. She smiled upon hearing the telepathic

exchange between the two. How Nafrini loved her True Mate and how she loved the way Lukas loved her daughter. Outwardly, she smiled at the picture her True Mate made as he faced off with the young vamp. The two adversaries made a beautiful picture. Her Serafeim so regal and overflowing with such passion; the young vamp was light in comparison to her True Mate's constant brooding. She knew the young vamp bristled with indignation and fervour. And though she could feel his respect for Serafeim, she knew his great love for Astarla made it impossible for him to back down when Serafeim accused him of not protecting their daughter.

Both men were handsome, not beautiful, but handsome. Nafrini saw how the young vamp tried to be respectful of her True Mate, but she knew both men were so enraged and pushed beyond the point of politeness that they would both say things that did not need to be witnessed by the bitch in the room or the male who accompanied Lukas.

"I did fail, my Lord, but your punishment for me will have to wait. I want my Star back," Lukas turned his back to Lord de Vires, something virtually unheard of, to focus on Calais.

"Where is she, Calais?" he spat at her.

She was reaching for the robe as she answered. "I do not answer to you, Lukas and plus, I know nothing."

Lukas's eyes went effervescent at Calais's uncaring response. He reached forward, but a gentle yet firm grip on his arm prevented him from slicing Calais's head from her body. Looking to his right, the leader of the Locke Brotherhood stared into the eyes of Star's mother.

"Young Lukas, to harm a woman is not the way. As much of a waste of space she is, we may need her cooperation later," Lady de Vires said.

Lukas took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself. The shimmering woman looked so much like Star that he had to move away from her touch.

"She has tried to kill my Star many times before this. I do not believe she is as innocent as she claims," Lukas said, his voice steady as his emotions raged through his body.

"You cannot protect your woman and still you blame me? You are pulling at straws," Calais said blithely.

Lukas stepped back towards her, but both Lord de Vires and Timothy stepped in his path. Lukas turned away, but Lady de Vires approached.

“You will tell us what you had planned for my daughter,” Nafrini said as she stood in front of Calais.

Calais looked as if she were about to argue, but Nafrini stepped closer; and though she spoke softly, her words were loud enough for all in the room to hear.

“I am not one to be trifled with, girl. I have powers that will render you in a purgatory worse than that created by Lucifer himself. I can bring pain and wrath like nothing your pitiful mind could ever imagine, so do not try and test me, *tripornos*. You don’t have the brain for such a battle. Neither do you have the physical strength or stamina for my retribution.”

Nafrini did not even bother to look at the bitch when she spoke, which was why she noticed the smile on Serafeim’s face and the surprise on Lukas’s and his friends’.

As incensed as she might be, Calais did in fact love her life. She knew power when she saw it and this woman reeked of it, even more so than Lord de Vires. Calais had never felt puissance like that she felt from this woman. She opened her mouth and quickly outlined her plans to kidnap Star and hold her until Lukas came for her. At that time, she had planned to kill Star in front of him so he would know what it was

like to lose someone he loved so much...just like she had lost him to Star.

Nafrini looked her up and down like she were dog shit. Calais snarled and found herself once again pinned against the wall. Bowing her head, she apologized quickly.

“I am sorry, madam. I forgot myself.”

“Step with trepidation, girl; my True Mate doesn’t appreciate it when anyone tests me, especially lowly chits such as you,” Nafrini said with a hint of smugness.

“So where is my Star?” Lukas snarled from across the room. Calais looked over at him. His eyes were still glinting silver in the dim light...and he was looking finer than ever. She now knew that regardless of what she did, she would never have him.

With haughty toss of her head she answered, “I have no idea.”

“Liar!” Lukas flashed so he stood directly in front of Calais. His hand reached for her, but once again Lady de Vires stopped him. He tensed but allowed her soft hand to guide him away. Finally, he turned to face his woman’s mother.

“Young Lukas, she speaks many lies, but in this moment she is telling the truth,” Lady de Vires said gently.

Lukas still wouldn't look at her, but he *knew* regardless of his power, she could see everything he thought and felt.

"I cannot live without her," Lukas whispered.

Lady de Vires cupped his face in her hands and kissed both of his cheeks.

"As it is with her father and me," Nafrini said gently.

Lukas raised his head and caught sight of Lord de Vires watching Star's mother touching him.

"All of this time you could have stopped her, Lord de Vires. All of this time, if she had known who she *really* was," Lukas said, his eyes flickering between blue and silver.

Lady de Vires continued to cup his cheeks in her cool, smooth hands. "Young Lukas, please do not judge my True Mate. There are many things you do not understand. Let us find our daughter, your True Mate; then, we will be able to discuss these matters," she said.

Lukas finally looked into Lady de Vires's eyes and saw her truth. She then spoke inside of his head.

You must fight these overwhelming emotions. They will get you killed, young Lukas.

Lukas nodded slowly. Lady de Vires gave him one of Star's grins and Lukas felt his heart squeeze.

Everyone's focus moved back to Calais. Before anyone could speak, Boris flashed into the bedroom. He was covered in blood and his wounds were not healing as they should. Lukas and Timothy caught their teammate. He gasped out one thing before he fainted.

“Viktor has her, Commander. He awaits you at the Locke compound.”

FOURTEEN

Star watched Lukas's team surround her as Viktor held her with a blade to her neck. The metal was already slicing into her skin and she felt her blood trickling down her neck. This could not end well.

"Do not come any closer," Viktor said with a curl of his lip at the group of men surrounding them.

"Commander Montague wants the Justice," one of the Locke Brotherhood said with a determined look in his eye.

"Well, he can just come and get her then, can't he?" Viktor said with a grin full of malice.

"And I'm here, Viktor. Let her go," Lukas said as he flashed behind his brother. Viktor spun around, the blade inadvertently slicing deeper into Star's neck, causing the blood to flow faster.

"Always such a grand entrance to be made, *brother*," Viktor said.

Lukas never took his eyes off of his Star. He tried to speak directly into her mind, but her eyes were wide with pain...and knowledge. He was being blocked. He heard Viktor laugh menacingly, and Lukas finally looked over at the *Shadow* that had once been his brother.

“Let. My. Star. Go,” Lukas spoke slowly.

“Make me, little brother,” Viktor said with a smirk. Lukas jerked his head to the left and the Locke Brothers all moved back a good ten feet. All of them sheathed their various weapons and stood with their hands behind their backs, their legs slightly spread.

Seeing this, Viktor only sneered at Lukas. “And all the toy soldiers do as they’re told,” he said.

Lukas lifted an eyebrow and looked directly at Star who was blinking rapidly. He could see his True Mate struggling for breath as his brother dug the blade deeper into her neck, and he hated as he’d never before hated. Finally, Viktor let Star go and she slumped towards the ground. Lukas wanted to rush to her, but he knew that was what his brother expected. He was torn; but sooner than he could decide on his plan, there was a flash and Star was gone before she’d even touched the ground.

Concentrate, Lukas. She is safe now, Lord de Vires warned him mentally before going silent.

Don’t get yourself killed, Lukas, or I will be most displeased, Lady de Vires added.

Lukas smiled and did as Lord de Vires had advised him. He summoned his powers and felt the hum in his blood.

Viktor fingered the handle of a lethal-looking knife. Neither man moved. The wind whipped around

them all. Lukas's eyes remained watchful as the silent moments passed. The time seemed to stretch, yet it was only probably a few minutes that had come and gone.

But then, Viktor threw down the gauntlet.

Lukas watched as his brother's image began to blur, then there were two Viktors. Two turned into four. Four turned into eight. The multiplication continued until there was an army of *shadows* with his brother's face.

"Commander—" one of the newest crew members stepped forward from the circle, yet before Lukas could warn the young man back, one of the *Shadows* slit his throat sucking out the soul.

Lukas moved.

Four *Shadows* surrounded him. Lukas had his hands behind his back, his braid in his hand. When the *shadows* moved in closer, he pulled his hands forward and stabbed the two *shadows* directly in front of him through the heart with the razor-sharp blades from his hair. Tossing the blades up in front of him he spun and grabbed the blades from midair and plunged them into the two *shadows* that had been behind him. All four disappeared immediately. With a quick look over his shoulder in the middle of the army of *shadows* Luke saw one was bleeding. He knew then where the originator of the *shadow army* was. He

began to slash his way through the multiplied versions of the *shadow*.

At no time are any of you to come to my aid, he telepathically commanded the Locke Brotherhood. He saw some of them nod in agreement to his silent message.

He was sure that the soul-stealing demonstration had been enough for them all, but he just wanted to make sure.

Lukas breathed deeply before once again plunging the spotless blade into the next *shadow*. He saw there was only a handful left. Looking left then right, he couldn't see the *shadow* that had been bleeding. Silence enveloped him. Lukas disposed of five more *shadows* before he realised the bleeding *shadow* was not amongst them and the Locke Brothers were no longer surrounding him. He felt a burning sensation in his chest.

Suddenly, all the sound came rushing back through him. Looking down he saw a blade coated with his blood sticking out of his chest. The pain thundered through him all at once. He fell to his knees, gasping at the ache he felt.

He could not be killed was all he could think.

"Except with a sword made from the Ancestors," Viktor said with a grin as he came to stand in front of Lukas. Lukas felt his blood running down his body

from the wound. Unsteadily, he got to his feet. Viktor scrutinized him like one would something under a microscope. Turning, Lukas walked into someone. He focused and found Timothy holding him by the arms. Lukas frowned.

“Timothy...” he began but couldn’t go on as the red light began to glow in his trusted friend. “No...” Lukas couldn’t believe it. His second-in-command had turned *rogue*? How had he missed that?

“You were *distracted*, Commander,” Timothy said calmly. “And while you were, Viktor made me a better offer.”

Lukas shook his head in denial. He’d thought he knew this man. Timothy was as close to a brother Lukas had had since Viktor’s demise.

“Timothy—” Lukas broke off as another crashing wave of pain ripped through him. Opening his eyes, he saw Timothy move towards him. Using every last reserve of energy to pull the last of his blades from his braid, he plunged them into Timothy before he knew what hit him. Timothy’s eyes cleared for a moment and he saw the apologies there. Lukas gave a nod of understanding the moment before Timothy’s body disintegrated into ashes.

“Doesn’t it break your heart? Everything could’ve been avoided, if only you were able to trust those around you, eh? I told you I would win, Lukas,

don't you remember?" Calais voice came from nowhere.

Lukas's energy was fading fast and he could feel his blood beginning to pour from his body. Sweat beaded across his skin, and he had no energy to even lift his head.

"Don't you want to answer the lady?" Viktor asked as he pushed Lukas so he lay on his back, looking at the ceiling. The handle of the sword pushed deeper into his back, but he would not close his eyes. He wanted to see death coming. He felt the gathering storm and thought how fitting it was at this moment. He turned his head and saw Calais standing a few feet away. She stepped closer. Lukas's eyes began to grow heavy and his breathing slow.

"Show me a lady and I'll answer her," Lukas said, his lips barely moving. Viktor kicked him in the ribs and Lukas gasped as darkness threatened. He skirted away from the pain in his mind, determined not to let it affect him. He wanted his last thoughts to be of his Star. He attempted to thrust the pain out of his mind, but it refused to budge.

"Dear Lukas, it would do well for you to remember who holds the power here," Calais said as she stood over his prone body. Lukas didn't answer; then again, he couldn't. He could only think of Star

and of all the time he'd wasted. What good was long life if one squandered it?

He felt a shift in the atmosphere similar to a power surge. The wind stopped rushing around him. All sound ceased and the only things Lukas could hear was his sluggishly beating heart and the regret that pumped through his veins.

"And it would do for you to stay the fuck away from my man, bitch," Star spat as she appeared beside Calais.

Lukas's eyes widened. There was an eerie glow about Star. He knew it was she. He would always know it was she regardless of how sorry a state he might be in.

Star grabbed the back of Calais's head, holding it in place, and brought her leg up to kick Calais in the face. Blood spurted from Calais's nose as she screeched out her rage. Just as quickly, Star followed that first kick with another one. This time, Star planted the flat of her foot directly into Calais's face. She knew then she'd broken the bitch's nose and smiled in satisfaction.

Unable to share in his True Mate's glee, Lukas felt himself being lifted by unseen hands. The pain was so overwhelming that he was unable to look to see who was helping him. He wanted to struggle, but his limbs were no longer under his control.

Be still, young Lukas. He heard the warmth in Lady de Vires's voice and tried to keep his eyes open, but they kept threatening to fall shut again. If he were going to die, he wanted his last image to be of Star. He tried to communicate this need to Lady de Vires.

He didn't know if he were successful, but he felt a rush of mild heat flood his body. Smiling, he knew it was Star. The warmth felt good; it didn't overwhelm.

I'm here, babe. Just concentrate on breathing for me. I'm cleaning up some shit, Star's beautiful voice flowed through his mind.

Lukas wanted to smile but his mouth's muscles weren't listening to him. He kept his eyes open and watched his little Star deal with the *shit*.

Star looked down her nose at the woman who'd caused too much trouble in the past two centuries. Calais stared back at her with complete hatred...and a fucked-up face. Star smiled at the other woman.

"Didn't expect to see me again, did you?" Star questioned Calais as she struggled to her feet.

Calais swiped the back of her hand under her broken and bloodied nose. Apparently, she didn't appreciate seeing her own blood, for she screeched and launched herself at Star.

Star waited for a second, then held her hand palm out towards Calais's advancing body. She

stopped mid-stride and glared at Star, her mouth wide open as she gasped for breath.

“You are meant to be dead,” Calais said angrily.

“But I’m meant to be Lukas’s True Mate first,” she taunted. “Besides, I don’t kill easily.”

Calais exhaled angrily. “Bitch!”

“Yep. And I can kick your ass. Kind of sucks for you, doesn’t it?” Star said as if having a normal, everyday conversation with her nemesis was simply par for the course.

“You can die like the rest of us. You are nothing but a *half breed*,” Calais spat.

She shook her head and with a sigh. “You know, I really think you have a problem, Calais. I mean, you lie, you cheat, you fuck around, and where does it get you? Nowhere. Lukas is *mine*!” Star made sure to stress the final word.

It had the desired effect as Calais snarled and tried to break loose from Star’s hold. After long moments, she realised the more she struggled, the more Star squeezed. By the time she’d tired herself out, Calais was gasping for breath and looking rather worse for the wear.

“You have no proof. You are nothing but a Justice,” Calais tried desperately to save herself.

Star threw her head back and laughed. “And you know what, Calais? I would never have thought it,

either, but hey, wanna know a secret?" she asked, then answered before Calais responded. "I'm not just a Justice, but apparently I'm the heir to the throne," Star said in a friendly tone.

Calais's eyes widened. "You lie!"

"Actually, no, I don't. You underestimated me, Calais. You knew Lukas would never look your way again, and yet you pushed and pushed, didn't you? And now, what do we have here? Oh, yes, you summon his dead *rogue* brother to kill me, thinking in that small rock that stands in as your brain that somehow Lukas would turn to *you* in his grief? Wow, you really didn't think that one through," Star said as she looked to her left at Lukas who was being lifted by her father, Lord de Vires.

Star nodded and Lord de Vires pulled the sword from her True Mate.

Her mother appeared beside Viktor who had turned silent since her arrival on the scene. He twisted his grotesque head at her mother's approach. When he realised who approached him, his shock was evident.

Nafrini held her hand over the area where Viktor's heart had once been. At the same time Viktor began to howl in pain, Star held her hand up and the *ancient* sword was suddenly in her hand. Before another moment passed, she ran Viktor though with it

and he disintegrated into thin air. Star then turned to Calais, who stared at her with shocked eyes.

“No, I beg of—”

“No begging necessary, Calais. Let’s see if I can do this” Star said almost talking to herself. “Calais, you are a real bitch. You are hereby sentenced to die by the means you wished upon my True Mate.”

Calais’s eyes became dark with fear. “You cannot—!”

Before she’d gotten the whole sentence out of her mouth, Star had lopped her head from her body and the rest of Calais’s body disintegrated until only her clothes remained. Turning quickly, Star moved to Lukas, who was laid out flat on his back, yet hovering a good five inches off of the ground.

Lord de Vires ripped open Lukas’s shirt and moved out of her way as she knelt beside her Lukas. She leaned down and kissed Lukas on the lips.

“Father, tell me you can save him,” Star said as she held Lukas’s hand against her heart. Lord de Vires shook his head and Nafrini came to lean her hands upon Lord de Vires’s shoulders, smiling down at her daughter and her True Mate.

“This is within your capabilities, Astarla. Lukas is your True Mate. You are bonded with him in a way I am not; therefore, you are the only who can save him,” Lord de Vires said gently.

Star looked down at her Lukas's face. His blue eyes burned into hers with fierce emotion and she felt the faith he had in her.

"Such an attention seeker," she teased as she placed her hand over the deadly wound on her man's chest. She felt the power roaring to life within her blood and she pressed down as firmly but gently as she could.

Star drew the spell out of her man's body first, and then concentrated on repairing the severe damage the sword made. Lukas's breathing became less laboured with every passing second. Finally, she felt the last of Lukas's pain leave him.

Lukas covered Star's hand with his larger one. Sitting up, he thrust a hand into her hair and brought her down for a kiss that could've scorched the green off of grass. Leaning her head against Lukas's, she smiled to herself. Lukas watched her with eyes as blue as the sky above their heads and she watched him back. After a moment, she continued to hold Lukas's hand against her breast but turned her gaze to the silent couple beside them. Lukas followed her eyes.

"Thank you," they both said.

EPICLOGUE

Star hid a grin as she watched her husband-to-be pace back and forth in front of her. They were in the study of the Locke Brotherhood mansion. Extensive construction had taken place in the past twelve months. Since her true identity had been revealed, she'd been inundated with all sorts of gifts, most of which had been from her parents.

“My little Star, how can you possibly find this situation amusing? We are to finally be married tomorrow and Destiny is still not present!” Lukas groused.

Star stood and walked over to her man. She stilled his pacing by wrapping her arms around her fiancé's waist from behind. Smiling, she rested her cheek against the middle of his heavily muscled back.

“Babe, trust me. Dessie is and will always have her own schedule; unfortunately, it doesn't always match ours. She's renowned for always—and I mean *always*—being late, but somehow, she always makes it just in time.”

Lukas turned and pulled her arms up so she was flush against him. Star indulged in the feel of her man. With her arms around his thick neck, she breathed in his scent and snuggled closer. He brushed his lips

across hers, and as usual, the contact made her blood tingle in her veins.

“Couldn’t you just ask someone else to take her place, just to be on the safe side?” Lukas suggested to his True Mate.

She shook her head and returned his kiss. They were almost ready to get down to some of their own brand of hot steamy sex when the study door was thrown open and Dessie sashayed her crazy ass over the threshold and headed straight for the bar.

Leaning over the bar’s counter, she snagged a bottle of tequila. Without getting a glass, she unscrewed the cap, put the bottle to her lips and swallowed an unhealthy amount before setting it down with a thump. Then, she finally acknowledged their presence.

“Well, how the hell are, y’all? Hey, Lukas, Starbright, so does he lick coochie as good as they say?” she asked as she wiped her hands on her jeans.

“See, Lukas, I told you she’d get here on time. She’s a whole day early. Look at that.”

“Which means she has time to wreak all kinds of havoc,” he said, more to himself than to the two women who were busy not listening to him.

Turning to Dessie, he asked, “So, are you still going by the name Destiny Smith before I introduce you to the local law enforcement?”

“Yeah, for the moment. I’ll probably change it in a few weeks, but let’s talk about you. I see you’re in an uncomfortable position there, Lukas. Has Star been taking advantage of you?” she asked while waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Lukas wasn’t sure whether to answer her or call some of the Locke Brothers to drag her crazy ass out of the study. Before he could decide, she started speaking again.

“No, please don’t answer that. I’ll just head up to my room...and then, I’m heading off to your garage.”

Star shook her head at Dessie. Feeling Lukas tense beside her, she squeezed his hand in hers. She knew Lukas wanted to say something but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“You’re in the room next to Jack, Lukas’s best man,” Star said before giving Dessie a hug and directions to her room.

“Sweet, a new person to harass,” she said. Wagging her eyebrows at Lukas one last time, she left the study in a blaze of laughter and lunacy.

“She is...”

“My sister, Lukas,” Star inserted.

“Who is nuts. Perhaps I should assign a guard to her; otherwise, she might get so wrapped up in my vehicles that she’ll turn up at the altar wearing bib overalls and carrying a wrench. That’s if she remembers at all. Even then, she’ll probably get there just before you walk in,” Lukas said seriously.

Star grinned up into her man’s eyes. “Dessie may seem a little crazy, but that’s just because you don’t know her like I do.”

“I remember she tried to kill me when we first met; she also threatened to kill me again after she healed you and we began training,” he added.

“You had it coming; you were in league with Lord de Vires,” Star said with a grin as she leaned back into his hard body.

“But—”

“Babe, don’t sweat the small stuff. We have more important matters with which to concern ourselves.”

“And what would those matters be, my little Star?” he rasped.

“My pleasure. Now lock that door then get your fine ass over here and fuck me,” she demanded.

“Star,” he whispered as he reached for her. “Every time,” he said as he gently stroked her face. “Every time is so good.”

“I really never thought I’d be living in the Locke Mansion and discussing my wedding to *you* of all

males. Most of all, I never thought I'd be happy," Star said softly as she touched her lips to her man's throat.

Looking into his eyes, she watched his expression soften at her admission. When he licked his lips, she couldn't help but groan. He was simply too sexy for his own good.

Lukas looked at his little Star. His heart beat in perfect synchronization with his woman's. The moment she'd ordered him to please her, his heart had sped up and his body had gotten hard. He was on her in the blink of an eye.

It took no longer than a nanosecond for him to tear off her clothes and sink into her welcoming depths, groaning. He stilled once he was in as far as he could go.

Star was so beautiful...he could look at her forever and always find something that amazed him. He felt humbled whenever he was in her presence; he felt at home when he was embedded in her lush body. As always, she stunned him. She was...everything to him and it had nothing to do with her being Empress; it had everything to do with her being the woman she was.

Star opened her eyes and stared up at him.

"I love you, *Empress Montague*," Lukas breathed.

Star reached up and pulled Lukas's head down to meet hers once more. "Forever, my *Emperor*."

He brought his mouth to hers, sealing their future with a passionate kiss.

~*~*~ *The Jeanie* ~*~*~

This concludes Star and Lukas's beginning.

Thank you for reading. I appreciate the investment of your time and trust. I hope you enjoyed the tale as much as I enjoyed writing it.

~Jeanie Johnson

You can read more about the Otherworldly Series in the following books:

V8: The Healer and the Alpha (Destiny and Jack Mann)

Vicious: The Assassin and the Wolf (Sunny and Jamison)

Visceral: The Faerie and the Wolf (Tag and Jaron)

The twins (Josiah Mann and Jared Mann) coming soon).

For more information on the Otherworldly series, please visit my website:

www.authorjeaniejohnson.com.

The Jeanie

Okay, what can I say about me? Hmm. I'm crazy and I smoke too much (And, yes, my momma knows that. Don't worry, she's trying to get me to quit!). My favourite beverage is cold Coke, Coke with ice, Coke in a glass, Coke in a bottle...I think y'all get the picture! I'm of the grandiose notion that world peace will only happen when women take over *all* the *top* jobs.

My little sister describes me as the hot, sexy brick sh*thouse badazz filmmaker, and you know why? Because she has great freaking taste.

My older sister describes me thusly: Jeanie is a shagalicious word slinger who will be world-ruling side-by-side with her momma. As long as her Polar Bear (*shhh it's a secret*) doesn't drink all of her Cokes, all will be well. After gifting her clan with a knee-buckling narrative or two, Jeanie intends to relax by throwing on her favourite hoodie and waiting for her momma to put her on restriction.

See people, this is the kind of praise you get when you have Yvonne as your MMFIC and Rolanda as the MNWIC. Thanks for the props, you guys!