

THE ASSASSIN'S CROWN

THE HYBRID CHRONICLES BOOK THREE

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For fuzzy socks, blankets, and hot chocolate.

PROLOGUE

SOFIA

Darkness.

It was a heavy, relentless weight that pressed down on my shoulders, dulling my senses and refusing to leave.

I wasn't sure if I even wanted it to. I'd become friends with the darkness.

I welcomed its embrace.

CHAPTER ONE
LENNA



“*W*ho are you fuck waffles, and what do you want?” Her voice was light and sweet, with an almost musical quality to it that most certainly did *not* match her pissed off expression and warrior getup. A few braids from her dark hair fell over her shoulder as she readjusted her grip on her bow.

It was clear that we would have to tread carefully with her, it seemed as if she spooked easily. Though, living a life as a gladiator likely wasn't the safest way to grow up. She was probably used to constantly looking over her shoulder. Joe, my hawk friend who'd joined us from Boston, flittered around overhead, waiting for my command. I sent him to check the perimeter, so he wouldn't try and interfere.

We'd spent the last few weeks searching for her,

determined to uncover why the Guild wanted her captured so badly.

I stepped forward and opened my mouth to explain, but she must have taken it as an act of aggression and loosed another arrow straight for my face.

Luka's hand snapped out and caught the projectile before it reached its destination, and I let out a gasp, shouts of outrage sounding around me from my companions. My chest heaved, my body frozen in shock as Luka snarled and zoomed forward, dismissing our passive approach after her assault.

Leaves crunched under his feet as he ran, the arrow lay discarded on the ground beside me. The situation was quickly getting out of control and I hoped we wouldn't have to kill the hybrid. This was the first trained hybrid we'd come across and our encounters had typically involved *us* protecting *them*, not them attacking us.

I didn't get the chance to yell for him to stop before her boot connected with Luka's chest and he slammed into a tree, the sound of impact reverberating in the air.

I flinched and screamed his name.

She'd moved almost too fast for my eyes to catch and hardly seemed winded from the effort of moving a fully grown, muscular vampire. If I'd had

any doubts of her heritage, they were long gone. My confusion rose as I catalog her abilities. Most hybrids had certain traits similar to vampires, but none of them had been as fast and as strong as the pure vamps. From Luka's stunned expression, the same thoughts were going through his mind.

Luka's eyes cleared and he groaned from his position on the ground as he clutched his side.

Trey and Nikita had their guns out in a flash, the panthers on either side of the hybrid focused on them, their fangs on display as growls ripped from their throats.

I shifted my body to shield Sofia, knowing she wasn't up to fighting anyone in her current state. She'd barely reacted to our current situation whatsoever. She simply stood in the same position as earlier, looking off into the trees with a pained expression. I made a mental note to ask her what about the forest gave her grief.

I saw Zander out of the corner of my eye, looking between me and the new hybrid, unsure how to proceed.

I guess it's up to me then.

Before I had the chance to try and defuse the situation, Nikita cocked her gun. The panther closest to her leapt forward and I thrust my hand out, a wall of light erupting between them.

A sizzling sound accompanied by a yelp and the scent of singed fur assaulted my senses as the panther dropped to the ground.

It was the hybrid's turn to be shocked. She stumbled back a step, her mouth dropping open as she stared at my shield, still crackling with energy.

"That's enough," I said as Luka got to his feet, brushing the dirt and leaves off his disheveled clothing as he reached full height. His chestnut hair tumbled out of his bun and he slowly replaced the elastic, his eyes narrowed on the female as he walked back to my side.

After slipping my hand into Luka's and sending him a few tendrils of healing energy, I let the shield fizzle out. None of us made a move as she examined us, her brow furrowing as she took in our black, assassin gear and an array of weapons. In hindsight, our wardrobe choices might not have been the smartest move.

I plastered a slightly less sincere smile to my face and cleared my throat, my empty hand lifting in a friendly wave. "We just came to talk."

She glanced toward the panthers and their snarls quieted immediately. The one who'd been burned from my shield sat down and began licking its wound, the other one quietly observing us, and I

knew any suspicious movement would spur them both into immediate action.

These were no regular animals.

She met my gaze and slinging the bow onto her back before approaching confidently. "Well?"

Luka's lips tightened and his hand stiffened around mine. This wasn't going at all how I expected.

I gave him a reassuring squeeze and sighed. "It isn't safe for us to stay out in the open like this, so I'll try to explain quickly before we go to the safe house. Do you know what you are?"

Her hand twitched at her side. "I know exactly what I am and I'm not going anywhere with you. If you try to take me by force, you—"

"Woah! Hang on a second. Nobody is going to force you to go anywhere. We've been rescuing hybrids for the past few months, and we recently found out you'd been targeted by the Guild of assassins. We're only trying to help." I gestured around me. "Look at my friends. We are all a mix of human, vampire, and hybrid."

Zander raised a hand and winked. "Fellow hybrid over here, as well as these three." He pointed to Adrian, Summer, and Daniel.

"I'm just your average, run-of-the-mill human," Ryder said, and I snorted as Quinn let out a chuckle.

“Okay, not exactly *run-of-the-mill*. We’ve been upgraded a bit.”

The gladiator’s slanted eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

Quinn placed a hand on Ryder’s shoulder and grinned. “What my friend is trying to say is that the humans here have all gone through an initiation which gave us some extra abilities.” His voice was cool and soothing like a balm. “You saw what Lenna did with her shield, right?”

He waited until she nodded. “Well, we all have unique gifts to give us a boost.”

“Why would you need a boost?” She asked, her arms coming up to cross over her chest.

There was an uncomfortable silence as Quinn tried to think what to say, but I figured it was better to be honest from the start. “Most of us are trained assassins.”

Twin daggers whipped out of their sheaths on the sides of her thighs faster than I could blink, and she bared her teeth at me.

“No need to get all dramatic,” Ryder said as he took a few steps forward, casually resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. “We’re all friends here.”

“I’m not your friend, I don’t have any clue...” She cut off when Sofia walked over to a large pine tree

and plopped to the ground, leaning her head against the bark.

“You guys can wake me up when you’re finished this ridiculous pissing contest.”

The gladiator raised a brow. “Pissing contest?” She asked as if the expression was foreign to her. She spoke English perfectly though, so I wasn’t sure why she wouldn’t know basic terminology.

I was just glad Sofia was saying anything at all, instead of staring off into the distance with a blank look on her face. Hopefully, that was a step in the right direction.

“That’s when people try to demonstrate dominance or superiority,” a small voice called out before a minuscule girl barely into her teens entered the clearing. Her white-blonde hair tied back into two braids, the hilt of a dagger poking out of her boot. Her forest-green eyes twinkled in silent laughter at the hybrid’s exasperated expression.

“I told you to stay out of this!”

“And I told you the internet would come in handy. See? I can be useful!” She smirked and placed a hand on her hip. “It’s considered juvenile, but something you do all the time,” she said with a grin, ignoring her older companion’s statement entirely. She turned back to the rest of us and waved.

“Hi! My name is Violet, and that grumpy one is Kasai. Don’t mind her, she hasn’t eaten lunch yet.”

Ryder made a choking sound as Nikita barked out a laugh.

Violet swung her hands on either side of her rail-thin body. “So... you guys are assassins? That’s pretty cool. Kasai is a gladiator, and I was supposed to be trained as well before we ran away.”

“Violet!”

“Oh, hush. If they were going to kill us, they would have done it already. Plus, I was getting bored and you guys weren’t getting anywhere with all your aggression clogging the air.”

That time, we didn’t bother containing our laughter. I slipped my hand from Luka’s and held it out for the girl to shake. “My name is Lenna Turgenov, and we’ve all been working against the bad assassins to help rescue hybrids. I take it you’re one too?”

She nodded. “So, you came to help us?”

“That’s right,” Quinn replied, reaching forward to shake her hand as well. “I’m Quinn. Do you have any idea what happened to your parents? Why aren’t you with them?”

As usual, his voice had a calming effect on all of us. The soft, lyrical tones caressing my ears in a dreamlike way. I shook my head to get rid of the

influence and wondered if he was even aware when he did things like that. His face gave nothing away as he stood there, his auburn hair gleaming in the light that was shining in through the trees.

“We’re orphans. All the kids Ahriman has started as orphans. He adopts us,” she said, her fingers pantomiming air quotes around the word *adopts*.

“I take it Ahriman is the one in charge of the gladiator ring?”

She bobbed her head.

Something twisted in my stomach as I looked at Violet. At this tiny girl with glimmering eyes and wondered what monster would take her against her will and force her into a life as a gladiator. I loved all of the time I spent fighting in the pit, but that was *my* choice. I chose to fight. Papa might have trained me since birth, but it wasn’t through any malicious intent. He’d wanted to protect me and give me the tools I would need to survive.

A closer look at Kasai showed me all I needed to know to understand her hesitation. I wasn’t sure how I’d missed it before; the scars that littered every inch of bare skin. I had no doubt that if I saw her under better lighting, more would appear.

We had really gone about this whole thing all wrong. I walked over and sat down on the ground

next to Sofia and patted the space beside me. “Why don’t we start over?”

Kasai hesitated a moment, glancing at Violet who gave a pointed look in my direction. Rolling her eyes, she sheathed her daggers and lowered herself on to the ground beside us, resting her bow across her lap for easy access. “Just a warning. If any of you dick biscuits tries to hurt her, I’ll rip out your throats.”

A grin spread over Ryder’s face as he approached. “Understood, darling.”

She glowered in response, which only served to increase the size of his smile.

CHAPTER TWO
KASAI



I wasn't sure what to make of the strange mix of people all focused on me. It wasn't as if I was a stranger to being watched. My matches always brought in large crowds, but something about these people had me itching for my weapons. Not that I needed them in a fight, I could probably take out quite a few of them with my bare hands. Never underestimate the effect of an eye gouge. I had to wonder what the extent of their training was though.

There were a few vampires, which were most certainly the biggest threat to my life. As strong as I was, vampires still came out on top in the strength department. But I wasn't that worried. I'd killed plenty of them in the ring. I knew what to expect when fighting them. They *always* underestimate

humans, or those they believe are human. Strength and speed aren't everything. I've had to rely on my wits and weapons enough to know that.

There were a few hybrids like me, but again, I was no stranger to battling them. Ahriman loved taking in stray hybrids and he'd spent a lot of money searching for us across the globe. He was convinced we would make the ultimate fighters. We were stronger and faster than humans, but not reliant on blood, or even distracted by it in a fight. No hybrid that I'd ever met had been consumed by bloodlust. Drinking blood was like eating candy bars. Tasty, but not necessary for overall health and survival.

And then there were the upgraded humans... whatever the fuck that was supposed to mean. I couldn't deny the truth to the arrogant, blonde giant's words though. I'd seen with my own eyes what that female did. The shield she'd thrown out with her bare hands. The shield that'd burned Tali's paw. I could still feel the pain from her injury through our connection, and a wave of irritation swam over me.

Don't worry about me, youngling. I'll heal.

Of course, she was in my head listening to every thought as it passed through my mind. It had taken a long time before Tali and I began seeing eye to eye. While I was still stuck in the gladiator ring Titus had

sworn his life to mine, which meant his mate had to come along for the journey when I finally escaped. She had *not* been pleased with the arrangement initially. But she'd grown on me.

Pssh. You mean I grudgingly accept your presence in my life?

Nah, you know you love me.

She chuffed in response.

The blonde giant was staring at me, his icy gaze piercing my eyes as if he could somehow catch a glimpse into my soul. I shivered, bumps appearing down my arms.

Something poked into my ass and I shifted on the ground, making sure not to dislodge the iPod from my pocket as I pulled a stick out from under me and tossed it away. I'd slept in far worse conditions than this, so I figured it would be ridiculous to complain about sitting here while we spoke. I just wished they'd hurry up and explain.

How very mature of you. Titus's voice rang through my head, his tone rich with amusement.



I listened as the assassin, Lenna, told her story. The others cut in to add details as she spoke. From

what I was able to gather, they were actually three separate groups, all connected to this one girl. They all came together because she was determined to find her father. And then avenge him after his death. A noble, but ridiculous cause. Putting so much loyalty in someone, simply because of shared blood was ludicrous. Then I wondered what it would be like to have grown up with such love, and it was clear by the wetness in her eyes as she explained, that her father must have loved her very much. Hadn't she said she was an assassin? Yet, here she sat, her eyes full of tears. A crying assassin. What Ahriman would say if he saw his girl.

I attempted to shove away the thoughts. But no matter how hard I tried; I couldn't expunge him from my mind. Ahriman wasn't a particularly loving father figure. There were times I had been certain he cared for me, especially when he would gift me with expensive, custom-made weapons. But then after the slightest disappointment, he would completely turn around his behavior and beat me senseless. I'd given up trying to understand the way his mind worked years ago.

I had no doubt it wouldn't make a difference to Ahriman if we were of the same blood or not. He wouldn't have treated me any differently. He showed more care toward me than the other gladiators, but

that was most likely because I was the best. I made Ahriman a ridiculous amount of money, and I knew that for a fact because one time I'd snuck into his office and saw his papers.

Oh, the beating I'd received once he'd figured that out. That was when I learned about surveillance and cameras. Ahriman liked to keep us somewhat in the Middle Ages, with nothing to entertain ourselves with aside from training and the occasional book we could borrow. I only knew about music because I'd stolen an iPod from the pocket of someone who'd come to watch our fights and convinced one of the gladiators who'd arrived at an older age to show me how it worked.

From what these people were saying, I was in far more danger than I'd understood. There had been quite a few assassination and abduction attempt in the weeks following my escape from Ahriman, and one had been too close. Violet had almost died in the first attack before I knew to be more on my guard. Now, I took more precautions and had begun training Violet. Not that she'd given me much of a choice with all of her incessant begging.

I had no idea what Ahriman was thinking bringing Violet to the ring. She was a tiny thing, barely stronger than the average male. She would *not* make a very good gladiator, but it was a good thing

we weren't in the ring anymore. I'd turn her into something else. Something quiet and lethal. An assassin like the ones sitting around us. Well, a *better* assassin than the ones sitting around us. I could probably sneak a peek at the way they train and improve on it.

You know exactly why he brought her. It's the reason she was given to you. To be used against you. Titus's voice filtered in through my mind.

I guess it doesn't matter now. We're out of that hell hole. I thought back.

I ground my teeth at his words. It wouldn't have been the first time Ahriman had done that to me, but I'd learned my lesson those years ago. There had been another gladiator, Sasha, who'd trained beside me day in and day out. We were inseparable, our relationship changing from friends to something *more* as the years went on, until the day Ahriman discovered it and put her in the ring against me. During a real match. Not training.

It had never happened before. Ahriman never pitched his own fighters against each other. He wouldn't make as much money that way. One of his fighters would have to die. It wasn't worth the investment, but he'd made an exception that one time. To prove a point to me. That I was his and not allowed to care. Not allowed to love another.

At first, I'd thought it was a bad joke or some kind of trick. Then I noticed the crowd and how they chanted for death. How they *screamed* for it. Demanded it. Sasha had looked as confused as me at first, but the moment she understood what was happening, her entire demeanor changed. She hardened into the warrior she was and attacked without hesitation. I hadn't wanted to kill her. It nearly broke me to do it, but I had no choice. It was her or me, and she wasn't willing to back down. So I ended it. As quickly and painlessly as I could.

My heart throbbed at the memory and Tali inched forward and licked my hand, the others eyeing her warily as she approached.

As they spoke, the white-haired vampire named Trey, suddenly straightened, black markings trailing up and down his arms barely visible on his onyx skin. He sniffed the air and tensed, pulling twin swords off his back. "People approaching rapidly."

I jumped to my feet, keeping a firm grip on my bow, and beckoned Violet to come to my side. She scurried over immediately, pulling out a dagger from her boot. The first thing I taught her was to listen to me without question in these circumstances. I'd come far too close to losing her.

"They are too slow to be vampires and too quiet to be civilians on a hike. My guess is assassins," Luka

said, his ear tilted in the supposed direction of the newcomers.

I strained my ears, but they weren't yet close enough for me to detect. Crap on a cracker, those vampire senses were better than I thought.

Everyone got into fighting positions, clutching their weapons as they waited for the upcoming fight. I couldn't see any traces of fear on their faces, only fervent determination. The only ones that seemed hesitant were the hybrids, but from what they explained of their secret society, it didn't seem like they saw combat often. *Pussies*.

"Do you think they were dispatched before I murdered Killian?" Lenna asked light crackling down her arm, materializing into a whip. There was a glint in her eye and a slight grin on her lips.

Now that is badass.

I wouldn't mind being able to create weapons with my mind. The smile on her face made it clear she welcomed fights. She *enjoyed* them. Maybe I judged her too soon.

"We know for sure it wasn't Hailey or Brielle, so they were either sent out before Killian died or the Benefactor still has connections in Boston," Ryder said, his grip strong and steady on his sword. He turned in my direction and winked, causing a strong sensation to come over my stomach. A flurry of

sorts. Like butterflies swarming around inside me. It wasn't entirely unpleasant, but certainly unwanted. I glared at him for distracting me, before looking away and readjusting my grip on my bow.

I heard a faint chuckle in response.

"They could also have been sent from a different location. Killian wasn't the head of the entire Guild. Only the Boston branch," Quinn added.

Ryder swore. "That's a good point."

"Can you tell how many of them are coming?" Lenna asked the vampires, and I strained my senses once more, determined to contribute. I wouldn't be sidelined by anyone. Being an assassin is hot shit, sure... but they stick to the shadows. The gladiators are all about upfront battling and I was the undefeated warrior at Ahriman's ring.

"It is difficult to determine how many of them approach. They are too silent. I wouldn't have noticed at all if one of them hadn't taken the safety off his weapon," Trey responded, his focus still fixed on the trees.

"They train you all too damn well," the vampire with bubblegum-pink hair stated with a frown. I was pretty sure she said her name was Nikita.

"Hey! That training has helped you out quite a few times if I remember correctly," Lenna quipped.

Nikita smirked. "I suppose so."

I let the killing calm wash over me as Ahriman's mantra flowed through my mind. Unbidden. Unwanted. *You are a weapon; you do not fail. You do not falter.*

A twig snapped in the distance and I zeroed in onto noise. *There they are!* I heard nothing more than the quiet crunch of leaves, and the rustling of clothing rubbing together as they neared. I likely would have disregarded the sounds as animals if I hadn't been on high alert from the assassins. I cursed my training, wishing Ahriman had had a reason to prepare me for the outside world.

I pulled an arrow out of my quiver and knocked it, closing an eye and releasing a breath as I focused. My mind was completely clear as I waited for them to appear, the murmuring of the others fading into the distance as they too readied themselves.

Titus and Tali padded up to either side of me and Violet, their claws digging into the earth, their fangs gleaming and on display.

At last, they emerged through the trees, halting in their footsteps as they took us in. All three of them. Three measly assassins came to fight against more than a dozen trained and armed fighters. What a bunch of fucksticks.

CHAPTER THREE

LENNA



I would have paid big money to see the looks of astonishment on the assassins' faces as they beheld our group at least one more time. One of them even went as far as to stagger back a step after coming face to face with one of Kasai's panthers. I heard Ryder snort and met his eyes, an amused glint sparking in his icy orbs. I knew he was bursting with the effort to hold back from saying something.

Luka's arm brushed mine and I could see the corner of his lip twitch as if he was holding back the urge to smile. Or laugh. This was likely the most ridiculous standoff I'd ever been in. I snapped my light whip and made to approach them, but after a moment of silent communication between them, they turned and bolted into the trees.

“Are we supposed to go after them... or?” Luka asked, scratching his head.

Sofia merely turned around and began the trek back to the cars, not bothering with a verbal response.

“I’m with her,” Nikita said, turning and making her way down the path, the rest of us trailing behind her.

I shot off a quick text to Brielle to see if she had any idea about those rogues. “You think it’s alright to let them run away?” I asked Quinn, who was walking past me.

He shrugged. “Whoever sent them here already knows our general location, so chasing them is pointless at this point.” He rubbed his jaw, looking behind us to where they’d disappeared through the trees. “It doesn’t feel right to kill people who didn’t attack us, even if they wouldn’t have given us the same courtesy.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I agreed with his statement. In my mind, they signed their deaths when they decided to come after us, but I wasn’t about to go running after them alone.

Joe landed on my shoulder and nuzzled my neck as I fell into step with Kasai and Violet. “I have a bunch of safe houses set up all over the world, and

one of them is in DC, so that's where we're headed now. Did you decide if you're going to come with us?" I tried to keep my voice steady and not show how badly we needed her compliance. She was the key to finding out what the Guild was up to.

I watched Kasai place herself between me and the girl, keeping her on the outskirts as if to shield her from us. I swallowed my scoff, incredulous at the idea of us ever hurting a child. "I think it's best we stick together, at least until we figure out why they are after you," I continued, placing what I hoped was a friendly smile on my face.

Violet tugged on Kasai's sleeve and whispered something into her ear, causing the gladiator to roll her eyes and let out a sigh. "Alright, we'll come with you for now, but if anything happens to make me doubt your intentions, I'm going to gut you and walk away without a second thought."

My smile changed, my lips lifting slightly to display bared teeth. "I would expect nothing less."



It took us a little over an hour to reach the address I found in the files that Papa left me. It

turned out to be a townhouse on 18th street in Adams Morgan. I stood on the sidewalk with my mouth gaping wide at the house, convinced there must be some sort of mistake. There was simply *no* way Papa would purchase such an ostentatious home.

It was yellow, and not the kind of burned mustard or saffron yellow. Bright, lemon yellow. The townhouses were situated on a row of shops and restaurants, and mine was above a small cafe.

“Well, at least there isn’t anyone who is going to guess this is a safe house for a bunch of assassins,” I murmured as Sofia sidled up next to me, her expression remaining blank.

“And don’t forget that we’ll have easy access to coffee and croissants,” Ryder joked, striding forward with a duffle bag over his shoulder.

“I like it!” Violet exclaimed excitedly and followed him up to the door. “It has character.”

We filed into the house and roamed through the different rooms. Thankfully, the decor on the inside was less vibrant. The furniture was all modern, the kitchen counters pristine and shining. There were three bedrooms on the bottom floor and four more on the top. It was as if Papa had somehow known I would need to make use of a place like this, but that

was ridiculous. I went nowhere and saw no one besides him and Max. Why would he buy this house?

A sharp twinge of pain shot through my chest as everyone began claiming rooms and Ekon's absence become abundantly obvious. Things happened so quickly after his death, and I hadn't had the time to properly mourn. Though, that seemed to be the unfortunate normality in my life. Sofia leaned against the wall, scrolling through her phone with teary eyes as Kasai and Violet claimed the room closest to the exit. Not at all surprising.

I made a note in my head to spend time with Sofia, just the two of us, to make sure she knew I had her back. Just as she constantly supported me through all of my struggles.

Quinn and Trey took the second room on the bottom floor, followed by Summer and Aidan, who I discovered on the ride over were together. Sofia nudged my shoulder and grabbed my hand, leading me up the steps to the room at the end of the hall.

I hoped she was finally going to open up and talk with me. My thoughts were likely clear on my face because Sofia gave me a small smile, sitting down on the bed.

"I'm not planning on jumping off the roof any time soon if that's what you're worried about. I just

need...time, I guess. The pain doesn't get easier the more people you lose. I found my way back after Miguel, and he was my brother. My twin." She twirled one of her curls between her fingers in thought. "I didn't think it was possible for me to love anyone as much as I loved Miguel, but Ekon was... he was *everything*." Her voice broke as she struggled to voice her thoughts.

I dropped on to the bed beside her and gathered her up in my arms. "And he knew that, Sof. He knew that and he felt the same way, and you know he wouldn't want you to give up the person he was so in love with because he isn't here anymore."

She nodded. "You're right. I know you're right. I just need to find a way through the darkness." A tear escaped her eyes, the green much more prominent at that moment. "It's just so *heavy*, Lenna. I feel like there is this weight on my shoulders and I have no idea how to make it go away."

I rubbed the tear from her cheek. "I don't have enough experience in life to give you the right answer, but you know what I did. I put all my focus on revenge. On killing the people responsible for Papa's death."

She sniffed. "And did that help?"

I let out a sigh and thought about it. "I'm not sure, Sof. I don't feel as dark as I felt in the begin-

ning, but I don't know if that is due to avenging him or because I have people in my life who helped shoulder the burden. All of you helped ease the pain, slowly. Getting over a loss like that doesn't happen overnight. It happens day by day, moment by moment until you wake up one morning not feeling like the world is resting on your shoulders."

This conversation hurt. It was like a knife to my heart, reopening wounds that were barely mended. Papa was dead. Ekon was dead. Axel was dead. I felt utterly selfish that my pain was ebbing, while Sofia was drowning in anguish.

Maybe Papa had been right by hiding me away all of those years. When you open yourself up and allow people inside your heart, there is a much larger chance for heartbreak. The kind that makes it hard to breathe. Cade's unknowing betrayal might have been the hardest for me to handle, especially since he was still alive and his actions fresh in my mind.

Sofia laid down on the bed and I followed her movements, putting my head down on the soft pillow and resting my hand inside hers with a squeeze. "We'll figure a way out of this, Sofia. I promise you."

"Together, right?"

"Always."



A soft knock echoed through the door, causing Sofia to stir. She'd fallen asleep within minutes of lying down, and I stayed with her, not wanting her to wake up alone. A part of me wanted the comfort Sofia brought, just as much as I knew she needed it from me.

Casting a backward glance at her sleeping form, I got up and made my way to the door, cracking it open to Luka's smiling face. The honey tones in his eyes softly glowing in the dim lighting of the hall. He was sporting a slight beard as if he hadn't had the chance to shave with all the traveling we'd been doing.

The sight of him like that brought a warmth starting at my chest and lowering to coil below my navel. He always looked good but seeing him slightly disheveled and out of his carefully put-together look, did something to me. Something I was still denying.

"Hello, little assassin."

"Hello, Prince," I said, turning my face to verify that Sofia was still sleeping. I slipped through the door and lowered my voice. "What's up?"

He glowered at me.

“What? Not liking the nickname, fang man?”

He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “I really wish you hadn’t found out about that.”

“You’d rather there were secrets between us?” I asked, hoping that wasn’t the case. Even though we’d gotten off to a rocky start when I stabbed him in the shoulder, I’d become close to him in the months following. After saving his life from Cade, and bringing him to my safe house in Boston, we’d started spending time together outside of hybrid saving duties and clicked.

Our late-night movies were one of my favorite parts of the week. They allowed me to turn off the Lenna Bishop facade, and just be... me. How rarely I’d been able to let go and simply relax, but Luka made it so easy. He already knew about Papa, and never pushed me to divulge any information I wasn’t ready to deliver. And in those quiet moments when the movies were over, but we stayed awake and spoke about things I’d never before dared to voice. Hopes and dreams for a future I wasn’t sure I would get to experience were aired.

He had eventually told me about being the prince and what his duties to his court were, letting it slip that becoming king was never something he wished for. How he knew the moment he took up the crown, his people would treat him even more

different than they already did. He made it seem like the loneliest job in the world.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not that I don't want you to know things about me, Lenna. I'd never deny you anything, but I don't want you looking at me differently. The way *they* do."

My eyes widened. *Oh*. I wondered how many times he'd had to question the motives of the people around him since he was young. Always wondering if they were showing interest in him or his title. My heart ached for him and how awful it must have been to grow up that way.

I scoffed, mockingly. "As if I'd treat you any different because of a silly little thing like a crown. Don't think you can use that as an excuse not to pick up the snacks for our next movie night. It's your turn, remember?"

He grinned. "How could I ever forget?"

Satisfied that we were back to our normal banter, I relaxed, copying his stance against the opposite wall. "So, what's going on? Did you need something?"

He looked down the hallway. "Yeah, actually. Everyone is waiting to discuss the next step."

I sighed, emotionally and physically exhausted. "I guess we should probably get that over with. Did Kasai have any idea why the Guild was after her?"

He shook his head. "Not a clue, but she still doesn't seem all that comfortable with us and she could be withholding information."

I nodded and looked back at the closed door. "Good point. Let me check on Sofia quickly, and I'll meet you downstairs."

Sofia opened her eyes as I re-entered the room and the corners of her lips turned up slightly. "Have I been out long?"

I shook my head. "About an hour or so. I'm going to head down to go over strategy. Do you want to come with or stay up here and keep resting?" I didn't want to push her unnecessarily.

"I think I'll stay here and sleep a bit more." Her eyes fluttered close and her breathing evened out. I hoped that letting out her feelings helped alleviate some of the sadness that rested so heavily on her shoulders.

I switched into pajamas and walked back into the hallway my fuzzy slippers silent on the hardwood floors. I stopped in my tracks when I saw Luka standing at the top of the stairs with his eyes closed, softly humming.

I approached and tapped his arm, his muscles relaxed under my fingertips. "Fang man?"

His eyes popped open and he grinned. "Sorry, I was listening to the most beautiful song."

“Well, if it captured your attention so well, I’d like to hear it.”

“Perhaps one day,” he said, the corners of his lips tilted upward.

“Weirdo.” And then I realized he wasn’t wearing headphones. *How bizarre.*

CHAPTER FOUR
KASAI



I sat on the soft, gray couch with Titus lying at my feet, Violet running her hand over his onyx coat. A low, rumbling purr emanated from his chest, vibrating through my legs that were squished under his belly. *No sense of personal space whatsoever.*

Mhmm, you know you like it. But by all means, move somewhere else if it bothers you. Titus said, his voice thick with sleep. He stretched and adjusted his position, his back now digging into my legs.

I gave him a little shove. *Heavy beast. I should put you outside with all the other animals.*

He chuckled and began licking his claws. I couldn't stop the small smile that forced its way on my face. It had been like this between us from the very first day he found me in the ring. He acted like

he'd always belonged with me as if his presence was normal. He still refused to tell me where he came from, or even why we could speak in each other's minds. I'd given up on trying to get the answers from him and just accepted it.

I was surprised there hadn't been any comments about Titus and Tali coming with me, though, at any given moment birds were flying around the house. *Honestly, birds?* I wondered what a regular human would say if they walked into this madhouse to see the birds flying around, and Titus and Tali slinking about the place.

Giving up on the idea of personal space, I leaned back into the cushions and sighed. Must be nice to live so large. I looked around at the furniture in the living room. A massive gray couch in the shape of a U, which was the most comfortable thing I'd ever sat on in my life. Attached to the wall opposite where I sat was a TV and gaming system. I wondered if they would allow me to try it out. Maybe I should just wait until they all go to sleep and use it anyway. Who needs permission? They needed me for some reason, so I might as well get some benefits from it.

Despite them all arriving together, there was a clear divide between the different groups. The other hybrids sat together at the kitchen table, speaking in low voices while the girl shot disdainful glances at

everyone else. Aside from the blonde one, who was leaning his chair back on two legs and scrolling through his phone, it didn't seem like they were all that friendly.

Lenna and the empty-eyed girl had been missing for the past hour. I had no idea why they would bring a girl like that on a mission, but they weren't asking for my advice. I'd give it to them if they did, though. They probably should ask my advice, because from the looks of things, they could use it.

The front door opened and the pink-haired vampire, smiling assassin, and the onyx-skinned vampire walked in. They carried cardboard boxes, and I caught a strong whiff of cheese, tomato sauce, and bread drifting through the air. *Mhmm, pizza.* One of the first things we did after escaping was to try all the different foods we never had, and I found that I most enjoyed pizza. There was just something about the combination of flavors that made my whole body feel warm and cozy.

The smiling assassin fixed his grass-green eyes on me. "You're hungry. Perfect! We got more than enough for everyone," he said as they brought the boxes to the table in front of the couch. "I'm Quinn, by the way." He held out a hand for me to shake. It was still hot from holding the pizza, and he squeezed my hands gently. Not like my opponents in the ring.

The ones who were naively confident enough to believe they could best me. They would hold my hand as hard as they could without it becoming obvious. And I *always* squeezed back. Hard.

“How did you know I was hungry?” I asked, letting go of his hand.

“Oh, that’s my gift,” he said animatedly. “I can feel other people’s emotions. Can you believe hunger is an emotion? There is a certain...flavor to it I can taste. Emotions all have different scents, tastes, and feels to them. I can’t really explain it in a way people can understand who don’t experience what I do.” He was rambling now. Generally, that would annoy me, but he just seemed so damn sincere, I couldn’t bring myself to snap a rude retort. “But yeah, basically, I can tell what people feel.”

That skill seemed a bit useless to me. How would knowing someone’s emotional state help in a fight? I didn’t bother to ask since he’d likely go on another tangent to explain it to me and I was too hungry to care.

Tali slinked in behind the others and dropped a dead rabbit on the floor in front of me, a few drops of blood seeping onto the hardwood. *I have brought your dinner, youngling.*

My eyes whipped around the room to see if

anyone else noticed the *dinner* from Tali, but they were all engrossed in the conversation.

Tali! You can't just bring dead animals into peoples' houses!

What? Why not? I hunted and provided for you. I thought humans ate in their homes. She sounded slightly affronted.

I shook my head in exasperation.

Yes. Humans eat in their homes, but not like that.

I don't understand.

I felt a tug on my sleeve.

"Sai, there is a dead rabbit on the floor," Violet said, pointing to the lifeless creature.

I slapped my forehead. "I know. I'm trying to explain how weird that is, but she doesn't get it."

Titus stood, finally releasing the pressure off my feet, and swiped the rabbit off the floor. *If you aren't going to eat it, I certainly won't allow such a fine meal go to waste.*"

Tali preened at the praise. So vain.

I rubbed sensation back into my tingly limbs as the others reminded me of their names.

After hearing people making their way down the stairs, I saw Lenna and Luka appear, a puzzled look on the female's face. Everyone took their seats scattered around the room, and I felt a jolt of irritation

as the blonde giant, now known as Ryder, plopped down beside me. Much too close.

“Do you mind?” I felt his leg press against my thigh before I shuffled over a few inches.

He grinned. “Not at all.” He held out a piece of pizza on a paper plate. “Want a slice?”

I glared at him and leaned forward to take for myself.

“Is that a flirting thing? I’m thirteen now, so I want to be able to flirt, but I obviously can’t ask Kasai,” Violet said in a rush, almost tumbling over herself in her effort to move closer.

My face heated, but Ryder responded before I had a chance to open my mouth.

“It definitely was, but why can’t you ask Kasai?” He asked that with an evil smirk on his face. It was like he could somehow guess at my inexperience. I’d had one lover before, and there had never been any *flirting*.

“Well, she grew up in a gladiator ring. *Duh*. How often do you think gladiators get the chance to flirt? Not a very romantic environment, ya know?”

“Oh yes, I can see how that would be a downer.”

I had to hold myself back from touching my face as I was sure it had caught fire. If only I could punch her, but she’s just a child. An irritating child with no apparent filter. I wanted to die. I’d rather fight

against three assailants in the pit simultaneously than listen to another word of this conversation.

I made to get up, but Ryder's hand stopped me.

"Hey, it's no big deal. We were just messing around. Sit."

I don't know why, but I did.

"Alright, now that we are all here, finally, let's go over a few things and strategize together," Luka said with an authoritative voice.

"Due to the unfortunate need for us to remain out of the limelight, we must figure out a solution for feeding. Those of us who require it, of course," Trey said, his white hair braided intricately over his shoulders, coming to rest on the muscles of his crossed arms.

"From our understanding, hybrids do not require blood to survive. Is that true for all of you?" Luka asked, looking between me and Violet to where the other hybrids sat across the room.

Zander smiled. "That is absolutely correct, your most royal highness, sir."

A few confused glances passed throughout the room at his comment, and I heard Lenna whisper something into Ryder's ear from her spot on his other side. His arm went around her shoulders and she snuggled into his embrace. If they were lovers, why would he be open about

flirting with me? That seemed odd to me, though as Violet already stated, I didn't have enough experience to understand romantic dynamics. All I knew was that I wanted to remove her from his chest, though I couldn't fathom why. Though, from the tightness of Luka's jaw, he felt the same way.

"I don't know if hybrids can feed vampires, but I'm sure the humans won't mind donating some blood," Lenna said, a blush creeping up her neck. "We already know the Donum Vitae doesn't stop you from feeding on us."

Summer snorted. "We're not going to be responsible for taking care of your weakness. It isn't our problem."

What a shit biscuit.

Adrian placed a hand on her thigh and whispered something into her ear.

"Hybrids cannot provide the necessary sustenance, unfortunately, darling sister, so I think we'll leave the feeding to you guys." Zander smirked as slung on the back legs of his chair.

"Why don't we each pair up with a vampire?" Quinn suggested as he swiveled around to face Trey, swallowing a large bite. "I don't mind offering up some blood. I doubt any of us are squeamish at this point," he laughed.

Ryder leaned over Lenna to high-five Nikita. “I got you, but just be gentle. I like it soft.”

Lenna shoved at his arm. “Don’t be gross.” She turned to Luka and reached for another slice of pizza. “I guess that leaves me and you.” Her cheeks flushed with a rosy tint and the look Luka gave her was almost carnal. There was heat in his eyes and they glowed a deep, golden hue. Her gaze dropped down and she busied herself with her meal.

Trying to understand the dynamic between these people made it clear that Quinn’s gift wasn’t as useless as I’d originally thought.



“Okay, so we’re agreed that we’ll stay here and continue training while we try and figure out what the Guild wants with Kasai?” Lenna asked, pushing aside her empty plate. They’d spent the better part of the last three hours going over the different options.

I wondered if I should tell them my secret. The one that might be the reason these assassins wanted me. I wasn’t sure how they could have found out about it though. My *gift*. Not even Ahriman knew about it. The only beings aware of my gift were Violet, who would never betray me, and the

panthers. Seeing as nobody apart from me could even communicate with them, I wasn't worried in the slightest about them spreading the word.

So no. I wasn't ready to put all my trust in them. The last time I used my gift, bad things happened. Crazy, unexplainable things. It was more of a curse than a gift.

Ryder raised his hand. "Um, I have a question."

Lenna pulled his arm down. "We aren't in class, Ryder. Just ask." She shook her head, though the look on her face was more amusement than annoyance.

"What are we going to do with all of the hybrids we sent to safe houses? Are we just going to leave them there?"

Luka straightened the cuffs of his shirt. "Actually, I've been in touch with Kalina Nagy, the vampire we saved with the young hybrid son. She's been in touch with the other people and has been helping keep everything organized. She's been wonderful making sure everyone has enough food, blood, and clothing. I've set her up with an account under an alias to use for all of their expenses, so they should be fine for another few months."

Lenna's head snapped up and her mismatched eyes widened. I'd never seen someone with two different colored eyes before her. One, a startling

blue, like the sea, and the other a warm brown. Kind of like a cup of coffee with a little too much milk.

“What?” He asked, sidling closer to her. “Did you think I’d drop them off and just leave them to figure it out? We’re all in this together, little assassin.”

From the look on her face, it seemed like she had just come to that same realization. Was it possible these people were truly *good*? The more I heard from them, the more it seemed like they were interested in helping me, and I began to hope. Hope that I might have found others who would accept me for who I was and not for what they could gain from me.

CHAPTER FIVE

LENNA



I followed Luka upstairs, all the way to the room next to mine and Sofia's. There was a king-sized bed with two small tables on either side of the dark, gray headboard. The floors were carpeted in the same soft material as in the other room, and I noticed Luka's two suitcases open on the bed.

Luka pulled out a pair of sweatpants and laid them on the bed next to his luggage. He then proceeded to unbutton his shirt and slip it off his shoulders, my gaze catching on the swirling black tattoos covering his impressive chest and arms. Luka was a little above average height, muscular, but not in an overbearing way. Though, enough that I was enthralled by the definition of his six-pack and toned biceps.

His chestnut-colored hair was tied up in his typical bun, a few waves escaped and emphasized his strong jaw. I ran my gaze over his full lips, to his nose, which was slightly crooked, continuing upward until I reached his warm, honey-toned eyes.

I suddenly felt like a nervous high schooler. Or at least, what I assumed that's what the butterflies fluttering around in my stomach meant. Cade had never once made me feel so twisty on the inside, which just made me wonder if the emerging feelings for Luka were something deeper.

"I'm about to change into the pajama pants, so if you aren't comfortable with the show, you might want to turn around," Luka said, a slightly teasing tone to his voice.

My eyes drifted lower for just a moment and I twirled around before I did something stupid like pull down his pants myself. I could have sworn I heard a soft chuckle coming from behind me and my cheeks flushed.

"I'm decent," he said, and I turned back to face him, my body feeling slightly warmer than it should.

He raised a hand to touch my face. "I love it when you blush."

I blinked and rubbed my arm, uncomfortable with the compliment. "So, how do you want to do this?"

“Well, last time I got a taste from your wrist, so would you be okay with me feeding from your neck?” He said it so casually as if he was discussing what to eat for lunch. Though, I guess for him it was. I didn’t think I could have him at my neck, especially knowing how his bite made me feel. If he had his lips pressed against my throat, I’d likely do something embarrassing.

“I’m not sure I’m totally on board with that. Could we maybe stick with my wrist, at least for now?” I asked, trying to sound apologetic.

He took a step closer and smiled. “We’ll do whatever you’re comfortable with, little assassin.” He paused, searching for something in my gaze. “I just want you to know how much I appreciate you doing this. If it’s too much for y...”

“It’s not!” I hurried to say, wanting him to know it had nothing to do with him. “I’m happy to do this for you, I just think it would be best to keep it at my wrists for now.”

He nodded. “I completely understand.” He gestured to his bed. “Why don’t we sit down?”

I sat beside him, the butterflies in my stomach feeling more like a tornado than tiny wings and gave him my arm.

He cradled it with such care that my heart clenched, his eyes glowing brightly as he neared my

skin. His fangs descended and he bit into my arm, the momentary pinch of pain almost non-existent before the rush of pleasure swarmed through me. My breathing sped up, my chest moving up and down more forcefully as he sucked the blood from my veins.

He took in a few more mouthfuls before the suction broke off, and he licked the wound, the skin closing before I could even think about sending healing energy. I thought the effects of the bite would disappear once he was finished, but no, I was left with an acute need. I tried to keep my composure so he wouldn't be able to tell, pulling down my sleeve and standing up.

I think he could tell that I didn't want to speak because he remained silent as he walked me to the door, before lifting my hand once more and pressing a featherlight kiss to the place of his bite. "Thank you again, Lenna."



We spent the better part of the next two weeks training relentlessly, utilizing the skills we learned at the Guild against the vampires. I was almost glad that the Guild never employed any of them since we

had already improved in the short time we'd been practicing with them. It made me shudder to think how many more innocents would have been killed if the Guild assassins had trained against actual vampires.

Though, from what Luka explained, he, Trey, and Nikita were all taught by the best of their kind to be the warriors of the "Old Age" as Luka called it. So it was entirely possible that the average vampire wasn't as much of a challenge. It definitely seemed that way when I fought against vampires in the *Blood Pit*.

I lifted a dagger from the folding chair I'd placed beside me and launched it at the printout of a target we stuck on the wall for practice. Bullseye. Again. I'd been down in the basement, which we'd converted into a training room, for the past few hours, trying to avoid the drama going on upstairs.

Summer had been picking fights whenever she had the opportunity, which apparently was often. It seemed she had a problem with everyone. Humans and vampires, yet somehow hybrids didn't share a spot in her hatred. She loathed us all equally, which I just felt was ironic seeing as she was half-human and half-vampire. You'd think that would make her more open to us both, but prejudice knows no reason.

The door opened and Nikita walked in, followed

by Trey and Luka. "You hiding from Summer too?" She asked as she walked over to the punching bag in the corner of the room.

I watched as she pulled her t-shirt over her head, leaving her in leggings and a sports bra. Her black runes caught my eye as she began pummeling the bag and I was glad her pent-up frustration was being let out on the gym equipment and not me. As close as we had become, I was still incredibly intimidated by her fighting skill. Her bubble-gum pink hair was shaved on one side and braided on the other, the color not detracting from her formidable appearance in the slightest.

I went to return to my boring knife tossing when Luka appeared in my line of vision, blocking the target. I twirled the knife between my fingers and raised a brow.

"Yes, fang man. Did you need something?" I tried not to look lower than his face.

He smiled wickedly, his fangs descending from his gums. "You don't happen to be referring to these fangs, are you?"

I rolled my eyes and gestured with my weapon. "You're in the way."

"I think I'm exactly where I need to be." He smirked, as if assuming his presence would stop me. Had he really not learned by now?

I shrugged and flung the blade, Luka's eyes flying open as it impaled his shoulder, the left one this time.

"You stabbed me! Again!" He said astounded, the sound of the others' laughter ringing through the small space.

"I did, yes. Though to be fair, I did mention that you were in the way."

"After everything we've been through. You wound me."

"Oh, don't be a baby, it wasn't even iron."

He grinned widely and walked forward, pulling the dagger out of his body as he approached, my heartbeat speeding up with each step closer that he made. He pulled off his shirt, using it to clean the blade before bending down to place it at my feet. He looked up at me through his lashes, one side of his lips lifting. "You never fail to do the unexpected, but don't worry, little assassin, you won't catch me off guard a third time."

Just like the first time he'd knelt before me almost a year ago and did the same thing, my heart stuttered in my chest. My breathing halted. He'd somehow managed to make me feel *more* than anyone else, and how he could get such a reaction from me was something I was too scared to look

closely at. I swallowed the lump in my throat and picked up the weapon.

“I believe I told you last time that I didn’t make any promises about stabbing you again.”

He chuckled. “I remember.”

As I stared into his honey eyes, a song began playing quietly. The melody was achingly beautiful and slightly wild, unrestrained. I’d never heard anything like it before. I looked around the room but the music player on the wall was turned off.

“Does anyone hear that song?” I asked, checking my pockets for my phone, thinking I’d accidentally turned on one of my applications.

Nikita shook her head, not removing her attention from the bag, to which she was now delivering powerful kicks to.

Luka’s eyes widened, but he stopped the movement and relaxed his features. “It’s a new ringtone of mine. I hope it doesn’t bother you.” His voice shook slightly, and he sounded unsure of himself. Almost worried about my response. I wasn’t sure why he’d be nervous about a ringtone.

“Definitely not. It’s the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard. Oh! Is this the song you were telling me about the other week?”

Luka nodded slowly; his face pensive.

Trey was glancing between me and Luka, his face

dumbstruck. I'd never seen him look that way before.

"What?" I asked, raising a brow.

He shook his head. "I... nothing. I just didn't hear anything. That's all."

I shrugged and dropped the knife back on the chair. "One of you in the mood to spar?"

Trey gestured me over to the mats we had set up the other day. The basement was somewhat unfinished, so the floors were concrete, which hurt when you were thrown down repeatedly on them. I'd been trying to catch them off guard since that seemed to work best with the vampires. They were just too fast otherwise.

I launched myself at him, fainting to the left before swinging a fist toward his abdomen. He flicked it out of the way as if my arm was merely a fly and slammed a fist into my sternum. I flew across the room and crashed into the wall.

Ouch. Note to self: don't let vampires punch you in the chest. It hurts. A lot.

My shoulder ached as I got back to my feet and I winced, before sending warm, rose-colored healing energy to the injury. I rolled the joint before crossing back over the Trey, who was looking at me in disappointment.

"Yes, I know. The big, bad assassin was taken

down so quickly. Though to be fair, I wasn't using any of my gifts and you were. Your vamp strength and speed count, you know," I said, fully aware my tone was a bit petulant.

"Forgive my expression, but that wasn't the reason behind it. Everything went exactly to my expectations. If you had somehow managed to dodge my attack I would have been astounded. And I don't mean that in a boastful way. I was using all of my speed, and I am one of the fastest of my kind."

The disappointment was still written all over his face, however.

"If I did what you expected, why do you still look like that?"

He rubbed his chin in thought. "I'd hoped you would be using your healing gift as you fought, but you don't."

My brows furrowed in confusion. "I did use my power. Once you tossed me into the wall, I activated it."

"That's the problem, though. You shouldn't have to activate it at all. You should constantly be using your gift. The more you use it, the stronger it will become."

Now his expression made sense. "That isn't how my power works. If I use it too much, I run out of energy and it stops working, or I faint. Neither of

those options is great. I have had the same limit to my gift since I was born.”

“Hmm,” he said stepping closer, pulling out a knife from the sheath on his hip. “Would you mind if I test a theory?”

I took a step back involuntarily. “What theory?”

He attempted to close the distance, but I continued to back up. He laughed at my hesitation. “I just want to see what will happen if you keep up a steady stream of healing.”

That didn’t sound *too* ominous, but I felt my reaction was what any sane person would do if someone pulled a knife on them.

“From the fact that she continues to back up should probably tell you that she doesn’t want to work on your theories, brother,” Luka said, his voice rough.

I twirled to see Luka leaning against the wall, his face unreadable.

Trey immediately retreated. “Of course. It was just an idea.” Most of the time, the lines between prince and subject were completely blurred, but then moments happened like this where he was a soldier listening to his prince.

As endearing as it was to have him protect me, I certainly didn’t ask for it, nor did I require it. A strong urge to know what the theory would prove

came over me. Ignoring the intruding male, I stepped forward and strengthened my voice. "What would you need from me?"

Trey grinned, his white teeth shining against his onyx skin. "I want you to activate your healing energy while I make a small scratch. I can make it nearly painless if you're worried about that."

I shrugged. "I'm used to pain. I've been training since I was old enough to walk."

His face blanched.

"What?"

He looked between me and Luka. "Luka mentioned that your father kept you at home for your safety, but I never imagined." His voice stuttered for a moment. "I never imagined that you were stuck at home *training* all that time. You must have been, what, two years old when you started?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Something like that. It wasn't like I hated it. My life was fine. I was loved and cared for... just stuck inside a lot." My voice trailed off by the end of my sentence and I regretted my loose tongue. I didn't need or want his judgment of Papa.

Luka cleared his throat. "Now *I'm* curious about this idea of yours. Why don't you give it a go?"

I smiled at him in thanks for switching the topic, ignoring that part of me that said I didn't want his

protection, and stretched out my arm for Trey to take.

He lowered the knife to my wrist and paused with the blade right above my skin. He met my gaze with a question in his emerald eyes.

I opened the deep well of energy inside me, releasing waves throughout my entire body, leaving it uncapped. I could feel my power searching for injuries that didn't exist. It was a strange sensation trying to heal where there were no wounds. The typical warmth washed over my limbs, but there was no relief of pain as I had come to expect when using my gift.

I nodded that I was ready, and he made a small incision which instantly healed as the blade moved. I felt nothing. Not one flicker of pain. No warning in my brain telling me to release my gift. Just the continuous feeling coursing through me, my skin faintly glowing rose-gold. Typically, my healing power only caused glowing on the location of the wound. Not everywhere. The only indication that he'd even cut me was the thin trail of blood the knife left behind in its wake.

Well, that was *interesting*. I couldn't bring myself to move or even breathe. I simply stood there, gazing at my arm and what the implications of what I'd just done could mean for me. But then reality

came crashing down as my energy began taxing. I cut off the stream and nearly collapsed. My legs wobbled and Luka slipped an arm around my waist.

I raised my head to see Trey's triumphant face. I didn't understand how he was so happy with the outcome. Yes, it would have been amazing if I could keep up that sort of power constantly, but I'd lose consciousness well before I finished a fight - which would render me entirely useless.

"Well, wasn't that exciting!" I turned my head to see Zander leaning against the doorway, watching the three of us. "I've only ever seen my mother, I'm sorry, *our* mother heal and I hadn't realized how much I was missing it."

"You didn't inherit her gift then, Zander?" Luka asked, tightening his grip around my waist.

"Unfortunately not. It appears that my darling sister was the lucky one. Mother believes my vampire side is more dominant."

I caught my breath. "It would be amazing if it didn't take everything out of me to maintain it, and unless I carry around an IV full of espresso, I don't see how it really matters."

Trey's smile didn't diminish, but he ignored Zander's presence completely. "I have every faith that you would be able to expand on your gift. From what you've explained, you never really tried this

before. I'm sure with enough effort, you'll be able to keep it going for much longer than you can now. It's something to work on."

He wasn't wrong about how useful this could be. How much more deadly would I be if I didn't even *feel* pain?

I nodded. "It's worth it to try." I sagged a bit more and Luka swept his hand underneath my feet and lifted me into his arms. "But maybe enough for today. You should rest now."

I tried to respond, but my eyes were fighting a losing battle and the last thing I remembered was leaning my head against his firm chest, the scent of autumn leaves and something undeniably male met my nose. The faint melody of a lullaby echoing in my ears.

CHAPTER SIX

LENNA



I woke up with a sharp, stabbing pain coming from my lower abdomen. I groaned and clutched my stomach, leaning over the bed to grab my bag. Sofia woke up from the noise and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, the morning rays of sunlight catching the auburn undertones in her hair.

“You okay, Len?” She asked, sitting up and wrapping herself in her blanket.

I tried to smile, but I’m pretty sure I only managed a grimace as another wave of pain came over me. Every single month I tried to use my healing energy to help, but this was the one thing my power was useless with. *Lame*.

“Just Aunt Flo gracing me with her unwelcome presence,” I said, failing to find what I needed from

inside my bag. “You don’t happen to have anything do you?”

Sofia seemed about to nod, but then stopped and shook her head. “Actually, it’s been a while since I’ve needed anything.” She grabbed her phone and scrolled through an application before gasping. “Oh no.”

“What?” I asked, gathering the energy to hobble over to her bed and plop down.

“I’m late, Len.”

And it hit me. “How late?”

“Six weeks. I don’t know how I missed this. It just slipped my mind with everything that’s been going on.” She brought up her trembling hands and covered her face, hiding a look of absolute shock.

I rubbed her back. “Do you think you’re pregnant?” If she was pregnant, that would mean the baby would be Ekon’s. The enormity of the situation hit me like a truck. We were in the middle of a war between assassins, vampires, and hybrids. It was no place for a baby. I wasn’t going to say that though. The only job I had was to be supportive of whatever my best friend needed from me.

She sniffed to calm herself down and wiped a few fallen tears before meeting my eyes. “I’m pretty sure I’m pregnant with Ekon’s baby.”

I tried to stay calm, reminding myself that now

wasn't the time to freak out. Sofia needed someone stable to be there for her no matter what. "Okay," I said, my voice a little shaky. "I'll go to the drugstore and pick up a test to make sure, alright?"

She nodded, her bottom lip trembling.

"Do you want to eat something first, or you want me to go right away?"

She closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath, before opening them again. "Let's get some food first. It won't change the results if I wait a few hours."



The smell of bacon and pancakes reached my senses as we walked into the kitchen, and I had to choke back a laugh at the scene. Ryder stood at the stove, wearing a flowery apron I'd never seen before. He was flipping pancakes as Nikita and Quinn stood across from each other, throwing grapes into one another's mouths. It was nice to see that some shred of normalcy remained.

I sat down beside Trey, who offered me a cup of coffee which I accepted with a wide smile. He grinned before returning to watch the news on the small television on the wall of the kitchen.

Violet skipped into the kitchen, followed by Kasai, who as usual, looked all of us over with a suspicious glance. She had relaxed around us significantly, but it was clear she was still not entirely comfortable. I wasn't holding it against her though. I was all too familiar with how strange it was being around a lot of people in a new environment.

Violet had no such hesitation and immediately began criticizing and offering suggestions regarding to Ryder's cooking methods. He didn't seem to mind I think he rather enjoyed the young girl's company. He must miss being around family. I made a mental note to ask him about his. I knew he didn't get along well with his parents, but he had a bunch of siblings. I wondered how difficult it must be not to have the option to see them.

Something brushed against my leg and I jumped, before looking down and seeing one of the panthers making itself comfortable on my foot. I froze, unsure what to do. They hadn't caused any issues yet nor tried to hurt anyone as far as I knew, but they were always *watching*. It was weird. I was convinced they could speak to Kasai in their minds, but she hadn't confirmed that theory yet. I wanted to know if it was similar to how I communicated with my hawks through images and feelings, or they could converse

through coherent words. I hadn't bothered bringing up my theory with anyone since I didn't see how it could harm anyone, but I would if that changed.

"Make way for the most delicious breakfast you will ever feast upon," Ryder said with a posh accent as he placed the dishes on the table. "Feel free to praise my excellence at your earliest convenience."

"You're such a weirdo," Sofia said, leaning forward to snag a piece of bacon off the plate and groaning once it hit her tongue. "Okay, yeah. This is really fucking good."

Ryder, seemingly taken aback that she was actually speaking, gave her a wide grin and an even bigger hug.

Kasai hesitated before taking a plate. "I don't know how it's been working until now with the groceries, but I don't have money to help out. We only escaped the ring a few weeks before you found us." She seemed almost timid and a sudden respect for her courage to discuss this with us blossomed in my chest.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Quinn said as he caught a grape Nikita threw at him in his mouth. "Lenna and Luka take care of everything. They're like our mom and dad."

I choked on my coffee and some spurted out of

my nose causing them all to laugh. *Note to self: hot coffee coming out of my nostrils hurts. A lot.*

I was very glad Luka hadn't been in the room to hear his comment. Especially since I was sure my face was beet-red. The more time I spent around Luka, the more intense and complicated my feelings became. Initially, I'd assumed it was purely a physical reaction to him because even looking at him had my heart racing, but there was something *more*. He seemed to understand me and my needs on a level deeper than anyone else. He gave me space when I wanted it but lent a supporting shoulder to lean on if I couldn't continue on my own.

"What he means to say is, it's totally not a problem. Our safe houses were already paid for by my father, and Luka and I both set up necessity accounts. If you need clothes or whatever, you can just take one of the credit cards."

Ryder pulled a black, plastic rectangle from his wallet and handed it over. "I went grocery shopping a few days ago, so I won't need it again for a while. Take mine."

"Is this a trick?" Kasai asked, staring at the card like it would bite her if she touched it.

Violet giggled and snatched the card. "I could use some new sneakers. We stole these, and they pinch my toes."

“Nikita,” Trey said, cutting into her game of *catch the grape* with Quinn. “Have you seen this?” He asked, muting the TV and throwing down the remote as Nikita took a seat at the table, her light-hearted expression from a moment before, hardening.

“After the massacre at the college campus, humans who are part of a vampire hate group have decided to take matters into their own hands and enact their idea of *justice*,” he said, putting air quotes on *justice*. “They’ve already killed three vampires, and the government isn’t doing anything about it. They’ve stopped releasing vampire support of any kind due to backlash from the humans.”

My stomach sank. Ever since reading that news report months ago, I had been worried there would be some sort of backlash. There were too many humans who were just waiting for an excuse to wipe out vampires. A wave of protective fury for my vampire friends rolled through me, tendrils of light swirling out of me.

If civilians were killing innocents without retribution, that would only lead more people to begin acting out. We had always lived in an uncomfortable truce with the vampires, the prejudices running rampant. Every few years there were cases of a vampire or human going rogue and killing the

other race for no reason aside from baseless hatred, but it usually ended quickly. Vampires were policed *hard*. I would know. Papa had told me enough about his missions to give me a clear picture, and the last year with the Guild only solidified it.

There had been almost no cases of unapproved feedings in the last five years, so I had no idea what could be causing the strife now. Had it started with the vampires who killed those college students a few months ago or had that been in retribution for something else?

I held my breath and yanked my foot out from beneath the panther, pulling it on to the chair and under my body before he could react. The panther merely stretched and repositioned himself. Kasai let out a chuckle and I had no doubt left that they could communicate telepathically. I just hoped she couldn't read my mind.

Nikita cursed and rubbed a hand down her face. "It's only going to get worse from here." She whipped her phone out of her pocket. "I'll check what everyone is saying on social media to get a sense of public opinion."

"That's all well and good, but we need to report this to the Queen," Trey said regretfully as if speaking to the Queen was something he didn't

want to do. Wasn't that Queen Luka's mother? What was wrong with her?

"You have a queen?" Kasai asked, shoveling pancakes into her mouth as if she hadn't eaten in days instead of hours.

Trey nodded, but gave no other explanation and Quinn rested a comforting hand on his arm, fresh bite marks visible underneath his collar. He saw my eyes shift to the marks and he winked saucily at me.

I smirked. It seemed that I wasn't the only one affected by the vampires' bites.

"I've already taken care of it. Maximus called me this morning and updated me about the situation. He's headed back there to speak with her now," Luka's baritone voice pierced the air from behind me.

I turned in time to see him enter the kitchen, his wavy, chestnut hair out of its usual bun and resting on his shoulders. He ran a hand through his locks and took the empty seat beside me, kissing my temple. The last remnants of fury evaporated from my body, leaving behind a different kind of heat.

"Are we going to be called back?" Nikita asked.

"Mother has already put out the order, I've just chosen to decline the invitation," Luka said with a mischievous grin.

“Uh oh. Nothing good ever comes after that look,” I said, amused.

“This look?” He said, repeating the gesture before piling his plate high with food.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to deny the queen?” Trey asked, his hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee.

Luka’s relaxed demeanor changed immediately, his shoulders tensing. “It’s just a delay, she’ll get over it. It’s not like this is the first time we haven’t returned the moment we were called. We have things to do first.”



I ARRIVED BACK with my purchases from the drugstore and gestured for Sofia to meet me in the bedroom. I slipped off my shoes and dug my feet into the soft carpet, loving the feeling. Our cottage had tile and hardwood floors, and I made myself a promise that if I made it through this war alive, I was going to live in a house with plush carpets in every room. Well, maybe not the bathrooms or kitchen. And maybe not the dining rooms, but most of them.

After handing her the bag I said, “I also picked up

that strawberry shampoo you love and some snacks. I figured you could use a movie night, regardless of what the test says.”

Her eyes glimmered as she rifled through the items. “*Pull-Apart Twizzlers!* You really do love me.”

“Duh. Badass bitches for life, right?”

Sofia gasped. “Did you just...curse?”

I laughed, pushing her into the ensuite bathroom and waited outside the door while she peed on the stick.

“It says I need to wait two minutes before I check the results,” she said, her voice shaky as she washed her hands and came back into the room. “I’m not sure I can look at it myself.”

“Sof,” I asked, unsure how to phrase my next question.

“Yeah?”

My hands twisted together nervously on my lap. “If you’re pregnant, will you... are you going to keep it?”

She looked down at the floor, her face contemplative. “I think I want to know for sure before I make any decisions.” She slowly made her way back to the test, which was lying on the countertop. She picked it up, eyes closed, and took a long, deep breath before opening them again.

She stood there, silently staring at the tiny piece

of plastic that had the power to irrevocably change her life. I waited, trying to be patient as my curiosity rose steadily higher the longer she waited with her gaze fastened to what she held in her hands.

Finally, Sofia looked up, meeting my eyes, and the start of the first true smile graced her features since Ekon was killed. "I'm pregnant."

CHAPTER SEVEN

LENNA



Ryder joined us shortly after and helped us push our beds together to watch a movie Sofia picked out about werewolves.

“Do you think...” Ryder began as he ripped off the end of a *Twizzler*. “That there was a Guild assassin who shifted into a wolf and that was how the myth began?”

“I bet whoever witnessed the shift crapped his pants right there. I know I would if I saw a man change into an animal right in front of my eyes and I didn’t already know shifters existed in some capacity,” Sofia said unwrapping her millionth chocolate of the night.

“Cravings,” she said with a shrug at my raised brow.

I’d been waiting for the ball to drop and for her

to inevitably freak out, but so far she hadn't. She'd told Ryder the moment he walked in and he'd done a very excited jumping up and down dance thing. Then swore us to secret, exclaiming that his rep would be on the line.

"You know, I wouldn't be surprised if it was. Papa once told me about a wolf shifter in the Alaska Guild," I said, snuggling more comfortably between the two of them.

"Man, it would be so cool to turn into a wolf. You could tear contracts apart with your fangs and run away," Ryder said playfully gnashing his teeth. "Easy peasy, and no human DNA evidence left behind." I knew he was joking; Ryder didn't like killing in a messy way. He said it made him too much like the bad guys.

"Ehh, nothing beats having wings," I said a little defensively.

"Aww, don't worry, Len. Your hawk is super badass too," Ryder cooed, rubbing the top of my head.

"I wonder if Ekon ever completed any of his contracts that way when he went on Guild missions," Sofia said softly.

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, each of us lost in thought as the movie continued.

"I'm just saying, my hawk could totally kill a

wolf.”



The discontent between the hybrids and the rest of us was growing, so Zander sent Summer along when Ryder, Kasai, and I went for a perimeter check. To me it felt like a terrible idea, but since I was all for bettering our relationships, I agreed. Luka had seemed unhappy with the plan but said nothing as he watched the four of us leave for the evening.

The feedings with him had gotten more intense, but neither of us had made any attempt to breach through the line of our friendship.

We circled the neighborhood for a few hours before I headed into the store to pick up some prenatal vitamins for Sofia. The vampires in the house had begun treating her like she was made of glass and refused to allow her out of their sights. Apparently, they held pregnant females with a high regard in their culture. Good for them.

To say that Sofia was annoyed by it was a gross understatement. If they hadn't physically stood at the front door each time Sofia entered the main floor, she would have left the house at the first

opportunity. She'd already kned Trey in the balls a time or two.

"Try and get me the gummies if you can," she'd shouted at my back as I'd walked out the door. So, that's what I was doing now, going through the isles in search of special gummies. I found what I needed and went back to meet with Summer, who was waiting for me in the alley out back.

I took one step out the door when something slammed into the side of my face, and I stumbled, seeing stars. The bag fell out of my grasp as I wheeled around to face my assailant, furiously blinking the sight back into my eyes. I received a hard kick to my chest, causing me to backpedal into the wall.

My eyes finally began to clear, and an assassin blurred into view, her hair blood red, and her eyes glowing green. There were vines wrapped around her long, willowy arms, and she lifted them, preparing to attack.

"Hey! Vine girl, how's it been?" I asked, activating my healing, the rose light warming my body as it washed over me.

She halted. "Do I know you?"

"Of course. You are part of the elite. Abbott sent you after those hybrids, remember?" I asked, perplexed why she didn't recognize me. Then her

confused expression brought me back to that day when Luka erased her memory. She'd been sitting on the floor, wailing like a small child after fighting Quinn, and had asked to have her memories altered instead of dying. Smart girl. Well, she had *been* a smart girl.

And where was Summer? My anxiety rose as I whipped my head around the empty alleyway trying to locate her. "What did you do with the other girl?"

"You didn't think they would send one person to kill Alexei Turgenev's spawn, did you?" She laughed and threw out her hands, the vines unraveling from her arms and shooting in my direction, the thorns ready to inflict damage.

I tossed up a light shield, my energy levels already depleting rapidly as I tried to maintain my healing like I had been practicing with Trey. I didn't have a lot of time left before it ran out entirely. His methods, while rough, were somewhat successful. If it was even a week earlier, I would already be stumbling.

"Look, we've been down this road before and it didn't end well for you. I know you don't remember, which actually is super inconvenient now, but you've fought me, and my friends and you didn't win."

She ignored what I said and continued lobbing

thorns and vines in my direction, my shield losing density with each hit it took.

Shouts rang out in the distance and I strained my eyes, trying to catch a glimpse at what was going on. It was a shame that her memory was altered because it didn't look like she would be willing to back down from this fight. Her eyes showed nothing but fierce determination. Making up my mind, as her body was turned toward the sound, I sent a current of invisibility over my body and pulled out a dagger.

Her eyes widened as she looked back around, searching for me. My heart raced as I ran forward, slicing the blade across her neck and continued without losing momentum or giving her a backward glance. I had to get to the others. The sounds of their fight were getting louder and had likely brought attention to them.

My feet pounded on the pavement as I rounded the corner and saw Ryder, Kasai, and Summer fighting against at least ten other assailants. Ryder battled against a fire elemental, but he seemed to be winning, so I diverted my attention to Kasai. I was floored by her fighting style.

She moved with a speed and ferocity unlike anything I'd ever seen. Assassins were trained to kill in the quickest, quietest way possible. Kasai fought with two swords, twirling them around the rogues,

hacking off limbs in a manner that appeared to draw the most blood and gore. It was like a show. An incredibly vicious and deadly show.

I dropped my invisibility since it was draining my reservoirs and sped up. I sheathed my dagger and materialized my light whip, lashing it forward to wrap around the throat of a male sneaking up on Summer.

I tossed him to the ground and joined the fray, switching the whip for my katana and nearly collapsing with the energy shift. I shook my head and began working on the assassins. Thankfully, not all of them were gifted. It seemed the Benefactor was outsourcing now.

I fended off two attackers, my sword arm barely lifting high enough to block each of their blows. From the corner of my eye, I saw Summer lying on the floor, her body encased with water as a rogue attempted to drown her.

I sliced the head of an attacker and ran the other through the chest before withdrawing my blade and running in Summer's direction. I had just enough energy left to ram into the water elemental's body, a body that was twice the size of mine. Thankfully, I was able to get him to the floor, giving Summer enough time to shoot him in the head with her gun. I could only imagine the talking to I was going to

receive from Trey once he found out how quickly I was tiring.

I stayed on the ground beside her as she expunged the remaining water from her lungs with wracking coughs. There were only three rogues left, two fighting Kasai, and one against Ryder. He inhaled, pulling his arm back just as his assailant left her chest wide open, and his fist connected.

Her scream cut short as his hand went through her sternum, and as he pulled it back out, something red and squishy dropped to the ground. Her heart. He'd ripped out her heart. I couldn't believe my eyes. Ryder was a fantastic fighter, but he wasn't brutal. He didn't like unnecessary gore.

Kasai finished off the last two rogues as Ryder dropped to his knees, throwing up next to the immobile organ. He hid his face until he was done and met my eyes, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"I didn't realize how many hits I'd already taken," he gasped, his hands covering his face as he rocked on his heels. "The energy needed to be let out. I didn't mean to... I ripped her heart right out of her chest."

Ryder's gift was energy manipulation. He could take whatever connected to his body and release it back but to greater effect.

"Ryder," I said, staggering to my feet and limping

over before dropping to my knees. "Look at me, Ry." I pulled his hands away from his eyes, which were beginning to redden. "She was going to kill you, Ryder. You know she would have killed you without a second thought. You protected yourself, and there's nothing wrong with that. And if you are really worried, at least now you know what to avoid next time."

He looked at the ground, his shoulders shaking. I'd never seen him look so vulnerable before. My stomach dropped, but Kasai stepped up to us before I could continue.

"Why do you mourn her life when she would have taken yours? I thought you were an assassin. Humans are weak-willed."

My mouth fell open at her audacity the same time that Ryder's head snapped up.

He shot her a glare and got to his feet, not bothering to wipe away the track marks running down his face. "That weakness is a little thing we call humanity. It's what separates us from the bad guys. If you think having a moral code is a weakness, then your priorities are *seriously* out of order."

Her eyes widened and she took a step back, saying nothing.

Summer walked up to us, wringing water out of her hair. "Well, that was unexpected." I checked her

over for injuries, but out of all of us, she was the only one without a splash of blood on her. Ryder and Kasai both had small lacerations littering various body parts, but nothing I would risk using the last remaining dregs of my energy to heal. Most of the blood soaking our clothing was from our opponents.

“We need to get back to the safe house and make sure the others are okay,” I said, accepting the arm Ryder offered and allowing him to pull me to my feet. My body was fully healed, but I could barely keep my eyes open. The thought of the others waiting at home, possibly under attack, gave me the extra push to keep walking.

“We are covered in blood, Len. I don’t think we can just walk through the city like this,” Ryder said, snaking an arm around my waist to hold me up.

He had a point. “Alright, everyone stay close to me so I don’t need to expend more than the necessary energy on this. I’m almost tapped out,” I said, touching the others and running cool waves of invisibility over their bodies.

I made it a few steps before my legs gave out and Ryder swore, swinging me up into his arms. I made him hand me the bag from the store as we passed it on our way back and closed my eyes in concentration.

The night was silent as Ryder carried me up the

stairs and into the house, after Kasai, who'd not said a word the entire walk back, opened the door.

"Lenna!" Luka yelled, zooming forward and taking me from Ryder's arms. I passed the bag to Sofia when she reached my side.

"Got you your gummies, Sof," I said, my eyes fluttering closed.

"You crazy bitch." Was the last thing I heard before blackness consumed me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KASAI



“*W*hat happened to her?” Luka said as he sat down on the couch, keeping an unconscious Lenna wrapped in his arms. He withdrew a hand to smooth her hair away from her face, gently caressing her cheek as he moved.

There was so much written in those odd, honey-colored eyes. Eyes that were full of worry and longing and possibly...love? I didn't know anything about love, but he was looking at Lenna the way Violet looks at pizza. And I know Violet loves pizza. He gazes at Lenna like she's the only thing in the world he can see. The only thing he *wants* to see.

My stomach twisted as an uncomfortable feeling flowed through me. It wasn't jealousy per se, but there was so much I wished I'd gotten the chance to experience growing up. I hated everything about my

life if you could even call it a life. Some people were born to fight, that much was clear when I watched Lenna earlier as she fought with a smile on her face. An actual ass cracking smile. Then there was Ryder, who couldn't even rip out someone's heart without losing the contents of his stomach.

I didn't care about killing people. There was nothing about it that bothered my soul, but I just didn't enjoy doing it. The problem is that I had no idea what I'd rather be doing. Battling was the only thing I knew. Maybe when all of this hybrid business was over, I could figure out what it is I would actually enjoy. Something that would bring me happiness, though at this point I would honestly settle for peace.

Perhaps it was time to tell them my secret, the secret I was now even more convinced was the reason they were after me. Why else would they come specifically for me? I knew why they attacked Lenna. She'd been killing their people for the last year, but I hadn't involved myself with them at all. Unless Ahriman was somehow mixed up in this mess, but that seemed unlikely.

Titus and Tali chose that moment to amble in, rubbing noses as they laid down together on the fuzzy rug Lenna had bought to make the place homier. Titus froze, sniffing the air before swiveling

his head in my direction. *Why do you smell of foreign blood?*

We were attacked.

Did you rip out their hearts? Tali asked calmly as she licked Titus' coat clean.

I couldn't stop the laugh from escaping my lips. *Actually, Ryder did. It was incredible how powerful he can be, but he was upset after it happened. Humans are strange.*

Indeed. Titus and Tali agreed.

I refocused on the conversation, catching Ryder's explanation of what happened to the others, who were all standing tense around the room. Trey had his arms crossed as he leaned against the empty fireplace, while Nikita appeared somewhat lost in thought. Everyone else was splayed out on the various seating options.

Lenna stirred in Luka's arms, and as her eyes opened, he adjusted her into a sitting position. She blinked and cleared her throat. "I'm getting really tired of passing out all the time."

Luka's chest deflated as he loosed a breath and Sofia let out a laugh.

"Maybe stop taking on more shit than you can handle?" Sofia suggested with a smirk. It was odd seeing the sudden change in her. She had seemed lost to the darkness like many of the fighters in

Ahriman's pits had. Something must have changed to pull her out of it.

Lenna stuck her tongue out in response. "Did you get your gummies?"

Sofia nodded. "These guys told us what happened to them, but they say you showed up halfway through the fight."

"I was in the store getting you the vitamins and went to meet everyone outside when someone hit me across the head." She sat up straighter and grinned. "Guess who I saw."

"Oh, oh. I love this game," Sofia said animatedly. "That hot actor from the wolf movie? Because I wouldn't mind meeting him in a dark alley."

Lenna laughed. "No, vine girl!"

"Are you talking about that girl from our first elite mission that I fought?" Quinn asked, taking the seat next to her.

Lenna wriggled out of Luka's lap and bobbed her head. "I hoped she would have been smart like last time, but there was no saving her. I had to take her out."

"What I don't understand," Nikita said, "is how you were caught off guard. What were you doing alone in that store in the first place?"

"I wasn't alone," Lenna argued. "I was waiting

for..” She turned to face Summer. “You were supposed to be waiting outside for me.”

That was true. Summer showed up only moments before Lenna did. I’d assumed that they had been together, and that Summer must have been the faster runner.

“I was, until I heard them being attacked and went to go help. Nobody else was in the alleyway when I left,” Summer replied, her eyes darting between Lenna and Zander, who had been sitting silently on the ottoman the entire time.

Lenna’s half-brother gave me the creeps. He was always watching what we were doing, especially during training. He gave off such a young, naive impression, but his behavior betrayed him.

It seemed like anytime something important was being discussed, or when skills were being tested, there he was. Out of the freaking blue. I didn’t like it one bit. Especially not when he had the other hybrids to sneak around for him as well. I wasn’t close enough with any of them to bring it up, largely because he hadn’t actually *done* anything.

Sofia clenched her fists and rose to her feet, the vampires instantly tracking her movements as they had begun doing the moment she announced her pregnancy. “So you decided to leave her *alone* knowing they

were after her and run away to help people you just assumed were Ryder and Kasai. Who, in case it wasn't completely fucking obvious, weren't alone!" Sofia ended in a yell before launching herself at Summer.

Nikita caught her around the middle, taking care not to squeeze her lower abdomen, and pulled her away from Summer.

"You crazy bitch!" Summer seethed, her fangs descending from her gums as she crouched in a fighting stance. I had a feeling she hadn't meant the phrase the same way Sofia had when she said it to Lenna. "I'm not her babysitter, if she couldn't handle herself against one puny human, what does she belong here with us anyway?"

That's when Lenna stood up, light crackling around the room, her eyes blazing as she flung out her arm. A whip made entirely out of energy flew through the air and wrapped around Summer's throat, bringing her down to the ground. Summer's hands clasped at the whip, and she cried out when it burned her palms.

"I don't care what you say about me, but if you ever talk like that to Sofia again, you won't enjoy what happens to you."

Adrian jumped forward, ready to run to Lenna when Zander yanked him back.

“Lenna!” Zander said, finally joining the conversation. “Let her go. She didn’t mean any harm.”

Lenna was waiting for Summer’s response, which didn’t seem likely to come, judging by the furious glare on her face.

This feels like a territorial dispute. Titus offered, stretching out his limbs, completely unconcerned with the proceedings.

Yes, agreed Tali. The lightning girl doesn’t want anyone near the pregnant youngling. She should claw out one of her eyes to make a point. That’s what I would do.

Thank you for that lovely image, Tali, but I don’t think that would help defuse the situation. Though, yes. I would do that too.

A feline grin spread across her face.

Luka placed a hand on Lenna’s shoulder. “Little assassin, you made your point. Maybe you should let the girl go.”

Lenna released the weapon and slumped into Luka’s arms for the second time, though keeping her consciousness this time. With one arm around Lenna, Luka fixed the other hybrids with a stony stare. “In this house, we have each other’s backs. If you can’t manage to handle that, we will go our separate ways.”

Zander pushed Summer and Adrian out of the

room, ignoring their protests. "It won't happen again."



Once the tension was gone from the room, and everyone was once again calmly scattered throughout the area, I decided it was time to come clean.

"I might have an idea about why they have been after me," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I didn't want them to feel like I had gone behind their backs or hid things from them. I might be able to fend off a few of them if they decided to attack me, but not everyone at the same time. I would also feel a little bad hurting them. They had been nothing but kind to me, and I was beginning to feel more... comfortable?

Where's Violet? I asked the panthers, wondering why I hadn't heard her sass join in the conversation until now.

She went to sleep a few hours ago. It's quite late after all.

"And what is that?" Ryder asked, meeting my eyes for the first time since he'd yelled at me. The moment we'd returned and Lenna deemed okay,

Ryder had taken a spot as far away from me as possible, pretending I didn't exist. Whatever. He could do what he likes. I didn't care what he thought, I just didn't understand why he'd been so upset about killing that rogue.

"There is something I've been able to do for as long as I can remember, but since nobody knows about it besides Violet, I didn't think it was important to mention until now."

"What made you decide that it is important now?" Luka asked, his tone curious, but not altogether suspicious.

Curious I could work with. Curious didn't have to be bad.

"During the fight, I got the impression that the fighters were after me more than the others."

"That's true," Ryder said, bracing his hands on his knees. "They were much more focused on you than the rest of us, aside from Lenna. You two were their main targets."

I was a bit surprised he was backing me up, but I wasn't about to let the moment go to waste. "Exactly. So I started thinking that maybe someone found out about my gift and it's somehow connected to all of this. Especially since I haven't met anyone else who can do what I do."

“Oh, just spit it out already. What is this *gift*?” Nikita asked, exasperated.

“I can open portals.” There. I said it out loud for the first time in my life. It was out in the world and I couldn’t take it back.

“Portals?” Lenna asked, her mouth gaping. “Like to other cities?”

I shook my head, not showing how smug her reaction made me. “Not exactly. To another world. One other world, I’m pretty sure. It’s only happened a few times over the years, but it leads to another world where there are plants and animals I’ve never seen before, and people that look a lot like vampires.”

Trey suddenly gasped and a hand came up to cover his mouth. “I can’t believe it.”

“What? Do you know what she’s talking about?” Luka asked, his fingers wrapping around Lenna’s.

“You remember our teachings of the Old World. How there were a select few from the Day Court who had the ability to open portals,” Trey responded, his tone becoming increasingly more excited as he spoke.

“And you think that’s where she comes from?”

“Wait just a hot minute. What’s the Old World?” Sofia asked.

“Yeah, I’d like to know that as well,” Quinn said, a few of the others mumbling their agreement.

“Alright,” Trey said, his legs bouncing from his anticipation. “Vampires do not originate from this world. We come from another realm known as Faerie. A little more than five hundred years ago, there were two Courts in the Old World. The Day Court and the Night Court.”

“Lukalian Night,” Lenna breathed. “Your family ruled the Night Court.” She said it as a statement. Luka nodded, gesturing for Trey to continue.

“There was an epic war between the two Courts, many believing that the Night Court would have succeeded. The King and Queen of the Day Court said they wished to make peace and offered to host a party for the members of the Night Court.

“Now, another thing about some of the members of the Day Court. They have the ability to open portals, around Faerie, and the other known realm. Earth. The party was a hoax, and when the Night Court entered the doors into the castle, they were exiting a one-way portal out of Faerie.”

“That’s horrible,” Lenna said, her face full of sorrow. “You were all shoved out of your homes into an entirely different world. That must have been awful.”

“We might live an extended life, but not that

extended. This happened to our grandparents generation. They also didn't send everyone from my court. That would have been impossible. Only the guests from the party were sent through. My grandmother, the queen at the time, and my mother had gone to the party without my grandfather. Many others were left behind. It is the saddest part of our history, and one we do not speak of lightly," Luka explained.

"If anyone in the Day Court can create portals, why haven't we seen more of them until now?" I asked, wondering who on earth, or I guess Faerie, my real parents were.

"Now, that is the craziest part. The only people who can create portals are the royal family. You have to be descended from the King or Queen of Faerie."

CHAPTER NINE

LENNA



From the look on her face of absolute shock, mixed with horror, Kasai had no idea what Trey was talking about. I doubted Kasai was a good enough actor to fake her reaction. Not to that extent. I couldn't imagine how insane it must feel to be descended from royalty. Especially for someone who was raised the way Kasai was.

"So, that means one of her parents snuck to Earth and did the dirty with an unsuspecting human?" Sofia asked with a shit-eating grin firmly planted on her face. "How incredibly naughty."

"Do you know who your human parent is?" Trey asked Kasai, trying to divert the conversation back on track. Though, I could see the twitch of his lips that showed how he really felt. Trey was the master of keeping his composure. It was nearly

impossible to decipher how he truly felt about anything, especially when his expressions were so often neutral.

She shook her head. "Ahriman always told me that the orphanage gave him no details about me aside from my name."

"Have you ever gone through the other side of the portal?" I asked, pulling at my shirt which was sticky and clinging to my skin. The blood was congealing and making movement increasingly uncomfortable. I needed a shower stat.

"I haven't, but others have come through and attacked me."

"So they know you exist," I said, a thought forming in my mind. "If the royal family members are the only ones with the ability to open the gateways, there is a pretty big chance they know you exist." I turned to Trey, a thought forming in my mind. "Do you think the Day Court royals would kill one of their own?"

He rubbed his chin. "I only know what we've been taught of generations past. But if she is a contender for the throne, I am sure there are quite a few people who would wish her dead."

"I can see why you'd think that Len, but that doesn't explain why there are *human* assassins after her. What is the connection between the Old World

and the Guild?” Ryder asked, the color returned to his skin and his queasiness gone.

Quinn pulled out his phone and began typing, his brows furrowed in concentration.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, which did absolutely nothing to help. “That’s a good point.”

“This whole situation makes absolutely no sense,” Sofia said, crossing her legs and plopping down on the floor. “There must be some reason this is all happening at the same time. I don’t know if you guys have seen the news today, but five vampires dropped dead from unexplained circumstances over the last few days. How does that even happen?”

Nikita’s head whipped around. “What did you just say?”

“It was all over the news earlier today, I figured you’d already seen it,” Sofia replied as Nikita scrolled through her phone furiously, before finding what she’d been searching for.

She cursed and slammed her hand on the table. “Why does this keep fucking happening?” She turned back to the screen. “It says here that they found trace amounts of iron and an unknown botanical element in their systems.”

“Did they discover any wounds on the bodies?” Luka asked, his tone low and lethal, his eyes blazing with barely suppressed anger.

I was so unused to him being any way that wasn't silly or flirtatious, that his ferocity took me by surprise. It shouldn't have though. He was their prince and felt responsible for all vampires. It made sense that he was angry.

"It doesn't mention anything out of the ordinary aside from the contents of their stomachs," Nikita responded, putting her phone to the side, her eyes blazing. "The queen must know about this. Why hasn't she taken any action?"

"You know as well as I that she is slow to react when it comes to the human world," Luka said, rolling his eyes.

"Well then, maybe it's time for a change in leadership!" She snapped.

Luka glowered at her. "Do not push me, Nikita. You are perfectly aware why I haven't taken the throne."

It seemed as if Luka was choosing *not* to become king. I'd always assumed it happened with the death of his mother, but Nikita hinted that he should have already been crowned. It made me wonder what he was waiting for since he clearly didn't support all of his mother's actions as queen. None of that really mattered now though. Our focus should be on the dead vampires, not royal drama.

"So, these vampires were eating iron and flowers

for dinner, and just dropped dead?" I asked, cutting in to redirect the conversation.

"Does it show any names of the deceased?" Zander asked as he re-entered the room, his tone cautious. He likely didn't want to rock the boat after what happened with Summer. I should probably feel bad about what I'd done, but this evening was just one step too far. She'd been pressing every button she could, and everyone had been ignoring her behavior. Enough was enough.

"It doesn't. Why, do you know something?" Nikita asked, a brow raised in question.

"Of course not, I was just wondering if the hybrids have been effected by whatever this is that's going on."

He posed a good question. If the vampires being targeted were hybrids, that would go along with the MO of the Guild. Which would mean they were probably to blame, if not simply involved.

I sent a text to Brielle, asking when she'd have time for a video call. We needed answers and we needed them now.

"Sister," Zander said, coming inching closer. "I think we should consider going to home to speak with Mother."

"Ibrida isn't her home," Luka snapped, throwing a glare in Zander's direction.

I ignored the retort and met Zander's sky-blue gaze. The worry in his eyes apparent. He ran a hand through his blonde hair, discreetly wiping the line of sweat off his forehead with the motion.

"Do you think she has any answers?" I asked him, wondering what, precisely, was causing his anxiety. Maybe he was nervous the drama with Summer would prompt us to kick them out. I couldn't be sure unless I asked him but doing it around so many witnesses wouldn't be ideal for honesty.

"She was in the Guild for longer than any of you, and she was more than an assassin. She was a spy, so she saw and heard much more than the average member. She's also soul-bound to my father, who is a vampire, so she has ties to the vampires as well. I think she might have some answers. The only way to find out is to go there." He paused, glancing around the room. "You wanted to come and check it out for yourself anyway, remember? You wanted to make sure the other hybrids could be safe with us."

That was true. There was no way I would send all of the innocents we'd saved over the last year and shove them into an environment I wasn't entirely positive was secure. They deserved better than that. Every person should have the basic right of feeling safe and secure in their own home.

I looked to Sofia, checking for her thoughts, and

she shrugged a shoulder and grinned. "I'll be wherever you are. Badass bitches for life."

I matched her grin and turned to Luka. His face was hard and cold as he stared at Zander, but the moment he twisted to me, his expression softened.

"My mother has requested our..." he gestured to him and the vampires "presence at the Night Court, but I've been able to delay her for the time being. If you are sure about this, we're with you. Always."

I clapped my hands. "Then it's settled. All that's left is to pick up the suits I had designed in Boston."

"What suits?" Luka asked, perplexed.

Sofia gasped. "Please tell me you kept the suits from the *Blood Pit*." A few months ago, I'd ordered silver suits so we could fight anonymously when Hailey had been struggling with the death of her father. A death that I had caused, not that she'd known that at the time.

I grinned. "I made a few adjustments. Improvements, if you will."



I'd called Tina when we decided to leave Boston, and she'd mentioned a few sister locations around the country that she could send the order to. Thank-

fully, one of them was right in DC. Instead of a bookstore, this location was in the back of a nightclub, much to Sofia's disappointment. She'd tried to join us, but Tali blocked her exit. The panther was just as protective as the vampires. There was also the fact that it was obvious Sofia would never kick an animal. She'd spent quite a bit of time with the panthers and she'd mentioned that they helped give her comfort when she didn't want to voice her problems.

I borrowed one of Sofia's skin-tight, sparkly dresses, and walked arm in arm with Nikita, my heels clicking down the street. If any assassins showed up, a whole lot of people were going to get a nice view of my goods. There was just no way I could fight without the dress riding up. I'd also have to fight barefoot, but that wasn't awful, I'd just use my shoes as weapons. Stilettos don't mess around.

Luka and Zander were on either side of us, Zander having cut his way into the plans with a comment about spending more quality sibling time with me. A big part of me wanted to give in and trust him completely. But on the other hand, Evelyn had really made it difficult to trust more family after her betrayal. She'd said she was only doing it to protect me, but she had done the exact opposite. Even if it

hadn't been intentional, which I still wasn't sure was the case.

According to Brielle, my aunt was confined to the infirmary until she could be deemed trustworthy again. I wasn't sure how they would decide something like that, but I had no interest in getting involved. No part of me wished to see her again.

The mere thought of meeting my mother sent chills through my body and a churning in the pit of my stomach. Would she apologize for abandoning me, or would she be cold and uncaring? She clearly had a good relationship with Zander, and her husband was a vampire, so she had to be open-minded to some extent. The one thing I was absolutely sure of, was that I wouldn't let whatever happened get me down.

I might not have a lot of family by blood, but I certainly had my family by choice. Those bonds were just as strong as blood ties, if not occasionally stronger. Sofia might not be related by DNA, but she was my sister by soul. Ryder and Quinn had wormed their way into my heart, even though it had taken me a bit to warm up to Ryder.

Even the vampires had claimed a large portion of my love. My chest twisted when I passed a glance at Luka as he strode beside me, his multi-toned brown hair up in its usual bun, the muscles of his chest and

arms showing through his button-down shirt. A pulse shot straight through to my core, making concentrating difficult. Every time I looked at him I remembered our feeding sessions. They were always in his bedroom, and the sexual tension almost tangible.

That now-familiar tune floated through the air, the melody singing to my soul, relaxing my stiff shoulders and calming my thoughts.

“Are you going to get that?” I asked Luka when he made to effort to answer his phone.

His brows furrowed. “Get what?”

“Your phone. It’s ringing.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Zander said, pressing a hand to my forehead. “Are you feeling alright?”

I shoved his hand off my face. “I’m fine.” I faced Luka. “It’s that same song from before, you still haven’t told me what it’s called. I want to download it to my phone.”

Nikita paused, looking between Luka and me, before breaking out in a huge smile. “Yeah, Lukalian. Why don’t you tell Lenna the name of that song?”

Luka coughed, clearing his throat. “Um.. yeah. Yes. Of course.”

Zander narrowed his eyes, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I think I’m missing something.”

I was pretty sure I was in the same boat as

Zander, but at that moment, the club came into view, and I made a mental note to ask Luka about it later.

Nikita adjusted the hem of her very short, black dress, and turned to me, striking a pose. "How do I look?"

"Absolutely lascivious," Zander said before I had a chance to reply.

Nikita didn't seem impressed with his complement and ran a hand over the braids on the side of her hair, before striding up to the bouncer. She was a tall, muscular vampire with long, powerful legs. Nikita leaned to her ear and I knew she was whispering the password Tina instructed us to say.

The bouncer flicked her silvery hair over a shoulder and examined us with an analytical gaze, before moving to the side and lifting the rope. Nikita shot her a winning smile and ran a finger down her arm before slinking inside, tossing her a wink over her shoulder.

I followed her inside, the flashing lights and upbeat music beckoning me forward.

CHAPTER TEN

LENNA



The interior of the club was structured into three floors, each serving a different purpose. We came in through the main entrance, which housed the dance section equipped with strobe lights, incredible acoustics, and a DJ. There were staircases on either side of the dance floor, leading up to the next level.

We followed the stairs to a second dance floor which held a more mature clientele. There were private booths with servers passing out cocktails, and partitions on some of the booths like at Max's casino. Those who weren't seated in the booths were dancing on the slightly raised platform in the center of the floor, grinding away to the lively beat.

"Now, this is my kind of scene," Nikita said, her eyes glowing with excitement and a wide smile plas-

tered on her face. She began swaying her hips to the beat, her arms twirling around her body as she closed her eyes, letting loose.

Zander's eyes glowed faintly as he watched Nikita's movements, and I was sure I could see the lust in their depths before he grabbed my hand. "Let's go get drinks. I could kill for a jack and coke."

I grinned and let him pull me along, but Luka stepped in our way, stopping our advance. I quirked a brow in question.

"I don't think it's wise to linger in crowded places like this. We should just meet with the supplier." Luka had become relentless in his effort to keep me safe in the days following the most recent attack. His playful behavior had been overshadowed by his need to protect me, which was sweet, but entirely unnecessary. It wasn't as if I was easy to kill. You know... with me being an assassin with special powers and all.

I could see that he was having a difficult time with it, so I hadn't pushed him, and he did have a point, but that didn't mean we all had to be on our guard. I slipped my hand from Zander's and gestured him to the bar.

"You have fun but stay alert. I'll go with Luka to get the suits."

He nodded eagerly and departed without another

word. I wondered how often Zander had opportunities like this if he rarely left Ibrida.

Luka offered his elbow, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "My lady."

I attempted a curtsy in my skin-tight dress and fluttered my eyelashes at him. "My Prince."

He chuckled and pulled my arm through his. "Hearing my title from your lips makes it sound almost... nice," he mumbled the last word softly as if surprised.

"It can't be *that* bad," I said as he led me toward the floor-to-ceiling curtains in the back of the club.

He was quiet as he seemed to ponder what I said. "There are most certainly benefits to the title. The cars, the chef, and all other materialistic luxuries. But the obligations ask more from me than I always wish to give." He looked down at me, his eyes full of emotion. "Please don't get me wrong. I love my people with everything that I am, I would give my life for them, but I do still wish it was *my* life to give. My mother and the council have control over every decision made and enforce laws that have remained unchanged and unchallenged for thousands of years. Until I become king, I am truly just a figurehead."

I pitied him in that moment. I was glad I didn't have Quinn's gifts as I could feel the sadness emanating from him. To be able to feel his sadness as

my own was intense. Though a part of me, a larger part than I was willing to admit to, wished I would pull his anguish from him and absorb it into me if only to make him feel better for a moment. I squeezed his hand, attempting to transfer my support through the gesture.

“If there was one rule you would change, what would it be?” I asked, assuming it would be difficult for him to decide, but he answered immediately.

“The marriage law of the Crown. In order for me to become king, I must marry. Men are not allowed to rule alone in my court. I could have taken the crown when I turned twenty-five, but I refused to marry.”

My spare hand clamped over my mouth. “Do you at least get a say in who you marry?” We were nearing the curtains, but for some reason I was desperate to hear his response, so I slowed my pace.

He sighed. “Technically, yes. Though, my mother has been rather aggressively pointing me in the direction of a specific female. Her mother is on the council and has been scheming with my mother for many years.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. “And... how do you feel about her?” I wasn’t sure I really wanted to hear his answer as my breath halted. We were mere

steps away from the curtain, the man standing at the exit already paying attention to our approach.

“She’s nice enough and we do have a history, but the feelings were fleeting and have long since died. At least for me they have, and I’m quite sure Genevieve cares more for my title than for me.”

Genevieve. What a stupid name. A terrible feeling twisted in my gut and burned through my veins, and only once we stepped up to the curtain and announced ourselves did I realize what it was. *Jealousy.* I was jealous. I shoved aside the thoughts, trying to remain focused on the purpose for our presence.

After giving the hard-eyed bouncer the code and telling him we had an appointment with Hamisi, we were led down a corridor to an office at the back. The bouncer, who hadn’t said a single word, knocked on the door twice before swinging it open to permit us entry. Once we were inside, he turned on his heels and walked away.

What kind of security would leave two strangers with their boss without even checking them for weapons? The moment my eyes moved through the room I understood.

There were five guards, all clothed in black, standing around a large, maple desk. They all had guns on either side of their bodies, some of the

guards already laying their hands on them in warning. They surrounded who I could only assume was Hamisi, an extraordinarily tall, thin woman with rich brown skin, large round eyes, and short, curly hair.

The expression on her face was amused, so I didn't bother reaching for any weapon or calling my powers. I looked her over, intrigued by her colorful ensemble. She wore a long white dress with vibrant green and orange shapes painted almost haphazardly all over. The colors looked beautiful against her dark skin.

I smiled and stepped forward, tensing as the guards all withdrew their weapons. I quickly put a hand on Luka's chest before he reacted and created a reaction I wasn't sure we could easily escape from. My experiences with Tina were never quite as *dramatic* as this, which only made me wonder just what kind of business Hamisi dealt in.

I immediately backed up a step and held my hands in peace. "Hello, Hamisi. My name is Lenna Turgenov, and my companion is Luka." I'd let her come to her own conclusions about him and why I didn't divulge his last name. "Tina told me that she sent my order here for me to pick up. I am aware of the added delivery fee, of course."

She stood there, silently as she examined me. I

felt the urge to move, to scratch something, or fidget. I didn't like being observed like this and my fingers twitched at my side, my fight instincts screaming at me. Her eyes caught the movement and her lips turned up in a grin, a hint of fangs appearing through her parted lips.

She leaned forward and sniffed.

Luka stiffened and inched slightly in front of me. "Is there a problem, Hamisi?"

"I'm just curious as to what you are," she replied before turning to Luka and freezing, her eyes widening. "My Prince," she said, lowering her gaze before switching it back to me. "Who and what are you to catch the eye of Night Court royalty?"

Her guards immediately placed their weapons away, turned their gazes to the floor, and I caught murmurings of "*My Prince*" as they shuffled uncomfortably.

"What am I?" I asked, frowning my brow. "I'm a human." I completely ignored her comment about catching his eye. Now certainly wasn't the time to dive into feelings we'd both been avoiding for the past few months.

"Mhmm. If you say so," She leaned forward, pressing her arms together to emphasize her cleavage. I held back a scowl knowing it wasn't for my benefit. I snuck a glance at Luka, but he had his eyes

firmly planted on her face. I wanted to smirk, but a thought entered my head.

Could she somehow sense that I was a little different? Most vampires had no clue the Guild even existed, let alone the fact that the assassins had special gifts. But surely there was no way they could pick up on it. Someone would have mentioned that I smell *different* by now if that was true. I was constantly surrounded by vampires and hybrids, ones who had no problem voicing their thoughts.

“About the suits...” I said, trying to divert her attention.

She clapped her hands. “Yes! The suits. They are absolutely exquisite by the way. Tina’s work is always something to be admired.”

“I’ve used her for quite a few different orders in the past, so I have no doubt they are perfect,” I said diplomatically, very close to losing my patience. I couldn’t understand what she was playing at, if this was some sort of vampire culture I wasn’t aware of.

Hamisi straightened up and walked around her desk, elegantly placing herself in the cushioned chair. “This is the first time I’ve had royalty visit my club, so why don’t you and Ms. Turgenov enjoy a private booth and complimentary champagne while we wait for Terence to bring the suits over?” Hamisi

said to Luka, batting her eyelashes demurely. I wanted to punch her.

He smiled in response. "That sounds lovely." He was seconds from getting a fist to the face as well.

"There is the small matter of payment, and then I will have one of our private booths prepared for you. Otherwise, I can have it billed to the palace if you'd prefer." She wasn't even bothering to speak with me anymore. Her sensuality was on full display as she stood again and approached us.

"Of course," I said, reaching into my clutch and pulling out a bound stack of hundred-dollar bills. "Fifteen thousand, including the delivery fee."

She forced her attention back to me only to pluck the bills from my outstretched hand. "Wonderful."

Don't punch her. Don't punch her. Don't punch her.



"Well," I said, getting comfortable in the booth one of the guards led us to. "That was interesting." Luka had been silent the walk over, a strange look on his face. Even sitting there, his head was lowered and his shoulders slightly slumped.

He didn't seem to hear me, so I poked his chest. "Fang man."

He lifted his head. "Yes?" His face was forlorn, and I didn't know why, but I did know that I wanted to make him feel better. Now that I didn't want to punch him anymore.

I scrunched my forehead in confusion. "Are you alright Luka?" I was beginning to get concerned. This morose behavior was so unlike him, and I wanted his playful banter back. I missed it. "Did something happen?"

He leaned forward to whisper in my ear. "I'm so sorry about her. I didn't expect to be recognized. It isn't actually that common for the royal family to leave the Court." I wasn't sure what he was apologizing for.

"Hey," I said, nudging his shoulder. "It's no big deal. So what if she's a little weird? We're still getting the suits and free drinks."

He smiled halfheartedly but didn't reply as a waiter arrived with a bottle of chilled champagne and two glasses. He set them on the table and disappeared into the crowd.

I filled the glasses almost to the brim. "Come on, you're not going to make a lady drink alone, are you?"

His eyes roamed over my face, and my breath halted as he lifted a hand to curl a flyaway strand of hair behind my ear. "I wouldn't dream of it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LENNA



I froze, heat crawling up my neck as I stared into those beautiful, honey-colored eyes. Eyes that have long since become a comfort to look into. Luka blinked a few times, releasing me from his stare, before backing up slightly and raising his glass. I wiped my clammy hands underneath the table.

“Here’s to hoping the melody of your soul will always find your ears.”

I had absolutely no idea what that meant, but it sounded meaningful, so I tapped my glass against his and took a sip, the bubbly wine tickling my throat as I swallowed.

I peered over Luka’s shoulder to see Nikita and Zander tearing up the dance floor, their bodies wrapped around each other so closely it was difficult

to tell where one started and the other finished. I was shocked Nikita allowed it, though from the look of things, they were both totally wasted. I didn't know vampires could even get drunk.

I turned my attention back to Luka, who was leaning back against the headrest, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, a relaxed expression now on his face.

"So," I said, taking another sip. "What else can you tell me about growing up at the Night Court?"

He sighed and I instantly regretted prying, but before I could retract my question, he replied. "I guess the best word to describe it was lonely. Father was killed by humans about ten years ago, and my grandparents on both sides are long dead. Vampires do not procreate that easily and both of my parents were single children."

"So, it's just you and your mom?"

"Yup, just me and Mother." There was no warmth in his tone like when I spoke about Papa, which made me wonder about their relationship.

"Do you get to spend a lot of time with her?"

His eyes widened, as if shocked I'd even ask such a question. "My mother?"

I nodded.

He let out a low chuckle, but I had a feeling he didn't find anything funny. "The queen is my mother

only by title. She was the heir to the throne, and when my father died, she dedicated all of her time to our people and her duties as ruler.” He rubbed a hand down his face. “Though if I’m being completely honest, she doesn’t have a maternal bone in her body anyway, so it wasn’t an especially negative change for me.”

My heart was heavy and my throat thick with compassion, I slipped a hand into his and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I know it isn’t my fault, but I’m sorry nonetheless.”

He lifted my hand and pressed a soft kiss to my knuckles. “It’s alright, little assassin. It has been many years since I’ve cared how my mother felt about me. It simply is what it is.” He got to his feet my hand still firmly grasped in his. “Come on, let’s see if you can dance as well as you fight.”

Luka led me through the crowd to the center of the dance floor, brushing past swaying limbs, the smell of sweat and alcohol hitting my nose. He slipped an arm around my waist and my nerves kicked up a notch as he leaned close. The champagne warmed my face, at least that what I told myself was the cause of my heated cheeks. I didn’t want to worry about the hybrids, about the assassins, about the fae. All I wanted was to enjoy myself in the moment and to soak up the mood.

So I did. My body relaxed, Luka loosening his hold on me as I twirled out of his arms, spinning and twisting my body to the music, letting it flow through me. As I spun back around and met Luka's gaze, that beautiful tune caressed my ears, speaking to my soul, the other sounds fading away.

His eyes were no longer warm; they blazed like golden fire, and I lost myself in their depths as I wrapped my arms around his neck. He pulled me close, his head lowering to mine, his full lips a hairs-breadth away. I sunk my fingers into his hair, goose-bumps trailing down my neck as his breath caressed my skin. My eyes fluttered shut as I waited for him to close the distance. His hands tightened around my waist and lips that were soft and silky like satin finally brushed against mine.

"Hamisi will see you now."

I could have sworn I heard Luka curse under his breath as he straightened, smoothing out his shirt as he faced the person responsible for our interruption. The person I now wanted to strangle.

We left Nikita and Zander to their debauchery, and followed the bald, muscular worker through the crowd, and back behind the curtain.

Hamisi was waiting with a smirk on her face that was too smug to be coincidental. She'd been watching us and made sure to interrupt in that exact

moment on purpose. She didn't even know Luka, so she couldn't have been jealous, but I wasn't able to figure out her intentions. She was just...*odd*. I equal parts wanted to punch her and wanted to understand her.

"Terence was finally able to track down your suits," she gestured to the hanging rack with the four suits on them. One for me, Sofia, Ryder, and Quinn. When I'd had the order placed, I hadn't had the slightest inkling that the vampires would be fighting with us, so I'd only had suits commissioned for the assassins. Vampires were a lot harder to kill so I wasn't especially worried. "I do hope they are to your satisfaction."

I walked to the rack and unzipped the first garment bag, sucking in a breath as the material unveiled. It was more than I could have hoped for. I ran my fingers over the lightweight, smooth as silk material. The suits were made out of Vantablack fabric, which was the darkest shade of black. So dark that it absorbs ninety-nine percent of light, making it the perfect option for blending in with the night.

If there was anything all assassins could agree on, it was the wish to be invisible. The Vantablack made it possible in the later hours. It simply made no sense for me to expend all of that energy trying to keep everyone concealed if I didn't have to.

The suits would cover most of our bodies, leaving only our hands and feet exposed. That was easily fixable with the gloves and the steel-toed boots I'd had commissioned to go with them. Our heads would be covered with matching masks, the cloth that covered our senses thinner and completely breathable. I was in love. My skin tingled with the excitement of a potential fight and I couldn't wait to try them on.

The best part of the suits was that they were lined with thin, featherlight armor plates that covered our backs, chests, and foreheads. I only regretted that our necks would be exposed, but Tina said it wouldn't be possible to put move our necks if she did that. It would make fighting almost impossible, so exposed necks it was.

I could already hear Sofia's laments about not being able to fit into the suits, which would have clung to her pre-pregnancy body like a glove... but now... I just hoped she could figure out what her role in this upcoming fighting was going to be. I would have just offered to set her up in a safe house if I wasn't worried the rogues had her information. It was a good thing we had a long drive to Ibrida to talk.

"They are perfect," I breathed, pulling out the suit

to show Luka. "Sorry, I didn't have your measurements when I ordered these."

He grinned mischievously. "You can measure me whenever you want."

My mouth dropped open as he let out a rough laugh. The sound was pure and sincere, and hit me right in the chest. My heart clenched as I cleared my throat, a blush present across my nose. "Thanks for the permission."

He smirked. "Just wanted to make sure you knew."

A voice came from behind us, and I wrenched my gaze from Luka's "I'm so glad they are to your satisfaction," Hamisi purred, trailing her eyes over Luka suggestively.

I tried to judge how quickly her guards would react if I punched her straight in her face. It would be pretty difficult to flirt with blood pouring out of her nose.

I placed the suit back into the bag and zipped it up. "Thank you for your hospitality, but we should really be going on our way."

"Yes," Luka said, throwing the suits over his shoulder. "It's time I get Lenna home. She gets tabby if I don't feed her on time."

I rolled my eyes and elbowed him. "That was only

twice!" I was so glad he was back to normal, that his teasing didn't bother me at all. I rather enjoyed it. I reached out to shake Hamisi's hand, sending an electric pulse through my palm and giving her a little shock.

She jumped back with a startled *yip*, and I had to hold back my laughter. By the amused expression on Luka's face as he opens the door for me, he knew exactly what I'd done.

"Lenna!" Nikita shouted in my ear as she threw an arm around my shoulders, leaning into me as we walked. "Where have you been?"

I laughed, reaching an arm around her waist to keep her propped up. "Picking up the suits.. you know.. the whole reason we came here."

"Oh, right! Where are they?" She looked around, finally noticing Luka, who didn't seem surprised by her behavior.

"Lukalian Night, your tie is off center." She looked between us. "Have you been doing naughty things?" She laughed, and before either of us had a chance to respond, Zander strolled up to us and turned his back to Nikita.

"Alright, ass-kicker, get on."

Nikita pounced onto his back and wrapped her limbs around his body. "Onward, noble stead."

He shook his head. "I'm suddenly regretting this choice."



MY FEET WERE SCREAMING from being in heels all night, so we decided to take a taxi back to the house. Nikita had fallen asleep by the time the driver pulled up to the curb, and Zander carried her into the house with a whispered “*good night*” to the two of us.

I followed Luka to his room, knowing he would need to drink, and went right to his drawers, pulling out a pair of sweatpants and t-shirt. Too tired to go into the bathroom, I slipped out of my heels, moaning at the release of pressure on my toes. I switched into the night clothes, Luka turning around to give me privacy.

“Sorry, I couldn't stay in that outfit for one more minute,” I said, sitting down on his bed as I untangled my hair between my fingers.

He turned back around and ran his eyes over my body, top to bottom. “Until this moment I’ve never cared to see a woman in my clothes, but you definitely make them look a hell of a lot better.”

He crossed over to the dresser and changed into a pair of pajama bottoms, leaving his chest bare.

I looked down, an unavoidable grin turning up

my lips. I was suddenly nervous, not sure exactly what was going through Luka's mind. He was an actual prince, and I was a human assassin. I had money, sure. But what was money to royalty? I probably should have thought of that before this moment, because I wasn't sure I could just retract my feelings. The past few weeks had made it pretty clear to me how much I cared for him. Which absolutely terrified me. He was a *prince* and a vampire. Was there any point to begin something that could only end in heartbreak? Unconsciously, I had already made the decision, the rest of me just had to catch up.

He came to sit beside me and tipped my chin up with a finger. "There is nothing to be worried about, little assassin." He brushed a hair away from my face and trailed a finger down my throat, lingering on my vein. "May I?" He whispered, his breath causing a shiver to race through my body.

I nodded and tilted my head to give him better access.

One hand slipped around my waist, pulling me against his hard body, while the other thrust into my hair. He lowered his lips to my neck, pressing a kiss to my skin before his fangs pierced through my flesh with a slight pinch.

I gasped from the sudden rush of arousal flowing

from the bite straight to my core. Luka let out a groan and pulled me into his lap, my legs falling to either side of his thighs. I squirmed and was met with something hard and... *big*. I rubbed against him, my head falling back as a moan escaped my lips, the tension rising with each passing second.

Luka retracted his fangs and gently licked the wound; his tongue swirling circles over my skin. He finished and leaned his forehead into the crook of my neck, my name falling from his mouth. I was about to rip off my shirt when he stopped rolling his hips against me and simply wrapped his arms around my body in a hug.

“Lenna... I can’t. Not yet,” he said, cupping my face and looking into my eyes. My stomach twisted as hurt pierced my chest. Was it possible I had misread the signs? He continued before my thoughts could lead me anywhere else. “But would it be alright if I just held you for the night?” He looked almost insecure and unsure of himself, that even if I wanted to say no, I wouldn’t. Not that I wanted to say no.

I nodded, and he guided me down to the bed, pulling the covers over us before tucking me into his body and pressing a kiss to my head. The last thing I remember before darkness claimed me was the feel of absolute comfort from being in his arms.



THE LIGHT SHINING through the curtains brought me back to consciousness, and as my mind cleared, I noticed I was still wrapped in Luka's arms. For the second time in the past year, I woke up without nightmares plaguing my dreams. Both times were nights spent with Luka.

I twisted around in his arms and examined him, his face appearing younger in sleep, the lines in his forehead smoothed out.

My movements must have interrupted his sleep because a moment later he grumbled and snuggled into my body, sticking his nose into my hair. His hair was unkempt, having fallen out of his bun and he was just so darn adorable. I knew we probably should have gotten up and started packing for the day, but I couldn't help it. I threw an arm over him and closed my eyes, just this once doing something purely for myself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LENNA



A few hours later, I was sitting next to Trey in the backseat of an SUV with Ryder behind the wheel. Trey had a bag of yarn in his lap and was knitting something resembling a scarf the colors of neon yellow and pink. It was almost too bright to look at, but I couldn't stop. After a few minutes of me staring open-mouthed, he finally set down his needles at met my gaze.

"Did you need something, Lenna?"

"You're knitting," I said, my mind still a bit muddled.

"That is an astoundingly accurate observation. It's no wonder they wanted you as an assassin," he said sarcastically.

I narrowed my eyes. It shouldn't have been so strange, but seeing the massive warrior crammed in

the back of the SUV, silently knitting a brightly colored scarf was just... odd.

“Who is that for?” I asked, absently running my hands over Titus’ head that he’d plopped into my lap. I was still getting used to their presence, but Titus was growing on me. Not that he gave me any other choice when he constantly invaded my personal space, requesting scratches.

Trey resumed his work, interlocking loops of string. “I haven’t given it a thought yet.” He lifted a brow. “Why?”

“It’s pink and yellow,” I said incredulously.

“Another staggering finding.”

“I’m just not sure anyone over the age of four is going to wear that.”

He put the materials down again. “Why not?”

Sofia spun around in her seat and examined the scarf. “It glitters!”

He turned to her. “You are both just bursting with obvious statements today, huh?”

Sofia laughed. “You can give it to Violet, she might wear it.”

“I think I’ll pass.” Came Violet’s voice from the front seat. She’d called shotgun the moment we neared the vehicle.

Trey glanced at Kasai. “Do you find these colors odd as well?”

She put her hands up. “Don’t look at me. I spent my life in a gladiator ring wearing armor every day. I’m the last to know what’s normal or not.”

He huffed out a sigh. “That would explain why Luka and Nikita have never worn any of the scarfs I’ve gifted to them.” He turned back to me. “I’m from the sixties, that’s what everyone wore...”

His sentence was cut off by a high-pitched screeching noise, followed by a resounding crash. Glass shattered, and I lurched forward as a scream pierced the air. The only reason I didn’t end up on the windshield was the seat belt strapped across my chest. I blinked stars from my eyes, groaning as I yanked on the belt that was digging into my sternum. I’d have serious bruising if I didn’t heal myself soon.

An inhuman noise screeched again from outside the car, and the sound of claws scraping metal met my ears before Violet screamed.

Chaos ensued as everyone scrambled to get out of the car, leaving Sofia unmoving in her seat as she clutched her stomach.

I finally managed to rip off my seatbelt, shoving past Titus to check on Sofia, who was staring wide-eyed out the window.

“What in the actual fuck are those?”

I followed her gaze and fell backward into the

seat. There were dozens of small creatures with humanoid bodies, teeth too large to fit into their mouths, and claws protruding from their hands. Their eyes were completely black, not even a hint of white to be found.

They bounded forward, talons at the ready as they continued their ear shattering screeching, their small legs carrying them faster than you'd think was possible.

Luka appeared outside the window. "Protect Sofia!" He yelled, turning his back to us to face the creatures, his sword already drawn.

Kasai grabbed my arm. "I will stay with Violet and keep Sofia safe."

I glanced between her and Sofia, unsure what to do, the sounds of the fight ringing in my ear. How could I keep Sofia safe when she looked like she was seconds from joining the fray herself?

Kasai seemed to understand my hesitation. "I will keep her safe in the car, I swear it on my life."

Sofia sighed. "Go, I'll be fine."

I nodded and stumbled out of the car, pulling my katana with me as I activated my healing. I'd realized during my training with Trey that I could maintain higher energy levels if I only used one of my gifts at a time, so I chose to use real weapons instead of manifested ones.

I passed Quinn, who had taken post outside the car for an extra layer of protection, and ran forward, unsheathing my blade and bringing it up in a defensive position. A giddy excitement washed through me as I examined the strange, otherworldly beings. Any chance to fight a new opponent, one that I had no chance of guessing how they'd react, made me incredibly exhilarated.

Luka had taken charge of giving orders, using Nikita, Zander, and Aidan as the first line of defense, leaving Ryder, Trey, and Summer a little farther back, allowing them to take out any of the beasts that managed to get past the others.

Adrenaline coursed through me as I reached the first creature, who growled and swiped for my legs with its razor-sharp talons. I jumped over its head and whipped around, slashing my weapon down in an arc, cutting straight through its skull.

The creatures came up to my waist and were thicker than humans or vampires. The one I'd just killed was instantly replaced by another one, who this time pounced forward, aiming for my throat.

I kicked it in the chest and drove it through to the hilt of my sword, before yanking out my blade and gasping at the sight of its blood. It was blue. *Cool.*

I laughed and twirled around the beings, slashing

and kicking them down, until they devised a strategy. Three of them all jumped for me at once, slamming my back to the ground, their teeth inches from my jugular.

My katana slipped from my hand with my fall, not that it would do any good in close combat. I quickly erected a light shield over my exposed throat, wishing we'd thought to wear our new suits so I wouldn't need to expend unnecessary energy. Teeth bit into my arm that had been holding them off, and it burned like fire. I hadn't realized I'd halted my healing when I threw up my shield and was now paying the price.

I tried to stifle my scream as another clamped its teeth around my shoulder. Reaching down my side, I slipped a dagger from the sheath on my ankle and stabbed the beast attached to my collarbone.

It shrieked and let go, just as the other two creatures were thrown off me, and Luka's worried face peered down at me. The moment he realized I was okay, his expression changed to a mischievous grin.

"What are you doing lying on the ground?" He chuckled, extending a hand to help me up. "Did you plan to let us do all the work while you just laze around?"

I quirked a brow. "Laze around?" I gestured to

the pile of dead bodies surrounding me. "Who do you think did this?"

He grinned and twirled his sword. "Do try and keep up, little assassin."

Two creatures jumped toward Luka's back, and my eyes widened. I wouldn't have time to pick up my katana before they landed on him, but Luka saw my horror and spun around.

He swung his sword, decapitating one of them, and with his empty hand, he thrust his fingers through the chest cavity of the second one and pulled out a bloody string.

No. Not a string. It was the creature's spine.

Luka turned to face me, my katana back in my hand, and grinned. "See, that's how it's done."

I scoffed and ran back into the fray, slashing left and right.

Zander and Aidan both had guns, and relied heavily on them, barely allowing the creatures to get close. It was clear they preferred not to have to fight hand-to-hand. *Interesting*. What would they do if they ran out of bullets? Throw the guns?

From everything I'd heard about Eleanor, she was an accomplished fighter, but it didn't look like she'd taken the time to teach Zander what she knew. Or the other hybrids that left the city. I guessed I'd need to fit training him into my schedule as well.

Nikita and Luka had no such qualms, seeming to prefer to get *down and dirty* with the beasts. There were several long gashes down Nikita's arms, which were as bare as any other day.

I took out a few more of the creatures before noticing how many were surrounding Luka, so I ran forward to join him just as he tore out one of their throats with his teeth. A small, and quite ridiculous, part of me felt a stab of envy that Luka sunk his teeth into someone else. I wanted to slap my face in exasperation. There was definitely something wrong with me.

Blue blood dripped down Luka's jaw, and I didn't bother holding in my laughter at the sight. "Well, now I feel a little jealous that you drank someone else's blood," the thought slipped out before I could stop it.

His face fell and he stepped forward. "Lenna, I'm so..."

His words were cut off when a creature that I hadn't seen snuck up behind him and shoved his claw through Luka's back. He staggered forward, his own blood spilling out of a gaping wound in his chest.

I screamed, my hands lifting of their own accord, and a bright flash of light exploded from them crashing into the creature.

It flew back and all that was left of its body was a charred husk.

Well, that's new.

Running to Luka's side, I caught him as he fell to his knees, his chest moving slower than it should. Sobs tore out of me as I shoved all the healing energy I could muster into his body. I wasn't sure if my hands trembled from the absolute terror coursing through me, or from the amount of energy I was pushing into his wound.

"Little assassin," Luka murmured as he lifted a hand to dry my face, but I kept on crying, desperate to save his life. I couldn't lose anyone else. "Don't waste your tears on me."

I shushed him and he chuckled, wincing as my gift slowly knitted his skin back together. His head rested in my lap and I tried not to move, scared of hurting him further.

The fight around us was coming to a close, Nikita and Zander had both taken up protective positions around us to give me time to heal Luka.

He watched, a look of fascination on his face. "I think you won this round."

I couldn't help the laugh that burst out of my throat. "How about we call it even, fang man?"

The hole in his chest closed and I sealed off the warm, rose-colored healing light, leaning down to

press my forehead against his. “I can’t believe I almost lost you.”

He closed his eyes and breathed, “Never.”



We decided to stop at a motel so we could clean up and get some rest, and I stepped between Ryder and Sofia as they walked down the dimly lit hallway.

“So, am I the only one wondering how we keep getting tracked so easily?”

“That’s what I was just saying to Sof,” Ryder said, leaning his head down and keeping his voice low.

“Someone either has or is betraying us,” I said, running through the options in my head.

“My bet’s on that hybrid bitch,” Sofia said, struggling to be quiet through her anger.

“I don’t know. I think that would be too obvious. Whoever it is would likely be trying hard not to act like a traitor,” I said, going over my memories to think of who it might be.

“You might have the right idea about the hybrids though,” Ryder said, pausing as someone exited their room and passed by. “It could be Adrian, or, I hate to say it, Zander.”

I sighed. “It certainly wouldn’t be the first

time one of my family members stabbed me in the back,” I said, really hoping it wasn’t Zander. He’d taken the effort to get to know me since our first meeting, and I’d hate to have to kill him.

Part of me still regretted leaving Evelyn alive, and we’d been a lot closer. I still couldn’t wrap my head around what she did. How she possibly thought telling my father’s killer who I was. I buried the thoughts as deep as they would go, knowing I could deal with that mess later.

They both had a point about the hybrids. They were still the unknown variables, and we were about to walk right into their arms.

“I think it’s safe to erase Kasai and Violet out of the list,” I said, pulling out the keycard the receptionist had given me. “I doubt they even know anyone outside of the gladiators and us.”

They nodded and followed me into the room which had two queen-sized beds. I set my bag down on the one closest to the door and pulled out a clean pair of clothes.

“Ryder and I can share this bed,” Sofia said, gesturing to the second bed.

I shook my head. “You should have your own. It says on this app I downloaded that discomfort in pregnancy starts pretty early.”

“Pregnancy perks,” Ryder said, grinning as he plopped down on my... *our* bed.

“You’re sure Luka won’t mind?” Sofia asked hesitantly.

I froze. “What do you mean?”

“It might have something to do with the way you practically wailed when he was injured.” Ryder smirked.

I opened my mouth to deny their statements, but I couldn’t. Not after that day.

I sighed, sinking further into the bed. “I didn’t realize until then how much I’d begun to care about him.”

Sofia walked over and squeezed my hand. “Feelings like that just creep up on you when you’re least expecting them. There’s nothing wrong with moving on from that spineless coward.”

Cade. My mind was so far away from thoughts of him, he hadn’t even factored into the equation. “He’s a prince, Sof. It’s not that simple.”

Ryder bowed his neck, spreading his arms out to the side dramatically. “All hail the future Night Queen!”

I slapped his arm. “Don’t be ridiculous.” I gathered my clothes and toiletries, making sure to keep them away from the blue blood. “I’m going to shower.”

Their laughter followed me as I made my way into the bathroom, throwing a vulgar gesture over my shoulder which only caused them to laugh harder. That was why I never cursed; it never had the desired effect.

I took extra time scrubbing myself clean under the boiling hot water, the steam fogging up the small mirror on the wall. My mind still wasn't settled by the time I was finished, so I got dressed and told them I'd be back soon. I needed the simplicity of soaring around in my hawk form, so I headed to the roof, forcing myself to think of anything besides crowns and royal responsibilities.

Night Queen indeed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LENNA



The roof was empty; the only sounds were the chirping of bugs and the cars driving down the street below. After pulling off my clothes, I laid them in a pile on one of the armchairs left for guests and closed my eyes.

Taking in a deep breath, I relaxed my mind, shifting my body into my hawk form. My limbs retracted, my wings and tail springing free as I finished the switch from woman to bird.

I opened my eyes, my sight sharper but not nearly as strong as it would be during daylight. Hawks weren't nocturnal, and they hunted during dusk when most of their prey were still asleep.

I ruffled my tail and leapt into the air, flapping my wings to get me to a respectable height before

letting myself soar through the night, leaving my troubles behind me. My hawk gave me the freedom to quiet my mind, giving myself up to the instinct of the predator.

I'd made the mistake of doing this during the day one too many times when I was younger. Once when I was fourteen I'd come back with a dead squirrel between my teeth. I'd cried for the rest of the day. Papa had thought it was hilarious.

I gave myself an hour of flight time before descending back to the roof. I wanted to get some sleep before we had to head to Ibrida to meet my mother.

I still couldn't believe that word even existed for me.

Shifting back to my human form, I slipped into my clothes and sat down, resting my face in my hands. It had been a *long* day. Coming that close to losing Luka had brought me right back to the moment Papa had died in my arms. The feelings were different, yet somehow equally as strong. How was that even possible?

That terrified me. To know that one person could have such a hold over me, to have ownership of such a large portion of my heart. It was barely healed, held together with scotch tape at best. It

could come apart at any moment, and if I let myself fall for him completely, he would have the power to destroy me. I know I wouldn't recover from that.

Just as I finished sorting through my epiphany, the door to the roof opened, and Luka walked out, bringing with him that familiar melody. A memory suddenly slammed into my mind from when I'd gone to check up on Max almost a year ago. He'd told me a story of his lost wife. What had he called her?

Bonded soul.

I let the memory wash over me, his voice echoing through my mind.

"It isn't an instant connection like you would think. Your soul must meet and recognize its match. Souls can feel compatibility and once it does, the other soul will sing to you. A unique tune created just for you, one that nobody else can hear. It was the most beautiful song I'd ever heard."

He called it a soul song. That's what I'd been hearing all this time, and Luka knew! Come to think of it, Nikita did as well, if her comments were to be interpreted correctly.

Why would he hide that from me?

A piece of that scotch tape unraveled from my heart, leaving a hole gaping in its wake. It solidified

my earlier decision into unbreakable steel. A rush of anger mixed with hurt came over me and I jumped to me feet, startling Luka, who had almost reached my side.

“Did you think I would never figure it out?” I asked, angry tears brimming in my eyes. I blinked them back, determined not to let him see me cry.

He saw my mood and took a step back, his brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Max told me about his wife, and how much he missed listening to their *soul song*,” I growled, letting out my frustration, my voice echoing through the night air.

Luka’s eyes widened and he reached for me, but I yanked my arm out of his path.

“So, what was the plan? To toy with my emotions and then just walk away?” My voice was rising as I clenched my hands into fists. “Tell me!” I yelled.

He flinched. “Lenna, I swear to you that was not my plan. It took me a while to understand it myself. At first, I was drawn to you and I couldn’t figure out why, aside from the obvious. You are beautiful and kind and fierce. Anyone could easily fall for you.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he stumbled over his words. “I kept ending up in places where you were, without any real reason for my presence. The first

time it happened was at the *Blood Pit*. Do you remember that?”

I narrowed my eyes, not giving him any further reaction.

“Then, I heard our song when that assassin came to kill me. I ran outside, not because he was there, but because I heard you arrive.”

I remembered him running out of the house and being surprised by Cade’s appearance. He had looked right at me through the trees. But none of that really mattered right now. He’d still *lied* to me.

“So you’re telling me you’ve known for over half a year and said nothing. Not one word.”

He threw his hands up. “That’s also when I found out you were with that boy. What did you expect me to do, drop to me knees and beg you to take me instead? I had no reason to believe you were hearing the song as well. I didn’t even know it was possible between a human and a vampire.”

“And what about the last few months? You knew!” I poked him in the chest. “You knew I’d started hearing it, and you hid the truth from me. You lied to me.” I shoved him away. “And all this time I was worried I wasn’t good enough for a prince.” I laughed bitterly. “But no. It is you who is unworthy of me.”

I hurried around him and stomped to the door,

hot tears falling down my face. Yanking open the door, I glanced behind me and paused.

Luka was on his knees with his head bent.

My bleeding heart twisted painfully, but I reminded myself of what he'd done. Steeling my emotions, I walked through the door, leaving him and my feelings behind.

I calmed my racing heart and dried my cheeks before quietly entering the shared room, thanking whoever was watching that Sofia and Ryder were already asleep. Sofia's quiet snores drift through the room.

I got into bed beside Ryder, pulling the covers over my body as I closed my eyes, my mind racing with all that had happened.

It was going to be a long night.



A familiar voice yelled out my name. It was pitch black and I couldn't see two feet in front of my face. A storm brewed in the distance, and I knew it was nearing. Any moment now it would reach me.

The voice called out again, and I whipped around, trying to locate the person behind that familiar sound. A

large shape appeared in front of me and I gasped, my hands covering my mouth.

This time it was Luka, and there was a hole in his chest, blood seeping out, drenching his clothes. I stood there frozen, unable to move a muscle. Unable to voice the scream that was pounding in my skull.

I gasped, my eyes flying open as my nightmare faded away, leaving me with a pounding pulse and clammy skin. It had always been Papa who died in my dreams, and now it seemed I would need to experience Luka's death over and over in my sleep. I covered my face with my arm and waited until the pounding in my chest lessened.

"Lenna, are you okay?" Sofia asked, her footsteps becoming louder as she neared the bed I rested on.

Satisfied that I wasn't about to have a heart-attack, I lifted my arm and sat up, meeting her worried gaze.

Her eyes widened when she saw what I could only assume was my blotchy skin and puffy eyes. I was an ugly crier.

"What happened?" She asked, plopping down on Ryder's empty side of the bed.

"Did you know that vampires can have soul mates?" I asked her, my voice coming out scratchy and rough as I wondered where Ryder had disappeared to.

She shook her head, but stayed silent, waiting for me to continue.

“Well, apparently they can, only it isn’t like in the movies. It isn’t love at first sight or anything, and you have a choice to accept or reject it.” I swallowed, trying to get my throat wet. “The way you know is through a song only the pair can hear. It’s called a soul song.”

“That sounds pretty fucking romantic, but I don’t understand why this makes you sad,” Sofia said, pulling her legs up on the bed and crossing them.

“Because apparently Luka has been hearing our song for almost a year now and said nothing. I only started hearing it once we left the Guild, but he told me it was his ringtone. He hid it from me for so long and then just blatantly lied to my face.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Did he say why?”

I shrugged. “He said he didn’t want to get in between me and Cade, but I left before he could explain why he kept up the lie after knowing I heard it too.” I closed my eyes and my shoulders deflated. “Maybe he was planning on rejecting it, so he didn’t think there was any point.”

Sofia shook her head adamantly. “I sincerely doubt that. Lenna, that man absolutely *adores* you. He is nice and polite to everyone, but when he looks at you, his whole face lights up like a fucking

Christmas tree. There has to be some other explanation.”

“It doesn’t matter now anyway. I said some pretty horrific things, and he’s still a Prince. I’m sure he already has a list of approved options he is supposed to pick from.”

She rubbed my arm. “I’m sorry, Len. But for what it’s worth, I don’t think this is the end for you. There is more to your story.”

I wasn’t as optimistic.



I refused to meet Luka’s eyes when he made the attempt, choosing instead to get into the car he wasn’t riding in. Thankfully, the damage to the vehicles hadn’t been too severe, only one side had smashed windows and a slightly dented door. It would have been a pain to get another door.

Sofia sat in the back with me, letting me keep to my silence as I leaned my head against the window, watching the poles flash by. I managed to get uninterrupted sleep and the day was turning to dusk by the time I woke up.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” Sofia said, offering me a protein bar.

I smiled in thanks and devoured it, wishing I'd eaten more before we'd left. My stomach had been in knots over what Sofia had said. It annoyed me that even when I wasn't with him, Luka still had the power to affect me. Was love worth that? Could I allow such vulnerability into my life?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LENNA



Autumn in Atlanta, Georgia was breathtaking. We drove past trees full of red, orange, and yellow leaves, and I opened my window to breathe in the crisp scent. It had fully relaxed me until I realized why. It was Luka's scent I was inhaling, and I quickly rolled up the window and glowered at it. Now he was taking my favorite season away from me as well. *Lovely.*

"Whoever named these streets was hella into Christmas," Sofia said, leaning out the other window. "Do you see this? The last two were Holly and Bramble," she pointed to the sign up ahead. "And this one is Reindeer."

"I've never celebrated a holiday before," Violet said wistfully, before turning around in her seat and

pulling on Kasai's sleeve. "Sai, can we celebrate the holidays this year?"

Kasai raised a brow. "Are you even Christian?"

Violet shrugged. "I don't think so, but we can make up our own holidays!"

"Sure, we can do that," Kasai said with a laugh.

Violet bounced in her seat. "We'll have lots of good food, like pizza and chocolate." She turned to the rest of us. "You can be invited too!"

It made me furious that someone wanted to taint her joy and youthful exuberance by forcing her into a lifetime of fighting. It wasn't just her attitude that wasn't compatible with that life, she was minuscule. I could probably blow too hard on her and she'd fall over. What were they even thinking training her?

Kasai hadn't divulged much from her time there, but she had mentioned how few made it as long as she had. Perhaps Violet was brought to be used for practice. To die. Looking at her wraithlike form, I made a decision. No matter what we found in Ibrida, I would make sure Violet would have a safe home there. There was no way she would be brought any further into this war.

"Sister," Zander said from the driver's seat, bringing me back to the present. "We're about to arrive." He pulled up to a dilapidated building, the windows boarded up and the paint long gone.

My mouth dropped open. “I thought you said this was an established community, Zander,” I said as Sofia mouthed, “What the fuck,” at me. I shrugged.

Zander parked the car and swiveled in his seat to face us, a large grin spread across his face. “It is. There is a retired Guild assassin here who has the ability to change the appearance of things. He calls it a glamour.”

My eyes widened. “Are you talking about Min-Jun Nai?”

“Yeah! How did you know that? He’s been with us for more than ten years.”

“Papa told me about him, but everyone thinks he’s dead,” I said as we filed out of the car, the others meeting us. I fell into step beside Zander, who seemed happy with the attention. Min-Jun Nai was the ultimate weapon because he could make you see whatever he wanted. During an attack, he could make an entirely different landscape appear out of thin air. A fabricated landscape, but one that seemed all too real.

“We helped him fake his death, so he could leave without anyone tracking him,” He said leading us up the stairs, part of me worried my foot would fall through even knowing it was an illusion.

“Just so you know,” Zander said, pulling open the

door. "I instructed Daniel when he left a few weeks ago to warn Mother that I was bringing you home, so she should be expecting us."

I tugged him to a halt and lowered my voice. "Zander, I want your word you won't go telling your mother about what you've seen and heard from the last few months."

His eyes narrowed over my use of *your* and not *our* but didn't say anything about it. Instead, he crossed his fingers with one hand, and covered his heart with the other. "I swear on my honor as your brother, that I will not say anything. I'll also speak to Summer and Aidan, but I can't guarantee they won't go behind my back."

I nodded. I couldn't ask for anything more.

Sofia caught up to us and rubbed her belly. She'd been doing that a lot lately, usually without even realizing it herself. "They better have good food here."

Zander laughed. "We have almost everything the outside world has. Restaurants, bars, and even clothing stores," he said with a mock gasp.

We exited the building and my jaw dropped. There were cobble-stone pathways winding in different directions, two lines of shops set up on either side of the main path. There was an ice cream

parlor, a diner, a jewellery store, and for some reason I half expected to see people riding around on horseback.

“Oh, oh,” Violet said, jumping up and down. “I want ice cream!”

I knew they didn’t have money, and I could tell Kasai was about to remind Violet of that, so I cut in. “Do you guys use regular currency here?”

He laughed. “Of course we do. What else would we use?”

I gave him a blank look. “You live in a secret city, completely hidden from the rest of the world. How should I know what goes on here?” I didn’t mention the city looked like a modern day version of Belle’s town from *Beauty and the Beast*.

“Valid point, sister. We only use cash to avoid detection, but it’s all the regular currency.”

I pulled out a few bills and passed them over to Violet. “Go crazy.”

Her eyes lit up and she jumped on me, squeezing me in a hug. I returned it somewhat awkwardly and she let go. “You should work on your hug-game,” she said before skipping off.

“Is it safe here?” Kasai asked as Tali bounded after Violet, following her into the shop.

“Don’t tell us the big bad gladiator is scared of a few hybrids?” Summer asked as she pushed past us.

I rolled my eyes.

“Just figuring out who I need to kill first,” Kasai responded, running her tongue over the point of a fang.

“Ignore her, everyone else does,” Zander said as he took a left and began walking with purpose. “We should head over to the manor. Mother will have already heard of our arrival and she doesn’t like to wait.”

Joe drifted down and landed on my shoulder, caressing my face with his beak.

“Hey buddy,” I said, giving him a little scratch. “Do you have something for me?”

He held out his leg, which had a note strapped to it. I carefully unwrapped the string and stuck the note into my pocket. I’d read it when I was sure there were no prying eyes.

Violet and Tali caught up with us right as we reached the manor. It was three stories, and at least five times the size of the house I grew up in with Papa. The structure was built out of gray stone, with multiple chimneys shooting up from the sides.

The landscaping was pristine, the grass so green it seemed unreal, the shrubbery cut into perfect hedges surrounding the building. We walked up the massive, stone stairway, my fingers tingling from an emotion I couldn’t place. There were dozens of

windows lining the walls of the manor, but I wasn't able to get a glimpse inside before the double doors opened, a middle-aged man in a suit appearing on the other side, a stern expression on his face.

His white hair was perfectly swept back, showing off his round face. I struggled to maintain my composure as I looked into his eyes, which were red. Not a cheery, bright red. A dark, blood red.

"Zander," He said stiffly, gesturing us inside. "I see that you finally arrived home."

"Yes Father," Zander said, slipping a careful smile on his face.

I was shocked his father would give him such a cool welcome. He'd been gone for half a year, but Zander didn't seem surprised. In fact, it was clear he'd expected this reaction.

A twinge of pity for Zander hit me. How would his life have been different had we been allowed to meet as children?

"Come, your mother is waiting." His father turned without another word and walked off, expecting us to follow.

"His dad is kind of a dick," Sofia whispered, and from the jerk of Zander's shoulders, I knew he heard.

I nodded my agreement. Zander's father's

behavior only increased my trepidation about seeing Eleanor.

We were led into a large sitting room, windows displaying a courtyard lining the wall.

I sat down on one of the two-seater couches, and before Sofia would plop down beside me, Luka zoomed over and lowered himself down.

Sofia winked and mouthed *'talk to him'*, before going to sit with the others.

I stared resolutely forward, not sure how to breach the silence, but Luka took care of that for me.

"So it's going to be like this between us now?" He asked, his voice low.

I turned to him and my heart clenched from the tortured expression on his face. It immediately softened my resolve, much to my dismay, and I lowered my gaze. "I don't want it to be, I'm just not sure how to move forward from this."

He reached out and took my hand, letting out a breath when I didn't retract my arm. "Now isn't the time to get into detail, but I promise you, Lenna, you mean the world to me. I would never intentionally hurt you, but it seems that through my actions I inadvertently ended up doing that anyway." He placed a finger under my chin and tipped up my head. "I will make this right."

Before I had a chance to respond, a sharp voice cut through the room. "It's really you."

I turned toward the voice, and saw a carbon copy of Evelyn approaching me, her heels click-clacking on the wooden floors. She was dressed in a plum-colored sheath dress, her hair cut in a severe, chin-length bob. She didn't have even one gray hair amidst the honey-blond tresses.

So this was Eleanor.

My brain stopped working. I suddenly couldn't think of any words to say, or what to do with my body. What was the proper reaction to seeing the mother who abandoned you at birth?

Luka squeezed my hand that was still gripped in his reassuringly, and I was grateful for the support. He showed me that even when we were on the outs, he still had my back and that was more than this woman ever did for me.

I hardened my gaze and stood up. "It is me, yes."

"I..." she said, coming to stop in front of me. "You meant to say, 'it is I.'"

Did she just correct my grammar? I could hear Sofia chortling in the background, and wished I had her throwback abilities.

"The first time we meet and I'm already getting a lesson. I'm so lucky," I deadpanned. Well, it was abundantly clear she wasn't going to start off all

warm and fuzzy, but what did I really expect from a mother who was more than happy to bail on me at birth?

She looked me in the eyes, that were identical to Zander's before throwing back her head and laughing. "That there just proves the Tabula Rasa theory wrong." She turned to the rest of our party before continuing, "John Locke was convinced that all people were born as a 'blank slate', meaning everyone could be formed and molded strictly by their upbringing and environments. But clearly, even with thousands of miles and years between us, you still ended up with my attitude."

She clapped her hands. "I love it. Just makes me wonder what other similarities we possess." She pulled a chair over, until we were all seated in somewhat of a semi-circle, with her at the head. "Tell me why you are here. Daniel explained what he could after arriving a few weeks ago, but I'd like to hear it from you."

I glanced at Zander, wondering why she hadn't even acknowledged him.

He shook his head and looked away. What was going on with this family?

"Well," I said, sitting back down and trying to figure out the simplest way to explain everything. "A few of us were part of the Guild when we found out

they were killing hybrids. We've been working with these vampires to rescue the hybrids and put them up in safe houses." I wiped my hands on my jeans, my nerves making my hands sweat. I was in such unfamiliar territory, meeting new family members and I didn't like the feeling of uncertainty it gave me.

"So you came to Ibrida to what, bring the hybrids here?" She asked, crossing her ankles and placing her hands in her lap.

I nodded, "We haven't brought them yet, we wanted to make sure it was safe first. I don't actually know you, so I'm sure you can understand our hesitation."

"Naturally," she said, examining me with a screwed gaze. "Do you have it?"

"Um.." I said, furrowing my brows. "Do I have what?"

"My gift, of course. Are you a healer?"

"Is that important?" I asked, not sure where she was angle she was going with.

"Certainly. I want to know if my bloodline rang true. As I'm sure you know by now, my son did not inherit my gifts. I'd like to know if you have."

I tried to catch Zander's eye, wondering why in the world she was speaking about him as if he wasn't there.

Sighing, I focused on Eleanor. There was no

chance I'd been calling her anything other than her name. "Yes, I did."

"To what extent?" She asked immediately.

I lifted my hands in exasperation. "I'm really not sure how this is relevant to the hybrids. We just want to check over the city and see if you have the space for them and if they will be safe here."

"You've come here seeking aid. Surely answering a few simple questions isn't too much to ask?" Her hard expression made it clear she wouldn't continue without the information she wanted. Perhaps she was right about her theory, because I definitely didn't get my obstinacy from Papa.

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth. "I can heal almost anything, as long as I reach it before death comes knocking."

Eleanor smiled, "See. That wasn't so hard." She pulled out a knife that was strapped to her ankle, slashing horizontally across her wrist.

I gasped. "What are you doing?" This woman was certifiably insane. No wonder Zander was so excited to be away from here.

She extended her arm, blood dripping to the floor. "Kindly demonstrate for me." She didn't even grimace from the pain.

Reluctantly, I passed my hand over her arm, delivering warm, rose-colored healing energy into

her wound. Her flesh knitted back together, leaving her skin as it was before, only difference was the remaining blood still falling down.

Eleanor smiled, and suddenly I was worried I'd made a terrible mistake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LENNA



I gnoring my sudden impulse to run as far away as possible, I breathed in deeply, calming myself.

“Now that magic show-and-tell is over,” Sofia said, leaning forward. “Can we get on with why we’re here?”

Ryder’s distinctive snort came from my left, and I bit the inside of my cheek so I didn’t laugh as well. I had a feeling Eleanor wouldn’t find that amusing, and I needed her on my side. For now.

Eleanor’s icy-blue eyes sharpened as she fastened her gaze on Sofia. It was a swift flash of anger before they softened, making me wonder if I’d imagined it. “Of course.” She relaxed back into her seat, recrossing her ankles. “How can I help you?”

Luka cleared his throat. “I’m not sure how aware

you are of the happenings in the rest of the world, but for the past few months there have been dozens of innocent vampires being murdered.” His entire demeanor changed as he spoke, and I had a distinct feeling that this was his royal persona. The Prince. His back straightened, his features took on an emotionless expression, and his voice hardened, but not aggressively. Power oozed from him like an aura. It was impressive.

A shiver trailed down my spine, filling me with heat at the sight of his ruthless persona, and I shifted on my seat.

“I am in fact knowledgeable about the situation, but I do not understand why this matter should concern me,” Eleanor said, her face blank.

Zander cringed behind her. I didn’t know what was going on between them, but he was not the spoiled heir I’d initially pegged him as. The question was if it was all an act, or if his parents were always that cool with him.

Everything Evelyn had told me about her sister made no sense when actually meeting her in person. Evelyn had said that Eleanor was the more emotional one of them and got along really well with people.

For the life of me, I couldn’t see Papa loving the woman sitting in front of me. She was just so.. cold.

Papa was strong and ruthless, that was true, but he was also kind and loving. Nothing was making sense anymore and more than anything, I wished Papa was here to answer my questions. Not this ice-woman. She was *not* my mother.

Luka's eyes narrowed. "There are plenty of vampires among your people, your husband included," he said, gesturing to Zander's dad.

Eleanor didn't bother looking where he pointed. "There are, but only because they are connected to a hybrid. Do not forget that these vampires were hunted by their own kind for creating *abominations*." She spat. "What sort of help are you asking for? Soldiers? This isn't an army or a court, this is a safe haven. We simply do not have the man-power to assist you."

"We're not looking for fighters," I said, hurriedly cutting in. "We only want you to continue what you're already doing. The Night Court cannot house all vampires, so we want to send those who are not able to return to Court."

Her eyes widened. "You want me to open the doors to Ibrida to allow these, individuals, into our society?" She said *individuals* as if she had really meant a different word. What was her issue with vampires? She was married to one for crying out loud! There was something off with this city, and I

wasn't so sure I wanted to send vampires to a place they would be hated.

Eleanor sighed. "Listen, Lenna. I'm sure you have questions for me, and I'd be happy to answer them, but I cannot put my people in harm's way by risking exposure. Any of those assassins could track a vampire back here and figure out how to enter Ibrida. It is simply too much to ask." She stood up and smoothed down her dress. "You are all welcome to stay, of course. I have already had rooms organized for your group." She turned around and left without a backward glance.

I looked around, slack jawed. Was that it?

The others seemed just as confused as me, so I stood up and stormed over to Zander, stopping before him with my hands on my hips. "I think you have some serious explaining to do, *brother*." Since arriving, his upbeat personality dulled, his entire bearing taking on a despondent air.

He nodded. "Okay, but not here," he whispered, just as his father made an appearance and introduced himself as Wyatt.

He gestured for us to follow him out of the room and through the wide, empty halls.

We trailed after him, Sofia and Ryder flanking me like bodyguards. Sofia was twirling one of her sai

around her fingers with ease, displaying her obvious aptitude.

Wyatt showed us to the guest wing, rows of bedrooms on either side of the hallway. There were enough for us all, especially since Zander, Summer, and Aidan already had their own residences.

The others went to put their belongings in their rooms, while Zander followed me into mine, closing the door behind him.

The room was sparse; the only furniture being a full-size bed, a small wooden dresser, and one side table. It would do for now.

I set down my bag and faced him, arms crossed, and a brow raised. "Explain."

He exhaled and nodded, sitting on the edge of my bed. "You might as well get comfortable; this is going to take a minute."

I joined him and waited, my frustration with him dwindling after everything I'd just witnessed.

"Okay, so I might not have been completely forthcoming with the social structure in Ibrida," Zander said, looking down at his clasped hands. "Mother started the community when she was pregnant with me, knowing she wouldn't be able to hide my existence in plain sight as she did with you." He tilted his head back to meet my eyes. "It started with

five other people that she'd discovered who also had hybrid children.

"We call them the Founders. Since my mother initiated the society, she became Regina. There are three women and two men on the Founders Council, and they all advise Mother. It definitely isn't a democracy the citizens have no say. They are typically so happy to have a *safe* place to live, they don't complain." He stopped and took a deep breath, wringing his fingers together nervously.

I placed a hand over his and softened my tone. "It's alright, Zander. Tell me whatever you're comfortable with but know that I wouldn't judge you or see you any differently." I had no idea what he was going to tell me, but it seemed personal. There was no other reason he would be so worried about telling me.

His eyes drifted lower along with his posture. "The Founders are all human and some of them became pregnant under... difficult circumstances. Because of this, they do not have the best opinion of vampires, and their biases transferred to the rest of the community." He pulled his feet underneath him. "They don't do anything horrible to the vampires, but they are given the jobs nobody else would take. They clean, they cook, they do the laundry, and a lot of other lower-paid positions.

They technically have the same rights, because everyone is ‘equal,’” he did air quotes over the word *equal*. “But they are definitely treated as lower class citizens.”

My blood began boiling with his confession. I would have thought in this age, we had overcome blatant racism and xenophobia, but apparently not. Tendrils of light twirled in angry spirals above me, exposing my emotional state. I tried to reign it in, knowing Zander wasn’t responsible for the way they treated the vampires, but he was complacent and that was just as bad. Though, I still couldn’t figure out how he could sit idly by while his own father was treated that way.

Zander scratched the back of his head, still refusing to meet my gaze. “Mother treats me the way she does mostly because I’m a huge disappointment to her. She looks at me and sees her ultimate failure because I didn’t inherit her gifts. She thought she had created the ultimate spawn, half-vampire, half assassin. Joke was on her when I came out without a speck of healing ability.” He laughed mirthlessly.

Pity swirled in my chest, dissipating the tendrils of light. “I’m so sorry you had to grow up dealing with that. What about your dad? Why didn’t he stop her from treating you like that?”

He finally lifted his head, his expression a bit

shocked. What had he expected me to do? Laugh at him?

He cleared his throat. "He tried for a while, but she doesn't treat him all that better than she does me. He is basically a glorified butler, and another constant reminder of her reproductive shortcomings. Once he realized we were both better off without him protecting me, he stopped trying."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Why haven't the vampires all come together and put a stop to this?"

He shrugged. "There aren't as many as you think there are. Most of the hybrids weren't brought here as children, so they didn't bring their vampire parent with them." He suddenly smiled genuinely. "There is an elderly woman who came here about seven years or so ago, and everyone calls her Grandma. She insists on it actually. I'm not sure how old she really is. Hybrids tend to age somewhere in between the pace of humans and vampires. So, instead of living an average of two-hundred years, we live to about one hundred and fifty I guess."

That elderly woman was likely the only person Zander felt a family bond with, and that made me profoundly sad for him. His odd behavior toward me suddenly made a lot more sense. He had absolutely no idea how to act around family. Though, I

wasn't sure I was that much better since my attempted relationship with my aunt was a disaster of epic proportions.

"Do I need to be worried about Eleanor?" I asked, cautiously. I didn't want to ask him to pick sides, only warn me if she was up to no good.

He hesitated, taking the time to think over his answer. "I don't think she would ever harm you, if that's what you're asking. She never physically hurt me she prefers to cause wounds that cannot be seen." He paused, smoothing out his shirt. "She might try to use your gift in some way. Maybe try to convince you to stay and be some sort of mascot for us. I don't have any idea what goes on through her head honestly."

Zander got to his feet. "I really appreciate you listening and not making this weird. It's nice to have family that I can talk to, but... I think that's as much as I can handle for tonight." He glanced at the door, and I chuckled.

"Don't worry about it, go get some sleep." He took a step before halting and twisting back around to give me a very awkward hug. He then hurried out the word without another word.



I spent the next thirty minutes trying to calm my mind, but it was impossible. My thoughts were racing with the news of how the vampires were being treated in Ibrida. How my *mother* was responsible for the way others behaved toward them. Then, there were all the vampires and hybrids currently being murdered daily in the outside world.

I also couldn't stop worrying about Sofia and her baby, and what she was planning to do during the upcoming war. There was also the small inconvenience of the traitor among our group, who I still didn't know the identity of. And finally, I had no idea what to do about the soul bond with Luka. Needless to say, my emotional state was all over the place.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and felt a crumpled piece of paper inside one of them. Remembering Joe's earlier delivery, I pulled it out and rolled it out, smoothing the wrinkles enough to make out Max's elegant scroll.

Dearest Solnyshka,

I hope your travels are going well. I'm afraid I must bring you bad news. The situation with the vampires is escalating. Thirty vampires were murdered over the weekend, and the news stations have stopped reporting on them. My queen is aware of the goings-on and has yet to make a decision. It seems she is stalling, and I do not

know why. I have tried to contact Lukalian, but he hasn't responded. Please impress upon him the urgency of his return. He must show support during these trying times and convince the queen it is time to intervene. I wish you all the best and hope to see you soon.

-M.

And now I had another thing to worry about.

I paced around the room before finally gathering my nerve and heading out the door. I needed to find Quinn and ask him to help sooth my mind, at least for tonight.

I made my way down the hall to where I thought I remembered Quinn entering and stopped outside the door. There were muffled grunting and rough noises emanating from inside the room, and my heart leapt through my chest.

I materialized a dagger and yanked open the door, coming to a screeching halt at the scene in front of me.

Quinn and Trey were completely nude and locked in a *very* compromising position. I stood there frozen with my mouth hanging open, before I regained movement of my limbs and immediately spun around, heat creeping up my neck. "I am so sorry," I said, before running out the door and slamming it shut behind me.

I leaned against the wall, my pulse pounding as I

tried to mentally erase the image of their writhing bodies from my brain. It didn't work.

The door sprang open, and Quinn appeared, clutching a sheet around his waist. "Hello, love. What are you doing barging into people's rooms after midnight?"

I knew he was teasing, but he was absolutely right. I definitely should have knocked first.

His brows suddenly furrowed, and he leaned forward, inhaling. His smile turned wicked and horror washed over me.

Of course he would know how that affected me. Arousal was an emotion after all.

He chuckled, picking up a lock of my hair and twirling it between his fingers. "Did you want to join us, love? Seems like you have some frustration to work off."

I shook my head, my hair falling through his grasp. "Uh.. No, thank you. That's not why I came." God, this was humiliating. "I was just feeling emotional and wanted you to help me sort it out."

"Ahh, I see," he said, the sheet slipping down a few inches. "I'm a little busy right now, but I'd be happy to sort you out after, depending on how tired I am."

Trey's face appeared in the crack of the door. "Sorry Lenna, but you can't join in."

I made a mock affronted expression. “What, not interested in my lady parts?”

“That isn’t it at all,” Trey said, inching open the door. “I love hearts, not parts, Lenna. I just don’t feel like getting my ass handed to me by Luka if I lay a finger on you in any way that is more than friendly.”

“Ahh, I see.” I took a step back and pointed over my shoulder. “I’ll let you two get back to... that.”

Their laughs echoed down the hallway, following me back into my room. Where I stayed for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LENNA



A loud and persistent knocking woke me the following morning.

Groaning, I turned over and pulled the blanket above my head as if that had the power to send away whoever was at the door. I had been up until the light began creeping along the horizon and my mind was finally able to stop working enough to allow my dreams to pull me under. From the look of the sky through my windows, not much time had passed.

The banging continued, and I flung off the covers.

“Just a minute!” I pulled on a pair of black jeans and a t-shirt before trudging to the door, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

I tugged open the door to Wyatt’s blank face. Confusion rose at his appearance, and it must have

been clear, because he cleared his throat and explained.

“I have come to collect you for a family breakfast.”

My mind must not be working yet because I could have sworn he just said a *family breakfast*. “Um... what?”

He flicked a piece of invisible lint off his suit jacket. “Your mother would like to have breakfast with you and Zander.” His voice was monotone, and after Zander’s explanation the night before, I wondered if he felt acting without emotion was easier than whatever punishment Eleanor decided was suitable.

“Just give me one minute,” I said, closing the door in his face and hurrying over to my bag.

Pulling out a pen and paper, I scribbled down a note for Sofia to use her ability to see through things to spy on the others. It was probably ethically wrong, but we needed to figure out who was double-crossing us and quickly.

I exited my room and followed him down the hall, stopping at Sofia’s room to slip the note under her door before continuing onward. If Wyatt had an opinion, he didn’t voice it, preferring to walk through the manor in silence.

He brought me to a dining room with a massive

oak table in the middle, large enough to comfortably seat twenty guests. What kind of life were they living here, while innocent hybrids and vampires were getting slaughtered outside their walls?

The sight of it infuriated me, wisps of light drifting upward in response to my anger. I realized pretty quickly, with the help of Evelyn, that this particular gift was connected strongly to rage. Anytime I was more than a little frustrated, the tendrils of light appeared. No amount of willing them away helped, short of calming my ire.

Eleanor's eyes widened; her gaze fixated on the wisps.

Splendid. Just what I needed.

She was positioned at the head of the table, Zander already seated on her left. There was an empty place setting across from my brother, which I assumed must be for me.

Eleanor smiled; her face lit up in excitement as she waved me over. "Please come in and sit down. I thought it would be nice for us all to eat together." She passed a quick glance at Zander. "I understand you've already had time to get to know your brother, but we still haven't spoken under more casual circumstances."

I plopped down in the chair, covering my face as

a yawn came over me, too tired to offer a snide remark.

Her face stiffened but she simply broadened her grin and gestured over my shoulder.

Before I could twist in my seat to look behind me, five people entered the room carrying covered dishes. They silently placed them around our plates before exiting the room. From their unusual-colored hair and gleaming eyes, I could tell they were vampires, which only solidified the obvious class system in this city.

My hands clenched into fists as I tried to keep my composure, and I knew without looking that my light was acting up. That knowledge was backed up by Eleanor's astonished expression.

I wanted to punch her.

Would I go to Hell for punching my own mother? I found I couldn't quite bring myself to care. She was at best complacent, and at worst an abuser. They were little more than servants, and it boiled my blood. Where were my vampires and what in the world were they thinking seeing this? I made a mental note to find them later and ask.

"So," Eleanor said, bringing me from my thoughts. "Did you have any hobbies growing up with Alexei?"

I raised a brow. "Hobbies?"

“Yes. What did you like to do with your time,” she said, speaking as if to an invalid.

I narrowed my eyes. “I know what the word means, I simply didn’t understand why you asked.”

She seemed confused. “I would like to get to know my daughter.” She placed avocado and scrambled eggs on a slice of toast, alongside a slice of grapefruit and a glass of fresh orange juice. She might be a terrible person, but she had great taste for breakfast.

I poured myself a mug of coffee and brought it to my face, closing my eyes as I inhaled the nutty aroma. I calmed my racing pulse and took a sip of the delicious drink, stopping myself before I let out a moan that would have made this strange meal even more awkward.

Opening my eyes, I stared Eleanor right in the face. “If you wanted to get to know me, you had the last twenty-three years to do it. Instead, you abandoned me to a life of secrecy and isolation, so forgive me if I find it hard to believe you suddenly decided to care.”

Zander’s lips twitched, and he quickly schooled his expression, tossing a quick glance in Eleanor’s direction.

She wasn’t giving him any attention however, not with all of her focus trained on me. I was beginning

to hate that icy shade of blue with each passing moment.

She picked up a napkin and wiped the corners of her mouth before setting it down and leaning back in her seat. "I suppose I deserved that."

Before I had a chance to reply, she continued. "I'm sure you have a lot to get off your chest, and there is no better time than the present." She straightened and intertwined her fingers on her lap. "I will allow you to air your grievances this once, Lenna, but then we put it all behind us and focus on more important matters."

More. Important. Matters?

My blood boiled and I didn't bother even attempting to stop the flames of light shooting of my body. "Your audacity is astounding," I sneered. "For you to believe you have the right to dictate to me is, quite frankly, laughable. You relinquished any right to command me to do anything the moment you bailed on me and my father." My voice steadily rising as I lost control of my temper. "I am no longer a child, nor am I one of your subjects, so do not believe for one moment that you have a claim on me or my actions."

"I am your mother and the Regina, you will not speak to me with that tone," she snapped, pushing back her chair as she stood.

I leapt to my feet and slammed a hand on the table, a loud crack reverberating from the wood beneath my fingers. “You are a coward, and I will not forget your actions to myself, nor to the vampires in this city. Do not think I am blind to what is going on here.” My hands trembled with the force of my wrath, my light going haywire around me. “I will free them from their servitude to you, mark my words.”

I took a deep breath, pushing aside my anger and meeting her gaze, wondering if my mismatched eyes were as icy as hers. “I do owe you my thanks however, for not subjecting me to your obviously substandard parental abilities.” I twisted around and left the room, banging the door shut behind me.



I stomped all the way to Sofia’s room, banging on the door once before turning the knob. Finding it unlocked, I opened it to see everyone else already inside.

I came to a halt at the scene displayed in front of me.

There were weapons covering every inch of their bodies, their expressions turning from fierce to

relieved at my entrance, and the whispering cutting off abruptly.

I locked the door behind me and moved forward. “What’s going on in here?”

Luka sped forward and took my face between his hands, turning me side to side, looking for injuries. They looked like they were preparing for war, and possibly a rescue mission if their relief at seeing me was any indication.

I pulled Luka’s hands off my face and stepped around him as Sofia began explaining. I was still too annoyed with him to accept his gentle touch.

“None of us could find you this morning, and the staff refused to answer any of our questions, so we met here to decide what to do.” She paused to take a breath and rub her protruding belly. “It got weirder when we couldn’t find Zander anywhere either, so we started thinking he might have been involved the whole time. Well, actually everyone immediately suspected him.”

I snorted and ran a hand through my hair. “I just came from the world’s worst family breakfast.” Hunger gnawed at my belly when I noticed a protein bar poking out of Sofia’s bag. I yanked it out and unwrapped it before shoving it in my mouth. “You weren’t going to eat that were you?”

She scrunched her nose. “I’m sure as fuck not going to now.”

I sank to the floor and stuck out my tongue. “So, what was the plan?”

Nikita grinned, her fangs descending. “Kill everyone who gets in our way.” Of course it was. Never piss off a group of assassins and vampire warriors. My heart swelled at their worry for my wellbeing, and I grinned, suddenly feeling shy.

“Well, thanks, but I don’t think that’s necessary.” Then I realized that might not be true. “Actually, there is a chance we’ll need to fight our way out.”

“Uh oh,” Luka groaned, slapping a hand over his head. “Who did you stab this time?”

I opened my mouth, affronted. “I am simply offended you would think I’d do such a thing.”

The others chuckled and Luka grinned widely. “It does seem to be your move.”

“No, fang man. That’s just reserved for you.”

My phone went off in my pocket, and I pulled it out, seeing a video chat request from Brielle. Brows furrowed, I accepted the call and held out the screen so everyone could see.

Brielle’s sweaty face appeared on the camera. “I have some news.” She turned the camera around to face the room, which looked suspiciously like the dungeons behind the Guild, but I knew for a fact

they were destroyed. I'd burned them to the ground almost a year ago, along with Papa's body.

A knife twisted in my chest, but I ignored it as usual.

There was a black-haired man tied down to a chair, blood dripping down a broken nose as Hailey's scowling face popped up. She pulled back her fist and snapped it forward, making contact with his face.

He grunted and pressed his lips together, trying not to scream.

"Am I the only one curious why they are beating a man who can't defend himself?" Ryder asked, narrowing his eyes at the phone. It took me a moment to realize that some people might not be so okay with torture, which really hammered home how different my life had become since entering the Guild. My moral compass was severely damaged.

The others didn't appear to be all that concerned, the vampires seemed somewhat bored, and Quinn was typing away on his phone. Well, at least it wasn't just me. Kasai leaned into Sofia and whispered something in her ear.

If I knew her, it was likely some snide remark about Ryder being too soft-hearted.

"Hey Brielle," I said, unable to prevent the lopsided smile from spreading over my face as she

reprimanded Hailey for hitting the man too hard. “Wanna bring the rest of us up to speed?”

“Yeah, sorry,” she said, coming back into view. “As you know, we’ve been going through our ranks, disposing of any members who express even a shred of support for the Benefactor. Because of this, there are elite members defecting and going rogue. I have no doubt they joined up with the Benefactor.”

She paused and grimaced when the man let out a pained shout.

“Okay, nothing we didn’t expect,” I said, sitting down on the bed and placing the phone on the side table so we could all see. My hand had gone numb from holding up the device for so long. “Is he one of the supporters?”

She nodded. “Yes, but that’s not all.”

“Just spit it out already, Bri,” Sofia said, exasperated. I noticed her patience had lessened since becoming pregnant. She blamed it on the hormones. Let’s be real, that was just Sofia.

“This lovely gentleman we’re interrogating is only one out of many we have down here. A few of them have spun interesting stories. It turns out the vampires that have been dropping dead have all been murdered by poison. The rogue elite members are taking out any vampires the Benefactor targets.”

She looked over the phone and raised a brow at

Hailey. "Is he dead? How are we supposed to interrogate him if he's dead?"

"What?" Came Hailey's voice from the background. "He wasn't going to tell us shit, and now I don't need to listen to his pathetic whimpering."

I laughed. Nothing had changed since we'd left.

Kasai grinned. "I think I would like this female." I had no doubt they would become fast friends. Their personalities were very similar, though sometimes that would have the opposite effect.

Ryder snorted. "Oh yeah, you two would get along perfectly." He seemed almost annoyed by that prospect and I wondered why.

"Lenna," Brielle said, bringing my attention back to the phone. "We're doing what we can from this side, but we are outmanned and outgunned. We need you to come back home."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LENNA



A knock sounded at the door, and everyone reached for their weapons, Luka signalling when they were ready. I opened it to Zander's face smiling somewhat shyly at me.

"Hey," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I might have overheard your conversation, though anyone passing by the door would. You lot aren't the quietest bunch around."

Luka sighed. "I'm assuming you have a point?"

"Yes, Prince. Indeed I do." He waved at Brielle through the phone, who raised a brow and averted her gaze back to Hailey, who was wrapping the dead elite member in a plastic bag. "I'm sure after that breakfast from Hell, you think there aren't options for you here, but you'd be wrong. Not everyone is loyal to my mother."

I was grateful he didn't say *our*. That woman would never be my mother.

"Are you referring to the vampires?" Trey asked as he twisted his stark, white hair into intricate braids.

"In part, but not completely. There are humans and hybrids who disagree with the treatment of vampires, and place their loyalties to me, hoping for a better future. They know that I don't agree with Mother's methods."

"And how precisely can these rebels help?" Luka asked, his arm brushing mine, sending tingles across my skin. I hated how much I wanted his touch.

He fiddled with his watch. "They aren't fighters, but they can help in other ways. They can carry messages and hide people." He gestured to Sofia. "I have no intention of attempting to take away your choice or anything, but if you decide you don't want to participate physically in the war, you can stay here. Safe. Violet as well."

Sofia glanced at me and I raised a brow as if to say *your call*. She ran a hand through her thick, brown locks, her lips scrunching. "It's not that I don't want to fight, because I do. I'm just not sure how much I can really contribute." She looked down at her belly and caressed it.

"It's not the worst idea," Nikita added, crossing

her arms and giving Zander a glare. “But if she stays here and something happens to her...”

“I give you my word, no harm will befall her. I will discreetly check in with them if they both decide to stay,” Zander hurried to say.

If someone had asked me just days ago to trust Sofia and Violet with Zander, I would never have considered it. But after being subjected to Eleanor’s parental skills, I had a much clearer understanding of his childhood, and how much he didn’t want to end up like her. If these rebels could be trusted, that would be perfect for them.

“Okay,” Sofia said, crossing her legs. “That settles it. I’ll stay behind with Violet, if that’s what you guys decide,” she said to Kasai, who nodded. “But what about the rest of you? We are hilariously short on allies.”

“Actually,” Kasai said, fidgeting with her sleeve. “Something has been nagging my mind since you guys told me about Faerie. What if I sneak through a portal and try to find people to help us from there? Just like there are rebels here, there must be those who don’t follow the current reign in the other realm as well. They might be willing to fight for us.”

Trey looked impressed. “It would be incredibly dangerous, especially since you are unfamiliar with the terrain, the residents, and the creatures. But if

you pull it off and manage to find help, that could turn the tides.”

“Especially with us being entirely outnumbered,” Nikita cut in and clapped her hands together. “I love it! Perhaps I should join you, those Faerie creatures were the only excitement I’ve had in a while. I’m in the mood to stab things.”

Luka let out a laugh. “Now you sound like Lenna.”

I glowered at him. “And you wonder why I like to stab you.”

“In any case,” Luka continued, a grin still plastered on his face. “You can’t go traipsing through Faerie, because we are due at the Night Court. Mother has made it abundantly clear we are to return immediately.”

Nikita groaned, stood up. “Fine. I’ll go pack.” She pulled Trey to his feet and start toward the door before turning around. “When do we leave?”

“At first light,” Luka replied, and they departed.

“Do you think she would help us?” I asked, wondering why the queen hadn’t already dispatched her fighters to deal with the situation.

He rubbed his forehead. “It appears that I’m going to have to make her.”

“So I guess we are all splitting up, then,” I said, a sense of dread coming over me at the thought of

being apart from everyone. This had been the first time I'd ever experience a sense of family outside of Papa and Max, and I didn't want to lose it. It would also be the first time being separated from Luka since our fight. "Okay, so Sofia and Violet are going to stay here with the rebels." Sofia and Kasai nodded. "I know you are an excellent fighter, but it doesn't sit right with me to send you by yourself to Faerie. Maybe I should go with you." I offered.

Kasai opened her mouth to respond, but Ryder beat her to it. "I was actually thinking I should go with Kasai," he said, ignoring the look of utter astonishment on Kasai's face. "You should probably go to the Night Court and help petition the Queen's help. You can even speak on behalf of Ibrida as their heir."

I scoffed. "I have no interest in being their heir." The only thing I wanted to do in this city was to help the vampires. Once that was done, Zander was welcome to inherit the throne.

Ryder grinned evilly. "They don't know that... do they?"

"I think it's an excellent idea," Luka said, pulling gently on a lock of my hair. "I can't wait to see you go toe to toe with the Queen."

I rolled my eyes, before Brielle cut in. "So, who is going to come back here? We still need your help."

"Why don't we all try to get our alliances and

then meet up at the Guild to strategize the next move? I don't think we can really trust technology past this call, and someone could intercept my hawks." I massaged my temples as I thought about what lay ahead of us.

She nodded. "Alright. Good luck to you all, and we'll see you soon." She disconnected the call, and I slipped my phone back into my pocket.

Sofia suddenly jumped to her feet and ran at Quinn, her face murderous.

I intercepted her, throwing my arms up to halt her movements. "What's going on, Sof?"

She glared daggers through me at Quinn, oblivious that he couldn't see through me like she could. I wasn't sure I liked having her looking through my body. It was weird.

I glanced at Quinn over my shoulder and he stood stock-still, his eyes wide. He looked like a deer in headlights. A guilty deer.

"You goddamn traitor!" Sofia screamed, trying to get around me.

I froze. "What did you just say?"

Luka, Ryder, and Kasai all stood tense around us; their bodies poised for a fight.

"You know how you asked me to find out how our location has been leaked so many times?" Sofia said before she backed up and pointed an accusatory

finger at Quinn. "Well, he's been the one communicating with elite members!"

His hands lift, a phone clutched in one of them as he took a step back. "I haven't. Lenna, I swear."

"Tell her the truth, you coward!" Sofia screamed, ripping her sai from their sheaths.

He flinched, his face taking on a pained expression.

"Quinn," I said cautiously, activating my healing in case a fight broke out. "What is she talking about?"

He let out a breath, his shoulders dropping. "It's not what you think."

"I don't think anything, Quinn. I just know that something happened, and I'd like to hear it from you."

"Just promise me you won't overreact," he pleaded.

I threw my hands in the air. "For crying out loud, Quinn, just tell me..."

"I've been speaking with Cade," he interjected, and the rest of my words caught in my throat.

My eyebrows skyrocketed.

Of all the things that flew through my mind, that was *definitely* not on the list.

Ryder leaned in and whispered into Kasai's ear, likely explaining who Cade was.

"Cade?" I asked, my voice deathly low and steady.

Ryder winced. "Oh shit."

When I was angry, my light reacted weirdly and my tone rose uncontrollably, my voice anything but steady. But now? Now I was beyond angry. I was downright livid, and my body entered my killing calm. My muscles were tightly coiled and ready for action. My energy hummed in anticipation; my gaze fixed solely on him.

"Like I said, it isn't what you think," he said, backing up another step and keeping his voice low and soothing.

I felt a brush of his energy caress my mind, making an attempt to calm my ire. I shook it off and growled at him. "Don't you dare use your gift on me!"

"I'm sorry, but I feel what's going through your mind and I can't help it!" He replied, and I knew he was right, but I didn't care.

I was at my wits end. This was just one step too far. I couldn't deal with this betrayal on top of the innocents being slaughtered outside, the vampires being mistreated in Ibrida, the lack of allies we had for this war, and the overall feeling of helplessness.

It. Was. Too. Much.

"Fuck!" I screamed, turning around and launching ball after ball of light into the wall. When I finally finished, my chest heaving, there

was nothing left of the wall save for charred embers.

I turned back around to everyone's shocked faces. "What?"

"Lenna," Quinn interjected, taking a hesitant step forward. "I promise you that I haven't given him any details. I just get in touch with him every few days to see if he's okay. He is my *best friend*, Lenna. It isn't that easy to just let it go. I've known him for years."

I should have considered that Quinn wouldn't be able to drop Cade like he was nothing. I was almost embarrassed to admit to myself that the thought hadn't even crossed my mind.

I squeezed my eyes shut, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Quinn, taking that as a step forward, continued more confidently, "I'll show you the messages between us if you want. There are no pertinent details in there, but we have spoken a few times over the phone. I suppose it's possible he had me tracked."

My heart dropped to my stomach at the implication of what he was saying. "Quinn, you know that means he had you attacked, right? He sent those assassins after all of us. For all we know, those creatures could have been connected to the Guild somehow as well. You could have been killed just as easily as the rest of us."

His eyes fell to the floor and he nodded. "That did occur to me, yes."

"So why didn't you come forward?" I asked, my tone softer.

He shrugged. "I guess I didn't want it to be true, so denying it was easier." He lowered himself into a chair and covered his face with his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry, love."

All the fight left out of me and I approached him, sinking down to my knees. "Quinn," I said, pulling his hands away and looking into his emerald orbs. "You are kind, and you are loyal. I'm sure you never suspected Cade would ever do that to you."

He held onto my hands like a lifeline. "He loved you too, Lenna. I didn't think he would ever try to harm you either."

I felt Luka tense behind me, and I let out a sigh. "It doesn't really matter at this point. Take out the SIM card and battery from your phone, but don't throw them away. We might need to make contact with him in the future. There is a chance that we can get to the Benefactor through him."

Quinn did as I asked, and I noticed a grin on Luka's face.

"What?" I asked, perplexed at his mood.

"Was I totally imagining it, or did you just say

fuck?” Luka asked, amusement shining in his honey-toned eyes.

“Yup, she totally did,” Ryder replied, clapping Luka on the shoulder. “I think we’re a bad influence on her.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. “Sometimes, there is simply no better alternative.”

I got to my feet. “Let’s pack now and get some sleep, because we’ll be heading out first thing in the morning.” I patted Quinn’s knee. “And you’ll come with us to the Night Court.” Could someone die from emotional exhaustion? Because, it sure felt like I could drop at any moment.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KASAI



Violet was surprisingly okay with being left behind. “That’s alright, Sai. I know I’m not a fighter, and I’d just be a distraction for you.” She shrugged her bag onto her shoulders and gave me a sly smile. “Especially if I get more of that ice cream from when we first arrived. That would *definitely* make the separation easier.”

I laughed and gave her the rest of my cash, hoping it’d last her until I could return. I pulled her into a hug, squeezing lightly before letting go, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Alright,” Zander said, beckoning her over. “We should get a move on before Mother’s spies discover us.”

Sofia was standing beside him, after giving Lenna a teary-eyed goodbye as she departed for the Night

Court an hour earlier. I wondered what it might be like to have someone who cared that much about you. A real friend.

Violet gave a last wave, and they walked away, my eyes following until I could no longer make out Violet's form in the distance.

Ryder shuffled outside, a hand wiping the sleep from his eye as he yawned. "Morning," he grunted, his shirt slipping up and exposing the toned muscles of his abdomen. He saw me looking and smirked, causing heat to rise to my face.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked, ignoring my reaction to his body and calling to that pebble of power deep within me that I needed to open the portal.

He nodded and swung his bag onto his back and adjusted the straps. "Let's do this."

I closed my eyes, coaxing the kernel forward, encouraging it to exit through my palm and expand.

Ryder's eyes widened as the tiny speck enlarged, different shades of blue swirling around, until the portal was large enough for us both to enter comfortably.

The swirling colors halted and moved to thicken the rim of the portal, and the middle cleared, giving us a view of the landscape. All I could see was white.

"Shit sticks," I said, pointing to the snow. "That's going to be hell to navigate."

Ryder groaned and we both glanced down at our clothes.

It was the middle of autumn, and our clothing matched the season. At least we both had boots on, but still. I didn't even own a coat. This was going to be the donkey's pits.

Ryder cursed. "I didn't bring any winter clothes with me, did you?"

"Nope," I said, popping the *p*.

He sighed. "There's nothing to do about it now, we might as well just go through."

I nodded and led the way, my hands slightly shaking with the anticipation of entering the gateway for the first time.



There was normal cold, and there was being in the middle of a fucking blizzard, wearing hilariously inappropriate attire cold.

We'd been trudging through the snow for what felt like hours, my clothing iced over and stiff, my feet numb. The snow had begun to burn my skin and I knew something bad would happen if we didn't find shelter soon.

Ryder was no better off. To my absolute shock,

he hadn't complained once. Sure, the sounds he made every once in a while could be considered complaining, but not one negative comment exited his frustratingly perfect lips. Lips, I needed to tell myself over and over, that I didn't want to taste.

He'd started off happily singing, disregarding my request to stop, and as the hours went by, his expression soured along with his mood. He'd stopped asking me ridiculous questions like *If you could be any food, what would it be?* a while ago. I mean... what kind of question is that? What use would I have being a food?

A building came finally came into view and I blinked, hoping it wasn't an illusion.

I nudged Ryder with my elbow. "D... do you see th... that house?" My voice quivered as fiercely as my body shivered. The cold was an absolute thundercunt. The minute the war was over I was moving to the tropics.

He squinted his eyes. "S... see what?" His human eyesight wasn't as strong as mine, so it was still possible the structure was real.

After a few more moments, Ryder stopped, and a grin spread over his face. "I s... see it!"

It was a single-storey building, made out of beige stone, smoke billowing out of the chimney. Hope

soared in my chest at the sight. Someone had to be home.

As we neared the house, noises from within reached my ears and I strained them to hear more clearly. From all the different voices, it seemed like there were a lot of people inside.

“Come on!” Ryder said, grabbing my hand and pulling me forward. “The w... warmth is c... calling.”

We reached the front door and he banged on it, loudly.

Nobody answered.

He lifted his hand to knock again, when I waved it aside and pushed open the door and was immediately met with a mixture of aromas and sounds.

Inside was utter chaos on my advanced senses.

It most definitely wasn't a regular house. It looked like a medieval tavern with wooden tables and benches to sit on. Torches lined the walls, and a roaring fire filled the fireplace in the corner.

Men and women filled the room, talking boisterously, some were even singing. There was a bar and kitchen area on the far side of the room, opposite the door. Behind the bar stood an absolutely giant man, taller than Ryder, with rippling muscles and two curved horns growing out the top of his head.

I stepped inside and narrowly missed being barreled into by something small.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going,” a feminine voice snapped.

I focused on what almost hit me and my mouth dropped open.

She was about a foot tall with purple hair down to her waist, wearing a tiny green dress. Her wings were the same shade of eggplant as her hair, but they glittered. Without giving me a chance to respond, she fluttered her wings and readjusted the tray of wooden cups in her hands that I would bet my left tit were full of beer.

“This is incredible,” Ryder murmured into my ear, the excitement in his voice evident even through his whisper. “But what’s the plan?”

I rubbed my hands together, trying to bring some semblance of warmth back into them as I thought through our options. “Well,” I said, leaning into his side so as not to be too obvious. “We need to get a feel for what’s going on in this realm and determine who to approach for an alliance.”

He nodded and clapped his hands together. “Perfect. We’ll get food and drinks and try to blend in with the crowd.” He pulled out his wallet. “I have a pretty distinct feeling they don’t accept our cash or credit cards here. Also, what’s the deal with the medieval vibe? Is this realm not advanced in technology?”

I turned to him and raised a brow. "How exactly do you think I'd have the answer to that?"

He chuckled and nudged me forward. "Come on cranky pants, let's talk to the barkeep and see what the deal is." Maybe we'd be able to barter our technology with them.

The horned male turned his attention to us as we neared the bar, and he ambled closer, examining us top to bottom. I wanted to squirm under the attention.

"We don't want any trouble with your kind," he said, his voice gravely. He didn't give an aggressive appearance, more like a subdued protective one. And he clearly didn't like whatever *kind* he thought we were.

Movement out of the corner of my eye had me angling my body to discreetly face the room. I didn't like having my back to so many unknown people.

A hooded man sat at a table with two other people, all three of them with their heads bowed together, speaking quietly. A strange sensation pierced my chest as I stared at him, and I rubbed the spot before turning back to the bar.

Ryder smiled widely and raised his hands. "It's a great thing we aren't looking for trouble. We're just hoping to warm up before the storm decides it

wants to keep our toes as souvenirs. A hot meal and a few drinks wouldn't hurt either."

The barkeep inhaled and his eyes widened. "What are you? You are not the High Fae you appear to be."

Did he just... sniff us?

"You should really ask a lady permission before sniffing her," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "That isn't very polite."

He snapped back like he'd been slapped, and a blush crept up his neck. "My apologies, Lady..."

I waited a moment, deliberating if telling him my name would raise alarms, but it didn't seem like anyone looking for me knew it. That's what our intelligence suggested. In any case, I highly doubted a barkeep from this tavern in the middle of nowhere would know who I was. "Kasai."

He bowed his head. "Lady Kasai."

I shook my head and said firmly, "Just Kasai."

Ryder snickered.

"My name is Sanas, Chief of Clan Kulond." His eyes flickered to Ryder. "And your companion is?"

"Ryder," he said, sticking out his hand.

"So," Sanas said, picking up a rag and wiping the bar down. "How can I help you?"

"Actually," I said, leaning forward. "Is this just a

tavern, or do you also have guest rooms for rent? We really don't want to go back out in this weather."

Sanas chuckled and nodded. "We have one room available for twenty crowns. A cup of mead or cider is three crowns, and a meal of stew and bread is five crowns. So, you'll need to pay thirty-six crowns for the both of you."

"So, here's the deal." Ryder said, rubbing the back of his neck. "We don't actually have any money to pay you with. Can we possibly do a trade?"

Sansa looked at us in disbelief before throwing back in his and laughing hysterically.

"It wasn't that funny," I grumbled, raising a brow to Ryder, who shrugged.

After an obnoxiously long time, he finally calmed himself down. "The only way anyone eats here for free is if they can win a clash."

"What's that?" Ryder asked, leaning his elbows on the bar.

"A clash is a battle between two opponents that are chosen by the challenged side." He pointed to his chest. "If you want to fight to sleep and eat here for free, you challenge my Clan."

Sanas looked Ryder over. "You might be larger than the average fae, but we are trolls. You are about the size of our smallest adults."

Ryder met my gaze and grinned. “Are you down?”

I shrugged. “Why not?” I might as well teach these ass crackers a lesson for underestimating us.

Sanas laughed again, confident it wouldn’t be possible for either of us to win, and bellowed out, “Clash! Clash! Clash!”

The crowd cheered and they all got to their feet, dragging tables, benches, and chairs to the sides of the room, clearing a space in the middle.

Sanas stepped into the empty circle and pointed toward us. “These two have challenged Clan Kulond to a clash.” Cheers erupted from around the room, my eyes catching on the hooded figure. He was still seated at the table in the corner, his companions huddled around him.

“Lograth!” He shouted. “Will you accept this challenge on behalf of Clan Kulond?”

A male only slightly shorter than Sanas stepped forward, and my mouth dried. He might be shorter than Sanas, but he was built like a truck, and his skin looked as hard as stone. On top of his black hair sat horns that were filed down into sharp points.

I would need to avoid those at all costs. He likely rammed into his opponents to impale them on his horns. A bit silly if you asked me. It left the rest of

his head and neck exposed to attack. I filed away that information in case I was chosen.

“Do you think you could take him?” I murmured into Ryder’s ear.

“Hell yeah,” He said, cracking his knuckles. “He will underestimate us and won’t be expecting my gift. Easy peasy.”

“I accept,” Lograth growled, rolling his shoulders, aggression rolling off him in droves.

“And who do you choose to battle?” Sanas asked, raising his voice to allow everyone in the tavern to hear.

I knew what would happen the moment Lograth’s eyes met mine, a wicked gleam shining through.

He pointed a meaty finger in my direction. “I choose her.”

Ryder clapped a hand on my back. “You got this. This is a walk in the park for you.”

I was used to fighting unknown opponents. Ahriman was always trying to find the perfect combatant for me, determined to find someone who I couldn’t best. I wasn’t sure if he wanted me to get better or wanted to break me. He might not have known either.

“What are the rules?” I asked, stepping forward and joining the males in the center.

“Death or submission,” Sanas explained. “But you can decide not to accept the submission of your opponent.”

I had a pretty good feeling this fuck waffle wouldn’t give me the mercy of a submission, so I wasn’t going to give him the curtesy either. I sure as shit didn’t do it in the ring. Ahriman would have slapped me silly if I tried to leave one of them alive.

“Wait,” I said, gesturing for Sanas to come close. “I want something else if I win.”

He scoffed. “And what’s that?”

“A favor.”

“What kind of favor?” he asked, amusement littering his tone.

“That’s for you to find out after I win,” I said, raising a brow. “So, what’ll it be big guy?”

He grinned. “Agreed. Room and board, and one favor to be determined after the clash.”

The lights from the torches cast the room in a soft glow, the shadows creeping along the sidelines as I rolled my shoulders in preparation.

Bitches get ready. I was about to *dominate*.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LENNA



“Lenna,” Quinn said, taking the seat beside me. “I’m going to take a wild guess that your level of terror is because you’ve never flown before?”

Luka had brought us to an airfield where his private jet waited to take us on the twelve-hour flight to Moscow, Russia.

From the moment I’d stepped foot on the plane, my body seized up, my flight or fight reflex broken. Dread washed over me in waves, and I sat clutching the sides of the seat as if they would somehow save me from danger.

I tried not to make it abundantly obvious that I was nervous, but of course, Quinn figured it out.

Sometimes I really hated his gift.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ve flown plenty of times... with my own wings.”

He chuckled, pulling my hand from the seat and intertwining our fingers, his gift brushing against my mind. A sudden calmness pushed away the panic, and my muscles relaxed.

I was grateful for the assist, but my earlier frustration with him didn’t ebb. And by the clenching of his jaw, he could tell. “Cade was partially responsible for my father’s death, Quinn,” I said, trying not to let the anger enter my voice, while also thankful he wasn’t trying to change that part of my emotions. “Because of him, my father was taken and tortured. For months.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I know, and I understand how you feel, believe me. I tried to forget him, but it isn’t easy leaving behind someone you’ve known for so long. Someone who had your back through so much.” He opened his eyes and turned to me. “Feeling each and every emotion that goes through people doesn’t sound like a big deal but think of it this way.” He angled his body to face mine.

“I can literally feel every single time someone is angry with me, is turned on by me, or is happy with me. Any time someone judges me or is disappointed in me.” He paused, a tear falling down his cheek, and

I felt a knife twist in my chest. “Cade was never judgmental, was never disappointed and was never angry with me. Yes, there were a few instances where he was a little annoyed, but significantly less than almost anyone else.”

He lowered his voice. “Did you know that every time I call you love; Luka becomes uncomfortable and slightly annoyed?”

My mouth dropped open, I let his change of topic slide, knowing how sad the conversation was making him. “Seriously? But... it’s just friendly.”

He nodded. “He knows that which is likely why he’s never said anything to me. I’m actually surprised with how down to earth and kind he is for a prince.”

His hand squeezed in mine. “And that is why I gravitate toward you so much. You care so deeply, despite how bloodthirsty and vengeful you can be.”

I grinned at the latter description. I was pretty confident there was something wrong with me.

“What else?” I asked, curious to hear, despite feeling awful at how difficult it must be to live with his gift.

He straightened in his seat. “Ryder kept giving off secretive vibes during the evenings, so I trailed him through the Guild to find out he has a stash of anime comics that he hid in an empty classroom.”

I grinned. “Oh yeah, he gave up that guilty plea-

sure when I told him who I really was.”

He faked pouted and leaned in closer to tell me more stories, distracting me through the rest of the flight.



We finally arrived in what appeared to be the middle of the night, and I tried to smooth my wayward hair, wondering how anyone could look normal after being on a plane for so many hours. Nikita's hair was fine, but hers was so short, I didn't think it really counted.

It was colder in Moscow, so I slipped on my leather jacket and rubbed my hands together.

“Welcome home, Your Highness,” a voice emanated from my left, and I twirled around to see a vampire with hair that was graying from age, and wrinkles around his eyes. Papa had always called them laugh lines. Only people who lived happy lives were blessed with wrinkly eyes as they grew older.

I didn't think I'd ever seen a visibly aged vampire before. Of course they existed, but I'd never come into contact with them until now. Though that would make a lot of sense since my vampire interactions were mostly limited to casinos and battles.

“Thank you, Stefan,” Luka responded with a warm smile.

Stefan gestured toward a limo waiting just outside the private airstrip. “If you would all kindly follow me.”

We did as he asked, clambering into the vehicle. I ended up in the seat beside Luka, trying to ignore each time his thigh bumped against mine.

The ride was quiet, and my eyes grew heavy from the lack of sleep over the last two days. My eyes fluttered shut as the subtle humming and vibrating of the engine lulled me to sleep.



“We’re here,” Luka’s voice whispered into my ear, his breath tingling my skin. I opened my eyes to see that I’d rested my head against Luka’s shoulder while asleep.

He must have stayed still the entire ride in order not to disturb me. It made me wish I could trust his words from when we’d first arrived in Ibrida. That he wanted to make it better between us.

But he’d lied to me and hid the truth about our soul bond. I hardened my heart and wiped a little bit of drool from the corner of my mouth. I’d been

betrayed too much in the past year and I could barely keep my tattered heart from completely crumbling. Another wound and I was liable not to recover. Especially if it came from Luka.

Quinn smirked as I sat up and looked around, stretching my limbs as the limo came to a halt beside a castle that the Addams family would have loved to call home.

The castle stood against the star-lit, night sky as if conjured from within the pages of a fairytale book. It looked almost too impossible to be true, made entirely out of black stones identical in shape and size. Sentries stood along the battlements, aiming weapons I could not distinguish from this distance. I felt vulnerable and exposed and I restrained myself from throwing a shield over all of us.

Four towers shot up from each corner, looming above the rest of the structure as if passing judgment. It even had a moat, for crying out loud. An actual moat with a drawbridge leading up to a portcullis.

I sped up to walk beside Nikita as we followed Stefan into the castle.

He led us into a magnificent hall, the floors a dove-gray polished stone, and the walls adorned with paintings on either side.

The artwork depicted various scenes from what I

assumed was their history. From my left, it started with grand parties and revelry, with different creatures I'd never heard of nor seen before. Plants and food also adorned the walls that were completely unrecognizable.

As my eyes flickered through the images, I started to notice human-like beings that were different than the vampires. Some had horns coming out of their heads, or claws on sprouting from their fingers. There were a few that boasted forked tongues and scaled skin.

I was in absolute awe.

The colors lost their vibrancy as they darkened, the paint-strokes becoming angry slashes as the scene changed to a war between the Night and Day Courts. There were faces that screamed in agony, frozen forever on the wall to show to the next generations what had transpired. It looked like a lesson. Chills trailed down my spine as I examined the paintings.

"Even after spending most of my formative years in this castle, I'll never get used to these portraits." Nikita whispered from my right.

"It's incredible," I breathed, unable to tear my gaze away from the savagery and utter torment clearly conveyed through the artist.

"It's batshit crazy is what it is. Children see this,"

she replied before moving forward, her eyes downcast.

“Is she waiting for us in the throne room?” Luka asked Stefan, his fingertips lightly trailing down my back as he passed me causing flutters to erupt in the pit of my stomach.

Seriously, body? *Traitor.*

“I’m afraid not, Sir. The Queen has already retired for the night but has requested I ensure you receive any comfort you wish upon your arrival.” He glanced at me and then Quinn. “We weren’t expecting your guests, so I’ll need to have rooms set up for them.”

Luka waved him off. “Lenna will stay in the adjoining room to my suite, but do please have a spare room set up for —”

“I’ll take care of it,” Trey interrupted, not leaving any room for question.

Stefan’s gaze widened momentarily, before he blanked his expression and nodded at Luka. “Of course, Sir.” He turned to the others as we neared the large, wooden double-doors at the end of the room. “Your rooms have been prepared for you as usual.”

Did he seriously just tell his butler or whatever, that we were sharing a room? What about my behavior to him lately gave the impression I would be even slightly okay with that arrangement? I

looked at Nikita and Trey, but they didn't give any outward reaction, as if what he'd done was totally normal. But by Stefan's reaction, it clearly was *not*.

Stefan gestured at the two guards posted on either side of the doors, continuing forward as they reached over and pulled them open, waving for us to exit.

Stefan faced us and bowed to Luka. "Since you do not need the spare rooms, I will leave you to guide your guest the rest of the way while I send a maid with fresh linen up to your suite."

Guest.

Suddenly, that word felt dirty. Like Stefan expected I was some mistress Luka was bringing back for entertainment. Our last conversation didn't instill me with a lot of confidence to feel otherwise. After all, he was a prince and I was... not.

Luka bobbed his head in thanks, and Stefan was off.

After waving goodnight to the others, I followed Luka through the eerily quiet castle, my anger simmering as our footsteps echoed with every step we took.

His suite was enormous, an entire sitting area complete with couches, armchairs and a table sat on one side of the room. The other side was taken up by the largest bed I'd ever seen. The colors of the

furnishings were all nature themed. Browns, greens, muted orange and red. His room was like autumn. Like his scent.

Before he could lead me into the adjoining room, I pulled on his arm to stop him, giving him my best glare.

“Before you say anything,” Luka said, putting his hands up submissively. “I know I should have asked you first, but I don’t trust everyone in my mother’s court. There are people who don’t support me and would want to get to me through you.” He lowered his hands and his honey-toned eyes hardened. “I cannot allow that.”

What kind of argument did I really have? I knew next to nothing about Night Court life, and it made the most sense to listen to Luka. I did trust him, regardless of how hurt I was by his actions. Though, he better stop making decisions on my behalf, or I’ll have to remind him how it feels to be stabbed. Maybe next time it’ll be in the thigh, that hurts more.

“Listen, Lenna.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I’m going to have to be different than you are used to. More vicious and aggressive. It’s simply the way of the court.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So, you’re going to treat me

poorly, and I should sit quietly on the side and be okay with it?”

He snapped back like he'd be slapped. “What? No! I need to act the part of prince, which requires me to treat my people a certain way. We aren't human, Lenna, so we react more brutal than what you would normally be accustomed to. None of that applies to you, though. If someone says or done anything against you, I will need to react more strongly than I would in the human areas.”

“Luka,” I said, crossing my arms. “I was raised by an assassin and then immediately after joined the assassins' Guild. What *normal* am I accustomed to?”

He chuckled tiredly. “Good point.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Luka went to answer it, returning with bedsheets in his arms. It gave me the perfect excuse to hit the hay. I was exhausted.

I yawned. “I'd like to get some sleep before the sun comes up,” I said, pointing to the closed door. “Does that lead to my room?”

Luka nodded and followed me into the room, staying behind to help me make the bed. The room was a smaller version of his. The same color scheme and a large bed, with only one small couch and armchair seated around a table.

I turned to face Luka and saw his gaze flick up from my neck, a slight blush creep across his cheeks.

He was thirsty.

I suddenly realized I hadn't fed him last night after our fight, which meant it had been two days since he'd had blood. Why hadn't he said anything? He must know that no matter how pissed off I was at him; I wouldn't let him starve.

Yanking up my sleeve, I offered him my wrist. "You can drink from here."

There was almost no hesitation before he zoomed forward and carefully sank his teeth into my flesh.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to shut down the arousal coursing through my body from his bite, somehow managing to tamper it down until it was a slight hum underneath my skin. A dull ache instead of the inferno it normally was.

I turned away after he was finished, pulling my sleeve down and opening my bag to pull out my pajamas.

"Lenna..." Luka started, but I cut him off.

"Tomorrow. We'll talk tomorrow."

He sighed. "As you wish." He quietly closed the door behind him, and I loosed a breath I hadn't known I'd been holding. It was going to be another long night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LENNA



The following three weeks went by agonizingly slow. The Queen had declined to see us, no matter how many times we asked.

I know she'd seen Luka, but according to him, she'd refused to talk about the hybrids or the vampire murders. She was acting as if nothing was amiss.

Luka had been pulled into Prince duties, whatever those were, so I spent the time training with Trey, Nikita, and Quinn. We were used to fighting together, so we fell into the process seamlessly. In fact, since we arrived at the Night Court and, our cohesiveness in fighting had increased exponentially.

Trey had taken the leadership role and started by

instructing us on different techniques the vampires practiced. Quinn and I taught them our strategies from Papa and the Guild. Words eventually became unnecessary as we moved together, trading blows and clashing swords as we anticipated each other's movements.

We practiced in one of the lesser used courtyards in the back of the castle, and soon attracted a crowd that animatedly watched our sessions. I was unaccustomed to being a show-pony and couldn't imagine how Kasai dealt with it for so long.

I'd already *accidentally* sent a knife careening into a tree above the head of one of the louder onlookers, who shrieked and ran away, her friends following at her heels. Trey had reminded me that I wasn't allowed to kill someone simply for being annoying. *Killjoy.*

I was now able to keep my healing activated for an hour while fighting, which gave the others an opportunity to fight with less worry of disembowelment. I didn't mind it, especially if it helped all of us improve our tactics. It had originally been humbling to fight against Trey and Nikita, but after these past few months, I could now say I'd improved enough to best them at sword play. Without my gifts.

Luka and I barely said a word to each other aside from our nightly feedings, during which I could tell

Luka wanted me to speak. I just couldn't seem to bridge the gap that'd grown between us since arriving. Each night we got back to our rooms exhausted, and I'd continued to give excuses not to discuss our soul bond.

It felt like a hole was missing from my chest that I needed to fix, but I didn't know how. My mind was so distracted by my thoughts, that I didn't see Nikita's fist coming until it was already smashing into the side of my face.

I dropped to the floor, stunned.

I didn't realize I'd disengaged my healing until the pain refused to recede.

"Shit! Are you okay, Lenna?" Nikita crouched down and gently held my face, examining the damage.

I blinked and sent warm, rose-colored energy into my face, the tiny fissure she'd cracked open restoring itself. "Yes," I croaked, blinking myself back to reality. "I zoned out for a moment."

She nodded and got back to her feet, offering a hand to help me up. "I noticed that a second too late. What's on your mind?"

I brushed the dirt off my leggings. "Why are we here? Why won't she see us?" I hadn't wanted to discuss the soul bond with the others, preferring to stew in my own frustration.

Nikita sighed. “Vampires are proud creatures. Luka snubbed her by not immediately returning home upon her request, so she’s likely returning the favor.” She fixed her hair, twisted the short strands into braids. “She’ll come around eventually. Do you want to switch to knives?”

I shook my head. This whole situation irked me. His mother was purposefully ignoring the fact that her people, along with many other innocents, were being murdered, because she felt *slighted*? Politics.

“I’m going to head back in and take a nap. I’m beat.”

Nikita shrugged, giving me a small smile, before turning around and joining Trey and Quinn.

Aside from the worries of the upcoming war, Quinn had been glowing since we’d arrived. Staying with Trey had apparently been the right move for them, and it showed on his face. He was always smiling and even wore the atrocious green and pink scarf Trey had made for him, saying “*It’s the thought that counts*” when I pointed out he didn’t have to wear it.

I headed back into the Great Hall, completely ignoring the tables full of people eating and drinking. I hadn’t been in the mood for company lately. There was too much on my mind, and the only person I could really talk to about it was Sofia, who

had offered to storm the castle, demanding the Queen give her an audience. But Sofia was miles away in Ibrida, teaching Violet how to fight with daggers.

I'd politely declined but wished she could be here with me. I was surrounded by people, and yet somehow... lonely. Needing something to distract me from my thoughts, I made my way through the winding corridors, finding an elaborate garden I hadn't discovered in my daily explorations.

It was bursting with life, every type of flower and plant I'd ever seen, including many I couldn't name. I breathed in the floral aroma as I made my way through the garden and a sense of peace came over me. I stopped by the sunflowers, running my hand along the beautiful yellow petals as I wondered if I'd get into trouble for taking one.

"You're welcome to whatever you'd like," a familiar baritone voice came from behind me.

I jumped and spun around, clutching my throat. "Luka," I gasped, surprised something else had slipped past me in my distraction. "I didn't hear you walk up."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "I walk quietly."

I hated the distance between us, and I desperately wanted to demolish it, but what could I even say? *I forgive you for pretending our souls weren't destined for*

each other and for hiding our bond? I shook my head internally. I couldn't simply move past it without understanding why he would do that to me.

I finally took note of what he was wearing, and I couldn't contain my surprise.

He was dressed in gardeners clothing, the knees of his pants covered in dirt and his gloved hand clutching a trowel.

"Are you..." I looked around. "Gardening?"

The first genuine smile in the last few weeks graced his face, albeit a small one, my heart stuttering in my chest at the sight. "This is my private garden. I find that tending to the plants helps me to relax when I am frustrated by things outside my control." He wiped his hand on his thigh and sighed. "It hasn't been helping me much lately though."

My gut twisted and my heart ached for him. As angry as I was for what he'd done, he was still important to me. More important than I cared to admit. I didn't want him to feel as upset as he clearly had been lately. "What's wrong?"

"We've been here for almost a month now, little assassin. She refuses to speak with me about anything more than my *duties*." he seemed so vulnerable in that moment. So dejected. Clearly, being at Court under his mother's thumb was weighing on him.

The confident and mischievous male that I'd come to know and care for was nowhere in sight, and it infuriated me. I was tired of his mother continuing to ignore us for selfish reasons. To allow pride to get in the way of stopping the needless slaughter going on around us was sickening.

"I'll be right back," I said, tendrils of light swirling around me as I stomped out of the garden without a backward glance, ignoring as he called out my name.

I marched through the halls, my anger rising as I made my way to the throne room, slamming my hands against the doors and blasting them open. My light sparked and flew off of my body as I proceeded toward the raven-haired woman on a throne made from thorns, the courtiers open-mouthed and gaping.

The room was circular, sunlight shining through the windows that lined the left wall as people filled the space, drinking and laughing.

Guards approached, drawing their weapons as they advanced.

I threw out my shield, pushing them back as I glowered at the Queen.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Queen asked, rising to her feet. She was tall and willowy, her face all sharp angles and her frame slim. A fierce navy-blue suit and high heels adorned her body like

armor. If I wasn't so pissed off, I'd probably be impressed and possibly intimidated.

"Enough," I growled, tendrils twirling through the air as I seethed. "Enough posturing and trying to prove a point. Hybrids are being targeted, your people are being slaughtered in droves, and you are sitting here doing nothing because you're too busy trying to win some ridiculous pissing contest with your son!" I yelled, my chest heaving as all of my pent-up frustration let itself out. "You are a queen of an entire race of people and you are sitting there, complacent!"

Gasps rang out through the crowd and a voice I hadn't heard in months called out to me, "Lenna!"

I turned to the voice and stumbled back a step at the sight of the blonde-haired, cerulean-eyed male I'd known my entire life. Max. Maximus was here, at the Night Court, and he hadn't come to see me.

"Who do you think you are to come into my court and speak to me in such a manner?" The Queen said, her honey-toned eyes blazing. They were the same color as Luka's and yet infinitely different. They didn't blaze with heat like his, they blazed with ice, if such a thing was possible.

"Who am I?" I said, hands curling into fists. "It seems like I am the only one here who actually cares

what happens to these people!" I shouted, spreading my arms to gesture to the courtiers.

Max took a step forward. "Lenna, I understand you are upset, but it isn't your place to barge in here and yell like this." He turned to the queen and bowed his head. "I apologize on her behalf, Your Majesty. Lenna was not raised in a traditional way and does not understand the customs here. Please forgive her mistake as a misunderstanding."

I couldn't believe his audacity. My fingers twitched toward the dagger on my thigh. "Do not speak for me, Maximus Chernov. I have not asked you to, nor do you have the right to do so." My glare switched to the queen. "I do *not* apologize for my actions, because I refuse to wait another moment to be heard. It is one thing for you to ignore me, but your own people, your own *son* has come to you about this issue. They have begged and pleaded with you to act. And instead of hearing them out, you sit on your royal ass and try to teach some sort of lesson."

People ducked out of the way of my light as it had begun shooting off erratically. I sucked in a breath, trying to calm my rage, and let it out. "It's time for you to grow up, stop playing childish games and speak to Luka." I knew the moment the words left my mouth that I had gone too far, but there was

nothing to do about it anymore. From the looks on the courtiers' faces, it was clear the damage was done.

Knowing I'd made my point, I spun around and walked back to the exit, keeping my hands clenched in fists to hide their trembling. I'd almost reached the door when the queen's voice rang out. "Wait."

My heart skipped a beat and my brows lifted in fear of what would happen next. Thankfully, the only people to witness it were the doormen whose faces were fixed toward the queen. I blanked my expression and slowly turned around before walking back, the courtiers moving aside to allow my approach.

She descended the three small steps and walked until she was a mere foot away, and I realized why people feared her. Something animalistic lurked behind the designer labels and stilettos. Something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

I'd faced down countless murderers without a moment of hesitation or fear, but everything in my body was screaming to get away from the queen.

Her gaze trailed my sweaty body, starting at my sneakers, passing my leggings and sports bra, and ending at my eyes. It took everything in me not to take a step back. And then she grinned. Nothing about her grin was nice. It was downright feral.

“Alright,” she said, her tone somewhat amused. “You’ll have your audience this evening, after the ball.” At my confusion from her mention of a ball, her grin widened. “I am throwing the Crown Prince a welcome home ball. Once it’s over you can tell me your concerns. I give my word I will listen.” And then she turned around and returned to her throne, sinking down gracefully, her eyes remaining glued to mine as she lowered herself into the seat.

Unable to believe my luck, I was about to leave when she spoke again, “And if you ever enter this room and speak to me like that again, I will tear your head from your shoulders and hang it from the rafters like an ornament.” She paused, examining my face. “Are we understood?”

I kept myself back from reacting to the blatant threat, believing that she could back up her statement, and nodded my head. I couldn’t trust my words in that moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LENNA



“I cannot believe you yelled at the queen like that and you’re still breathing,” Nikita snickered as we walked arm in arm through one of the enormous ballrooms in the castle, watching the queen speak with two of the Council members.

Nikita had barged into my room after I’d returned and showered, raving about a video one of the courtiers had taken of my confrontation with the queen. I’d looked a bit crazy with the light spewing out of my body and my fists clenched at me sides, but something had gone right. Or it was about to go terribly wrong, but I wasn’t one to regret about things that hadn’t yet come to pass.

She then proceeded to allow five women into the room, who were all carrying shoes, racks of dresses,

and makeup. They spent the following two hours poking and prodding me until I ended up in a strapless, glittery black gown with a slit up my thigh, blonde ringlets falling down my back, and my feet shoved into pointed red bottoms.

I sighed. "She's... vexing." I picked up a glass of champagne from one of the waiters and took a sip. *Mhmm.*

Nikita elbowed me in the ribs and tapped my ears. "Be careful what you say in a place where everyone can hear better than you."

"Nikita," the rough voice belonging to a male with burgundy hair and silver eyes said as he stepped in our path.

Immediately, Nikita's relaxed posture stiffened, her arm tightening under my grasp. It was clear this man was not someone Nikita wanted to speak with. From the similar bone structure and shape of their eyes, he was likely a family member.

I thrust my hand out, diverting his attention to me. "Hello, I'm Lenna. Who are you?" Nikita's fingers clamped around my wrist, her nails digging into my skin painfully.

He sneered down at my hand, not moving to take it. "Duke Nightrose, and I already know who you are. You're Prince Lukalian's newest pet. Don't get

too comfortable with your position, it won't last long."

So he was her father. How... delightful.

I smiled at the Duke, baring my teeth. But before I could form a reply, a deep voice interrupted.

"Have you ever had an assassin smile at you before, Arlen?" Luka asked, sidling up beside us. He took in my appearance and his eyes widened as he examined me head to toe. He looked at me the same way he had the night we'd gone to the club. The night he'd had his lips on my neck and his hands everywhere else. All I wanted was to forget the pain and launch myself at him.

He cleared his throat and his expression blanked.

The Duke looked at him, his brows furrowing in confusion.

"It means they are likely plotting your untimely demise," Luka said, his lips turning up in that mischievous grin I missed so much.

The Duke paled and took a step back.

"There will be none of that in my court," the Queen snapped as she emerged from behind us.

"Who knows how long you plan to have us sit here idly. I need to pay the bills somehow." I winked and heard a faint snort coming from Nikita.

Luka chuckled as the queen glowered at me. She really wanted me dead. I could feel it. She turned to

her son, reaching out to adjust his tie. "Did you see that Genevieve is here?" She asked, a smug expression gracing her features. "Don't you think tonight would be perfect to announce your engagement?"

Everything stopped. My breathing, my brain, my hearing. Everything.

I should have expected it. All the signs were there, and yet somehow... I felt absolutely crushed.

I cleared my throat, praying that my voice held steady. "Congratulations." I tugged on Nikita's arm. "If you'll excuse us." I pulled her away, pretending I didn't hear Luka calling my name as I tried to keep the tears from escaping my eyes.

"It isn't what you think," she whispered, looking back over her shoulder. "He has no intention of going through with the marriage. Genevieve's mother is on the Council and is the queen's closest friend. They've been betrothed," she did air quotes, "since she was born. He never once agreed to it."

"I don't want to hear about it," I said, struggling to find my breath. I fanned myself, suddenly overcome with heat. I'd never felt more mortified in my entire life. I gulped the rest of my champagne and grabbed another from a passing waiter, startling him.

I spotted Trey and Quinn spinning around the dance floor, arms wrapped around each other. They

looked stunning, Trey in a suit as white as his hair, contrasting so beautifully with his onyx skin. His smile was small, but warm as he moved with Quinn, whose auburn hair and beard were trimmed perfectly, looking absolutely dashing in a gray, pin-striped suit.

I had finished another two glasses by the time I saw Luka accepting the hand of a breathtakingly beautiful female. Her hair was baby-blue, and her curvaceous body on display in a skin-tight floor-length red dress. I'd never been particularly self-conscious until that moment. They looked good together and I absolutely loathed it.

Her hands trailed over his body and he pulled them back into proper position with a slightly annoyed expression. She didn't take the hint, returning her wandering fingers toward his lower back. My anger flared and I moved to interrupt them when someone stepped into my path.

"Would you care for a dance?" The male said. He was broad-chested, with hair so blonde it was almost white. His grin was confident, and I could instantly tell he had an ego the size of the castle, but I wanted a distraction, and he was there.

"Sure," I said, smiling sweetly and accepting his hand, Nikita giving me a disapproving look as I left her side.

"I'm Gavil," he said, wrapping an arm around my waist.

"Lenna," I replied as I put my hands on his shoulders. "I'm not sure I know the right steps."

"Don't worry about that, just follow my lead," he said as he slowly demonstrated the moves, correcting me when I stepped the wrong way. He asked me about what it was like in the human world, explaining how many vampires stay within the castle most of their lives, only venturing out for work or studies.

Apparently, he was above those things.

I had a tough time not rolling my eyes at half the things that spewed from his mouth. *Hadn't anyone ever told him being pretty wasn't enough?*

He then proceeded to tell me every facet of his life, assuming incorrectly that he was the most fascinating person I'd ever met. When in reality, he was as dull as a doorknob.

I was about to politely tell him that my feet were hurting and I wanted to stop, when he leaned forward and sniffed my neck. I shivered, and not in the nice way that sends flurries of butterflies through my stomach every time Luka looked my way. It felt gross.

"We're in the middle of a dance floor, this isn't

appropriate,” I said, trying to pull away from him. He refused to let go.

“Look around, Lenna, darling. People are doing far worse, but if you're feeling particularly shy, we can go somewhere more private.” He wasn't lying. Some of the courtiers were almost pornographic in their *dancing*, but that didn't mean I had to do the same.

“I don't care what the others are doing. I'd like you to let go,” I said, forcing just enough steel into my voice to show him I was serious, but not too much to seem threatening. I didn't think I'd be forgiven for murdering someone in the middle of the dance floor. The queen already wanted a reason to kill me.

“Don't be a wet blanket,” he said, bringing his mouth to my neck, his fangs coming down. “I just want to play.”

My breathing increased along with my pulse and I was about to zap him with my shield when Luka appeared at his shoulder. “Take your hand off of her immediately.”

Gavil sneered. “I'll be happy to hand her off to you when we finish.”

I wrapped my fingers around the knife strapped to my inner thigh but Luka got there first.

He lifted Gavil up by the throat and slammed his

face against the floor with such force that blood and cartilage exploded. Gavil stayed on the ground immobile. He was either dead or knocked out, and it didn't seem to matter to Luka. Or to me. That's what happens to people who don't understand that no means no.

Chest heaving, Luka turned to the room which had gone silent. "This is your only warning. If any of you tries to touch her, I will tear you to pieces."

He finally looked at me, emotion coating every inch of his face as he held out a hand. "Please," he begged, his voice rough, "Please come with me, I'll explain everything,"

It was in that moment I understood this was my one chance. I could either throw away everything between us, give up on our bond... or I could put my hand in his and discover what could be.

I chose the only option that wouldn't leave me absolutely destroyed.

His entire face lit up as my fingers slipped into his, and he brought my knuckles to his lips, lightly brushing them against my skin. "Let's go." He led me through the silent room, I could feel the stares on our backs as we walked to the exit. The piercing gaze of his mother hit me the hardest.

The doormen hesitated before seeing Luka's murderous expression and swung the doors open,

allowing us to leave the ballroom and everyone behind.

He swept me into his arms and sprinted through the corridors, shocked faces blurring past as he ran. A small part of me considered demanding he set me down so I could walk on my own two feet, but I could see he needed this. He needed to hold me and move quickly, so I held on tightly.

We reached his suite in record time and he finally placed me on my feet, stepping in front of me and taking a hold of my hands. My heart thumped erratically as I looked into his warm honey-toned eyes.

“So,” I said, breathlessly. “Tell me everything.”

He swallowed. “As I told you before, I only figured it out the night the assassin came to kill me, and I thought it was you outside.”

I nodded, shuffling on my feet as I waited for him to continue.

“It was also the night I found out you were dating the man who’d come to kill me. There were quite a few emotions flowing through me and I was reeling. Finding a soul bond isn’t that uncommon, but in high society, you do not search for that in a match. I was told from as young as I can remember that I was supposed to marry the daughter of a Council member. And no, before you say anything, I never had any intention of marrying her. I told my mother

that on numerous occasions, but she has the annoying tendency to disregard my feelings for what works better for her." He paused, examining my face.

He wasn't lying. I knew him well enough by now to see through that. Could I really fault him for something that he never actually did? No, definitely not. But that wasn't the only issue. I looked down, not able to see his face when I asked the next question. "And when you realized that I heard our song as well... why didn't you say anything?"

My pulse beat faster as I waited with bated breath for his response, my eyes squeezed shut.

His fingers gently lifted my chin and I opened my eyes. "Don't lower your gaze, little assassin. Never hide from me." He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. "I'm a prince, Lenna. I know theoretically that sounds amazing, but my world is vicious and brutal. You've seen the political games here, and there has been more than one occasion I've feared for your life. When I heard what you said to my mother, I nearly lost my shit."

He took a deep breath, as that beautiful melody reached my ears softly. "I was also terrified of what you would say."

My eyes widened at that. "What do you mean?" What could I possibly say that would worry him? He must have known how effected I was by him. Did he

not see my reaction every time he looked my way and each night when I fed him my blood?

He cleared his throat, a light blush inching up his neck. "I wanted you so badly, with every fiber of my being, and I was absolutely petrified you would realize I didn't deserve you. I was worried you'd kick me to the curb the moment I told you what was going on, and I'd... lose you."

His words got stuck in his throat, and my chest constricted. "In my head I convinced myself that I would rather be by your side as your friend forever than have you reject our bond. I wouldn't have recovered from the pain. So, the most logical choice was to avoid it and pray you would one day choose me anyway." His eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "You were right. I am unworthy of you."

"No," I said, swallowing the lump in my throat, my hands shaking in his. "I didn't really mean that. I was devastated - thinking you didn't want me as much as I want you." My lips trembling as I forced the words out.

He shook his head. "I have wanted you every moment of every day since you stood completely bare in front of me and stabbed my in the shoulder. No hesitation and total confidence." He pressed a kiss to my brow before looking me in the eye. "You were utterly breathtaking and you capti-

vated me from that first meeting and every second since.”

Our song blocked out every other noise around us, enrapturing me in its beguiling tune. It built up, higher and higher, reaching the crescendo, before crashing down, making my heart stutter. There was nothing in this world or any world that was more perfect than our song. Tears fell from both of our eyes and I knew he was hearing it too.

I traced his face with my fingertips, outlining his perfect lips and he caught my finger between his fangs and grinned mischievously. There were very few things I loved more than that grin.

“If we do this, that’s it, little assassin. I can’t do anything halfway. Not with you,” he said as he swiped away a tear with his thumb.

I furrowed my brows. “What do you mean?”

“My soul is demanding I bond with yours. I can’t simply be with you like anyone else. Once we move forward, there is no going back. It is permanent.”

I knew what he was saying, but it didn’t matter. There would be no other for me. Nobody else would understand me on the level he did. Nobody else could speak to my very soul. I felt like a total fool for even thinking I could deny it.

“I want this, Luka. I want you. Forever.”

His smile was absolutely dazzling, and I knew we

were on the same page. My answering grin reached from ear-to-ear and my energy was singing. It only did that during a battle because fighting was what brought me the most joy, but now that wasn't true.

"I don't know what I was thinking giving you a dress like that," Luka said roughly, his eyes hungrily roaming over my body.

I brazenly trailed a finger up my bare thigh, the glittering, black chiffon layers parting to give me access. "What, you don't like it?"

He growled and took a step forward. "I think you know exactly how I feel about it."

"Tell me," I said, breathlessly.

He dropped to his knees and lifted my ankle, pressing his lips to my naked skin. He continued his ministrations up my leg, speaking between his kisses. "I can't think when I look at you. All I want to do is rip this off and ravish your body. Taste every curve and dip of you. Learn exactly what makes you..." he licked a particularly sensitive area and I gasped. "Tick," he finished and looked up at me, his honey eyes blazing with heat.

It was now or never. I either had to take that step forward or let him go. I couldn't keep wondering, so I took a breath and rasped, "then, do it."

His smile was sinful and full of promises.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LENNA



I woke up with something heavy wrapped around my body and my eyes flew open as panic flooded through me. I looked down to see a bronze arm draped across my midsection and a warm body pressed against my back; a bare leg settled between mine.

I relaxed, loosing a pent-up breath as the memories of the night before came rushing back. Heat pooled my core when I remembered how our bodies writhed together as we brought each other to the heights of pleasure, over and over, until dawn crested the sky.

“Mhmm,” Luka mumbled, pulling me tighter against him and I let out a chuckle.

“Morning, fang man,” I said, hardly able to believe that last night was real. That it actually

happened. I felt... happy. *Balanced*. Our bond was strong and vibrant.

I heard him yawn behind me before he gently turned me around to face him. He was leaning on one of his hands and smiling widely down at me, his entire face lit up.

His eyes examined my face before he moved closer, pressing a whisper-soft kiss on my lips. "Last night was... mind blowing," he said, before pressing additional kisses all over my face. "Let's stay in bed all day... No... all week." He shoved his face into my neck and playfully nipped at my skin.

"I wish." That sounded like heaven. If only our lives would allow for such things, but unfortunately it was time to be responsible again. Ugh.

I sat up, pulling the blanket up to cover my goods, suddenly feeling shy.

He laughed.

"What?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Lenna, there is not one single inch of your body I didn't touch or taste last night. No reason to be shy now." He reached for the blanket, slowly peeling it away to expose my bare body, heat flashing in his eyes as they roamed over me. The sounds of our song softly playing in the background.

He lowered his face to my breast, sucking on my nipple before flicking it with his tongue.

I gasped, plunging my fingers into his hair as he continued his ministrations. I pushed him backward to the bed and climbed on top of him, feeling how excited he was beneath me. Surely the world wouldn't burn down if we took one more hour.

His hands ran up and down my body as he grinned that beautifully mischievous smile that I loved so much. "Now what, little assassin?"

I matched his expression and trailed my fingers down his muscular chest, following the light sprinkling of hair in a straight line from his sternum all the way down... before gripping him.

He jerked in my hands and my smile widened. I loved how strongly his body reacted to my touch. It spoke to some primal part of me that I didn't know it existed until then.

I pumped him with my hands as I peppered kisses from his neck down to his abdomen, stopping when I reached my hands. Keeping eye-contact with him, I opened my mouth and took him all the way in, a smug satisfaction crashing through me as his hips bucked off the bed in pleasure. His hands fisted my hair as I used my tongue to bring him close to completion, but he pulled away before he finished.

"Not yet," he said, pulling me up the length of his body. "I want to be inside you."

How could I ignore such a request?

I held on to his shoulders and sank down, both of us moaning as he entered me. I started moving, as he reached forward to rub my clit. I threw back my head, increasing my tempo as my climax began to build.

It wasn't enough.

Luka clearly felt the same way as his grip on my butt tightened before he switched our positions, flipping us over and slamming me into the mattress. I cried out, raking my fingernails down his back as he thrust into me harder and faster.

We both moved frantically, unable to get enough of each other as he pumped in and out of me, pulling my legs higher up on his hips. My hands sunk into his hair and I yanked his head down so I could look into his brilliantly bright honey-toned eyes. Our lips connected, hot and needy.

I wanted more of him. No... I *needed* more of him. All of him.

Letting go of his hair, my hands ran down his tightly corded muscles as he pounded into me, our bond strengthening with each thrust. I felt the connection like a live wire between us, our need pulsing along the cord.

Ecstasy took over my senses, as he sank his fangs into my neck, staking his claim. Nothing existed in the world outside of his touch, his taste, his scent.

He groaned, grinding into me before breaking free of my neck and licking closed the wound. Breath rushed out of my lungs as he took me even harder, my eyes fluttering shut as my climax neared. I held on tightly as we climbed higher together, our bond screaming in pleasure.

My orgasm crashed through me like a tsunami, my entire body tingling with the aftershocks. Luka thrust a few more times before shouting my name as he finished.

My legs, which were clamped around Luka's waist, turned to jelly, but I somehow managed to leave them there as my breathing slowly returned to normal.

Luka leaned his forehead against mine, his chest still heaving, before he rolled us over, taking me into his chest. "You are absolutely, breathtaking," he breathed.



An hour later, we were showered, dressed, and making our way to the throne room to see the queen. A sideways glance at Luka made me realize how relaxed he looked, as if a crushing weight had lifted off his shoulders. His back was straighter, he

walked with total confidence, and he had on a grin that seemed glued to his face.

In other words... absolute perfection. And he was *mine*.

He caught me staring and grabbed one of my hands and brought it to his face, kissing the palm of my hand with his lips.

“Finally,” Nikita’s voice rang out as she approached with Trey and Quinn from an adjacent corridor. “I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to figure your shit out.” I stuck my tongue out at her as Quinn threw me a sly wink.

Luka slipped an arm around my waist, keeping me close. Now that our bond was accepted and sealed, I felt his contentedness through the cord almost as strongly as my own. I didn’t know how I’d lived so long without it.

“So,” I said, diverting the topic. “What’s the likelihood of the queen actually helping us?” I asked as the doormen pulled the doors open and we walked through, the queen atop her throne wearing a tight, eggplant-colored suit and a scowl.

A sense of dread swam over me. That didn’t bode well.

“Not fucking likely,” Nikita whispered.

Nikita and Trey both sank into low bows, Quinn

and I moving to follow their lead, when Luka halted my movement.

“You will bow to no one,” Luka said as he wrapped a warm, supportive hand around mine. My heart swelled with adoration until I saw the Queen’s face.

If she had the power to throw daggers with her eyes, I’d already be dead. The absolute hatred pouring off her from was almost tangible and my instincts were telling me to run. To escape before whatever horror that was going through her mind could come true.

“So you take the human to your bed and she believes she has immunity from our laws?” The Queen sneered as Nikita, Trey, and Quinn rose to their feet.

“Lenna is not some *human*, mother. She is my bonded soul, and you should take care how you speak of and to her,” Luka said roughly, his spine rigid. I couldn’t believe my ears. He actually told off his mother in front of the courtiers. That’s it, we were going to die. I threw up a shield to separate the queen and us as a collective gasp rang out through the crowd.

The Queen scoffed. “You think that matters? Soon enough she’ll be gone, and you’ll come to your

senses.” Electric currents flashed across my shield, tendrils of light swirling above me.

“Regardless,” Luka said, letting go of my hand and moving forward. “We are here regarding an unrelated issue.” I adjusted my shield to cover him as he walked, knowing they could all see the shimmering in the air.

“Oh, yes.” The Queen replied, rolling her eyes. “The dead hybrids and vampires. Well, go ahead.” Her callousness about the loss of life was astounding. I knew she didn’t like me, but that felt personal on a whole new level. These were her own people she was disregarding like trash on the side of the road. A sickening feeling and a sudden urge to slap that ridiculous sneer off her face swept through me.

I bit my tongue to avoid giving her a piece of my mind. I knew there was only so much she would accept before unleashing the beast that lay uneasily beneath her skin.

“Vampires are being killed by the dozens, dropping in the middle of the street like leaves off a tree,” Luka explained, crossing his arms over his chest as he spoke.

“Vampires are born and die every day, this is nothing new,” she responded, lifting a brow. “What makes you think we should drop everything and rush to their aid?”

The courtiers and guards were paying attention now, their eyes bouncing back and forth between mother and son. I wondered what was going through their minds, and if they were all blindly loyal to the queen. If that was the case, we were screwed, because it didn't seem like she was interested in doing anything other than getting rid of us.

Luka barely managed to contain his fury at her remark. "Because they are our people and they are being slaughtered like animals," he growled, chest heaving. "There are rogue assassins from the Guild who are taking them out on behalf of someone named the Benefactor."

Looks of shock spread throughout the room. The Queen, side-eyed the crowd before smoothing out her skirt as I wondered how many of them knew what was truly going on, or if the truth had been hidden from them. "That sounds a lot like a conspiracy theory to me. Do you have proof of this Benefactor?"

"We know this person exists because they took over an elite division of the Guild to go after innocent hybrids and vampires," I said, before gesturing to Quinn. "We figured out what was going on and started working against them immediately."

Her eyes flicked toward me and moved back to Luka, dismissing me and what I said. "Until you have

indisputable proof of this group of assassins, I'm going to have to decline providing assistance." Her voice left no room for argument.

I'd known this would happen and yet it still surprised me. And made me furious. I guess it's true what they say. Mother-in-laws are the *worst*.



"We can't go back to the Guild with nothing," Quinn said as we walked away from the throne room, all of us disappointed with the events that transpired inside.

Placing a hand on his arm, I halted his movements. "We won't get help from here no matter what *proof* we find. But there is a chance we can strong-arm Eleanor into helping us if we make it impossible for her to refuse."

Nikita grinned evilly. "I think I like where this is going."

"What if we gather everyone we have at the safe houses and bring them to Ibrida in force? We'll make a lot of noise, thanking her for accepting the innocents and helping us save more lives." I smiled as my plan came together in my head.

Luka nodded, his expression thoughtful.

“Everyone will be so thankful that she won’t be able to refuse us without inciting a riot.”

“That actually sounds perfect,” Trey added, the corners of his mouth lifting.

I raised a brow. “Don’t sound so surprised, I do have good ideas occasionally.”

He laughed. “Apparently so.”



I had no choice but to use my phone to call Zander, hoping nobody tried to track us in that moment, and let him know about our plans. We were going to contact each safe house and have them join together at the house in Georgia since it was closest to Ibrida.

While Quinn and I were busy with that, the others prepared the jet for the flight. Everything moved quickly after that. We packed our bags and left the Night Court without another word, and I was somewhat relieved to escape from the queen’s eye. There were very few people who actually brought out my fear, and the queen was one of them. She disturbed me on a whole different level.

The flight was slightly longer this time, taking us fifteen hours to arrive in Georgia. This time,

however, Luka distracted me in the best way and I certainly wasn't going to complain. My hair static-y and my lips dry by the time we touched down, thanks mainly to him.

Walking down the steps of the jet, I smiled genuinely at the sight of my brother, his band-shirt and ripped-jeans making him appear even younger than he was. His honey-blonde hair was cut shorter on the sides than the top, his grin wide as he caught my eye.

I enveloped him in a warm hug. "How's everything been?" It was nicer to see his face than I expected, and I was glad our relationship wasn't strained or complex. Not like with Eleanor.

"Mother has been her usual, cantankerous self, but Sofia has made it a hell of a lot easier to be in Ibrida." He leaned back and winked at Nikita, who rolled her eyes and chuckled.

He shook hands with the others and motioned us over to the lines of SUVs he had waiting for us. Summer and Aidan were each behind the wheels of two of them. "I figured a bunch of them will need rides, and it'll be better if we're all together."

I nodded, grateful for his forethought, and clambered into the one he was driving, the others following my lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
LENNA



The safe house was only a thirty-minute drive and I took the time to relax, watching the houses zip past the window. We pulled up to the curb and hopped out, going inside to help everyone bring their belongings to the cars.

Halfway through, I heard my name being called and looked up to see Zander heading my way, a terrified expression on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Lenna,” he whisper-screamed. “We have a serious, emergency-level, issue.” His lips trembled as he looked around to see if anyone was listening. “Quinn and I just found a bomb in one of the rooms upstairs.”

My breath caught. “A bomb? Are you sure?”

He nodded, his hands shaking. “Absolutely. Quinn is informing the others.”

I had no doubt there were all sorts of protocols in place for these situations, but in the heat of the moment you can't really consider them. All I could think about were the dozens of innocent lives we put in jeopardy by bringing them here.

I did the only thing that sprang to my mind. "We just got word that assassins are on the way here," I yelled, getting everyone's attention. "We need to get out, now!"

The people scrambled, parents grabbing children and speeding for the cars, leaving behind their possessions as they ran.

"How long do we have?" I asked Zander as I grabbed what I could and followed them out.

"Minutes," he breathed, grabbing my arm and anxiously pulling me across the yard.

We ran together, depositing the luggage in the trunks of the SUVs as everyone rushed into the vehicles. Someone must have told the rogues we would be here today. That we'd *all* be here today. How else could they have planted a bomb at such an opportune moment? Who could have done that?

It suddenly occurred to me that they could be there now, hiding around the property, waiting to see the outcome of the blast. My eyes flew around, mentally counting heads and checking if everyone

was accounted for. I found all familiar faces except one.

Where was Luka?

My heart pounded in my chest as panic overtook me, my mind flying with the possibilities for his absence.

“Let’s go!” Zander yelled, hopping into the driver’s seat and turning on the ignition.

My eyes were wild as I scanned the area for my other half. “He’s still inside,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “He’s still inside!” I repeated with a shout.

My pulse raced, fingers tingling as my breath halted. I needed to find him. I threw what was left in my hands into the car and took off, sprinting for the house.

Quinn chased after me and tackled me to the ground. “Lenna, you can’t! It’s about to explode,” he yelled, using his gift to try and calm me down.

I squirmed out of his hold and leapt to my feet as he did the same, stepping in front of me to block my advance. Taking no time to consider my actions, I kicked the inside of his knee as I pulled out my pistol and whipped it across his face. He dropped to the ground and I bolted for the house, screaming for Luka as my feet pounded on the pavement.

I was steps away from the front door when a

bright light blinded my eyes and the house detonated, the sound cracking like the loudest gunshot I'd ever heard, before everything went dark.



Silence met me as I floated back to consciousness. The first thing I noticed was a pain so acute I nearly fell back into the void. Sending warm, rose-colored healing energy through my body, I let out a sigh that couldn't be heard through my damaged ear canals.

My energy levels were almost deleted, and I kept my eyes shut while my skin slowly knitted itself back together. I had to disengage my healing before I lost consciousness again, and an uncomfortable itching sensation began, my burned skin not completely healed.

I tried to move my hand to scratch the itch from my recovering skin but was met with resistance. My arm refused to budge. I opened my eyes, blinking as the light filtered in through a small window near the ceiling of the room. It was some sort of basement, the walls bare and the floor covered in plastic.

Glancing down at my body, panic settled in as the metal bands encasing my wrists, ankles, and

waist swam into view. I was bolted to the wall, my clothing in tatters, the scorched material barely held together. I jerked, trying to break free, even risking unconsciousness to use my light on the manacles. Nothing.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and pain radiated from my neck. Trying to move my head, my mouth dropped open when I figured out why I had limited movement. There was a metal band around my throat, restricting my actions.

The basement was set up startlingly similar to the time I'd captured, tortured, and killed one of the people responsible for Papa's death. I had not given him the privilege of a painless death, which was no doubt the same plan as my abductors.

I attempted to clear my sluggish mind to remember how I ended up here when the memories surged back full force.

Luka.

My bonded soul. The male I'd only just realized I was deeply, irrevocably in love with. And now he was... gone. He was ripped from me before we even got to experience a life together. In what sort of cruel world could that happen? It would serve me no purpose holding on to hope that he'd somehow managed to survive that blast. A tremor shuddered through me as I tried to contain my heartbreak.

I hadn't even been inside the house and had barely survived. Using a fragment of my limited reservoir of power, I checked over my injuries. Several bones had broken and were almost mended, and that was the only internal injury I'd sustained.

The majority of my skin had been burned and only a small fraction had been healed with my energy, it had determined the broken bones and exterior lacerations were more vital than the burns. I would have rather dealt with the pain than this incessant itching.

Before I had another moment to wonder about my whereabouts, the door at the top of the wooden staircase opened, heels clicking on the steps as someone descended. Black, six-inch stilettos came into view, stumbling slightly as she made her way down, her indigo pantsuit covering a toned, albeit short, body.

The rest of her was revealed and she was breathtakingly beautiful. Her skin was naturally tanned, the sun catching reddish tints that streaked through her medium-brown hair as she passed into the light. Lavender eyes that held no warmth observed me keenly, not unlike the Night Queen. Her jawline and cheekbones had angles that seemed cut from jagged stone.

She sneered down at me as she approached, her

expression doing nothing to add to my fear. My emotional state was far too spent on my grief, dread taking a backseat for this ride.

“So, the prized assassin has finally awoken.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

I raised a brow and said nothing, digging deep into my mind, taking in all of my anguish and shoving it inside. I locked that mental door tightly. It was the only way to survive whatever was about to happen.

Anger flashed in her eyes before she narrowed them. “I have a feeling you’re going to make this difficult,” she said, crossing her arms, revealing a sheath on her hip. The hilt of the blade was silver and adorned with a large emerald.

I tightened my mental door, sealing out any emotion and grinned, feeling the band around my throat digging in. “I do have a nasty habit of doing that, yes.”

“Do you think you’re funny?” She asked, gesturing to the room. “Take a look around you. You aren’t here for a tea party.”

“Oh, that sounds perfect! I’d love a chai tea if you have it on hand, but I’d be okay with Oolong in a pinch.” She wasn’t impressed.

“Listen, you little cunt. I’m in no mood for games.” She pulled her blade out of its sheath and

stepped forward, her hair swaying to unveil pointed ears.

She must be fae.

She saw where my gaze was fixed and smiled. “Yes, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself. I’m the Day Court Queen, otherwise known as the Benefactor.”

My mouth dropped open and she smirked in satisfaction, my eyes trailing her as she walked about the empty room, glad she couldn’t walk around to my back thanks to my position against the wall.

Of all the theories that ran through my mind regarding the identity of the Benefactor, I’d never even considered the possibility of it being a fae. I’d wrongfully assumed it was one of the higher-level assassins. I wondered if the rogues had any clue they were taking orders from a fae. Or even knew what a fae was.

“Let me tell you how this is going to work,” she said, testing the tip of the dagger. “You are going to tell me everything, or I’m going to make things rather unpleasant for you.”

It was like Déjà vu; except this time I was the one strapped down with someone else threatening me. What a mind trip!

“Yeah, alright,” I replied, the corners of my mouth tipping up. “My favorite color is red, I absolutely

adore sunflowers, mac and cheese is my comfort food, and my number is three..."

"What are you blabbering about?" She asked, exasperated.

"What?" I said innocently. You wanted me to tell you everything. You should be more specific when you do these kinds of interrogations. I can give you pointers if you want."

She glared daggers, causing my grin to widen.

"You should take lessons from the Night Queen. Her glower is a lot more terrifying than yours. I almost peed my pants every time she looked at me."

She stomped forward and backhanded me across the face, the metal collar digging into my skin painfully.

I sucked in my cheeks to avoid reacting. "That wasn't very nice, Day Court lady."

"You insolent little shit," she screamed, slashing the blade across my half-naked chest, blood immediately gushing from the not-quite-healed skin.

I sucked in a breath, forcing my face to retain its mocking expression. "This is basically foreplay for me, sweetheart. You're going to have to try harder than that." I let out a laugh. "You haven't even asked me any questions. I really think you aren't very good at this whole interrogation thing."

She leapt forward, ramming the blade into my

thigh as she let out a high-pitched scream of frustration.

My teeth pierced my bottom lip, the coppery taste of blood coating my tongue as I tried to hold back from crying out. And boy, did I want to cry out. Getting stabbed in the leg was... awful. I almost felt bad for how many times I'd done that to others until remembering why I'd done it. Then I was glad they felt this burning pain.

Irritated by my lackluster reaction, she withdrew the weapon and struck again, impaling my other leg. Without hesitating, she pulled it out and punched me straight in the face with her empty hand, and that time I couldn't hold back my scream as tears dripped from my eyes.

I hated my body's uncontrollable reaction, angry at myself for the vulnerability my tears would expose. I breathed as deeply as I could, narrowing my eyes at her. "Ow."

"You've been inconveniencing me quite a bit with your delusions of grandeur." She said calmly, pulling out a cloth and wiping the blade clean. Her abrupt change in attitude was bewildering. "You are one insignificant human, what gives you the right to go trampling all over my plans?"

"Look, lady. Until right now, I had no idea you even existed, so I think you're giving me a little too

much credit." I could barely make out the words through the pain and exhaustion, my energy reservoirs a nearly empty void. If I tried to heal myself or use my light, I'd pass out. And I definitely didn't have enough power to shift.

"Where is the hybrid?" She asked through gritted teeth.

I furrowed my brows. "What's a hybrid?" The moment the words left my mouth, her fist pummeled into my stomach, bile rising to my throat. I groaned, unable to lean over.

"Don't bother acting dumb, Eleanor told me you had the hybrid with you in Ibrida," she said, pausing for the information to sink in. "Didn't you wonder how we found you at that safe house? Your own mother gave you up. She hates you so much she practically begged me to get rid of you. You see... she doesn't want a child who can't get in line."

It felt like another knife stabbed me in the chest. I'd always known she hadn't wanted me, but a childish part of me had held out some sliver of hope that she'd eventually come around. That she'd want to be a mother to me. That was a stupid wish... It shouldn't hurt as much as it did... but it really freaking hurt.

I squeezed my eyes shut, prying to my tears not

to fall, when the door opened again. Someone with a heavier gait walked down the stairs.

"Is all of this really necessary?" A distinctly male voice emanated across the room. "It's just so... distasteful."

"I didn't ask you for your opinion, Adiel," The Day Queen snapped. "What are you even doing here?"

I forced my eyes open to take in the newcomer. He was tall, towering over the queen as he examined me. He was full of lean, corded muscles, with skin the color of smooth caramel, and eyes the same lavender-color as my torturer.

He stepped closer, his movements graceful and confident; a disinterested and somewhat disgusted expression lining his angular face. His hair was long and black, held back in braids, and I couldn't get the thought out of my mind that he was vaguely familiar.

The queen spent the next few hours continuing with her line of questioning, the time beginning to slip away from me as my brain fogged. My vision blurred and my words slurred. I was confused more often than not, but one thing stayed abundantly clear.

There was no one to hear my screams, no one to come to my aid. I was my only chance, or so I told

myself the same thing over and over. No matter how many bones she snapped, no matter how many slices with the blade she made, I would not break. I would not give her the satisfaction of believing she had won.

I would hold on with everything that I had. I would grasp that bond that was buried deep within me and clutch it tightly.

I would survive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KASAI



The torches on the walls cast a soft glow throughout the tavern, the tables and chairs all pushed to the sides to make room for our clash.

Lograth stood opposite me, tying back his midnight-black hair to the nape of his neck, his muscles bulging with the movement. He was, without a doubt, the largest opponent I'd ever fought. His filed down horns were my biggest worry though, since I could easily outmaneuver him. I didn't need to fight him to know I was quicker and more agile, but those horns would do irreparable damage.

The rest of the patrons circled us, and Ryder shouted his support and encouragement as the

pixies flew about the crowd, depositing and taking orders.

My eye caught the hooded man who'd stepped through the throng of people to get a glimpse of the fight. There was something innately graceful about the way he moved, and by his smaller build, I could only assume he wasn't a troll.

I shook the thoughts out of my head and entered the ring, memories rushing back from the hundreds of times I'd done this for Ahriman as his mantra filtered into my mind. *You are a weapon; you do not fail. You do not falter.* I doubt I'd ever truly escape him.

Lograth clapped his hands together and then against each of his thighs, prompting the others to copy his motions. The room became a cacophony of banging hands against weapons and flesh.

I pulled my twin swords from their sheaths and gave him my most menacing glower as Sanas stepped between us, shaking his head. "No weapons." Well, this just turned into a total clusterfuck. I banked my entire advantage on being able to use my weapons. I shrugged, sheathing the blades before passing them to Ryder, who gave me a confident grin. He believed in me.

"Lograth from Clan Kulond to fight against Lady Kasai," Sanas roared, banging his hands on his legs in

a rhythmic beat. He backed out of the circle and spoke, “let the clash begin!”

Knowing I had one shot to take him by surprise, I bolted forward and threw all of my weight into a round-house kick to the side of his face. It was a great kick. I couldn’t even count the number of opponents I’d taken down with this simple move, but it didn’t have the desired effect.

Lograth stumbled back a step, his eyes wide as he shook his head. And then he scowled at me, his lips curling downward. Letting out a growl that shook the windows, Lograth stomped forward, swinging his meaty arm toward my face in retaliation.

I easily ducked, and side-stepped his body, bringing my fist into his ribs in a bruising punch, before retreating.

Lograth’s range was far longer than mine so if I tried to come at him directly, I’d get hit way before I would have an opportunity to land a blow. I needed to depend on my speed, using combinations and falling back before he had time to react.

I bounced on my toes, making sure not to stay in one place and give him an obvious target. I shifted and circled around him, landing blow after blow and hastily drawing back. My hits were more of an annoyance to him than anything else, but I kept at it,

trying to tire him out. I focused on his sensitive areas, ears, kidneys, and lower back.

I wanted to wait until he was worn out before going for his throat and nose. Getting too close to the front of his body would mean having to take a few hits myself, or possibly getting impaled on his horns.

He roared and spun around, swinging his fists in my direction, narrowly swiping my side with his last strike. His breathing became labored as he struggled to follow my movements, his stamina decreasing exponentially as I dragged out the fight.

I stumbled over a crack in the floor and he took the advantage, bending down and ramming into me, full force. I crashed onto the floor, his body landing on top of mine as he straddled my hips. Word of the wise; there is no worse position for someone to be in than in that one.

I was totally fucked.

He pulled back a fist, snarling as he knocked me right on the cheek, the bone snapping with a loud *crack*.

Tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision as I breathed through the pain. It sucked, but it was nothing I hadn't experienced before. I inhaled, repeating my manta in my mind as the pain dulled,

and brought my hands up, digging my fingers into his eye-sockets until blood poured down my arms.

He screamed, trying to get loose from my hold, shoving against my body in an effort to get to his feet.

Using the leverage of his own body against him, I flipped us over and rained punches down on him, barely able to see through the blood, sweat, and tears on my own face.

When he finally choked out his defeat, I glanced up at Sanas, wiping my eyes clear, trying to decide if I should accept his submission or complete the kill.

Sanas stood stock-still, completely bewildered as he took in the scene before him. His expression eventually cleared and seemingly understanding what I was waiting for, he shrugged. "His fate is in your hands now, Lady Kasai."

I didn't enjoy fighting like the others and I didn't want to kill anyone, but I wasn't aware of their culture or customs. I had no idea what accepting his yield would object him to. "Will me leaving him alive cause him dishonor?"

Shocked gasps swept the room, making me wonder if I'd made an unintentional mistake. Sanas gaped at me. "You would allow him to live?"

I pushed up off Lograth's body, ignoring his amazement, and stumbled to my feet, blinking the

stars from my vision. “My appearance misled him. How was he to know I’ve been trained my entire life to fight bigger, stronger opponents? I won, and the fight is over, I have no wish to take lives unnecessarily.”

Lograth rose unsteadily to one knee and bowed his blood-covered head, his hands clasped in front of him. “You fought with cunning and courage. You were a worthy adversary, and one I will not soon forget. You have my allegiance should you ever require it.”

I nodded and turned to Ryder, who was looking at me with a peculiar expression. There was a raging storm in his eyes as he looked me over, head to toe. The corner of his lip pulled up in a lopsided grin, the sharp angles of his face softening. He was beautiful, too beautiful to exist. And yet there he was, staring at me like I was the only person in the room.

Everything else disappeared, a sudden *need* sweeping through me as I glanced down at his lips. I wanted to taste them. Marching forward until I was directly in front of him, I yanked on his belt and angled his head down until our mouths collided.

His arms came around my body, lifting me up so I could wrap my legs around his waist as he devoured me. His tongue swirled around mine and he tasted like mint and Ryder.

I hadn't even kissed him before now and yet I was absolutely positive this flavor was uniquely him. How he also tasted minty after a long day of traveling, I had no idea, but my mind wasn't focused on that at the moment. I was too busy rubbing my body against his.

Cheers erupted from the crowd and we broke apart, gasping for air. Ryder's face was luminescent in the dim lighting of the tavern. I grinned and unwound my legs, dropping back to the ground as the pain from my broken cheekbone rushed back.

I grimaced, clutching the injury as Sanas approached, a mug in his hands.

"Take this, it will help speed the healing process of your wound," he said, offering the mug with a warm smile.

I nodded my thanks as I accepted it, tossing back the drink and sighing as the hot liquid ran down my throat. The pain dulled considerably, making the return grin I sent Sanas far less painful than it would have been moments before.

"Excuse me," a rough voice said, followed by a tap on my shoulder. "May we speak for a moment?"

Ryder's hand slipped around my waist, pulling me to his side as he observed the hooded figure. "I usually prefer to see the people I speak with, so why don't you go ahead and pull back that hood?"

The male chuckled. "Of course," he gestured to his table, which was back in its earlier position, his companions long gone. He sank down into one of the chairs as he reached up, slipping the material away and exposing long, black braids.

His skin was a lovely shade of tawny, and almost entirely unblemished. Far too smooth to be someone who was used to fighting. I would bet my last ten dollars that he was privileged and used the hood to avoid detection. He was physically strong, his lean corded muscles prominent underneath his fitted tunic as he shifted in his seat. He gazed intently at me through light purple eyes that gleamed brightly in the darkness of the tavern.

He leaned his elbows on the tables and observed me keenly.

"What?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

He let out a sigh. "I'm honestly trying to figure out how to explain myself without sounding like an absolute lunatic." He paused, rubbing the slight scruff of his beard before continuing, "You're the hybrid the Queen is searching for, aren't you?"

Ryder leapt to his feet, grabbing the male by his lapels of his jacket and ramming him into the stone wall behind our table.

Tingles spread through my body; both at Ryder's

reaction, and at my current predicament. The *queen* was after me?

The male didn't move, simply shooting an unimpressed glance at Ryder before disregarding him completely. "My mother," he said, returning his gaze to me, "has been obsessed with finding you for the last few months, ever since she found out about your existence."

"*Your* mother," I said, getting to my feet and moving closer to him in an effort not to raise my voice. "So... she's not my mother, then?"

He shook his head, shaking off Ryder's hold which had loosened with the decreasing tension. "Your father is named Eldor, and is the King of the Day Court. I have no idea who your mother is, though."

I stumbled backward and fell into my seat, my mind racing. For over twenty years I'd wondered. I'd allowed myself in the darkest, quietest hours of the night to hope and pray that my parents would come for me. And here was this virtual stranger casually divulging information I'd longed for as if it was standard chitchat at the dinner table. It somewhat lessened the experience for me even though having my father as a king was a way bigger deal than I expected... and yet somehow, I was disappointed.

Ryder moved to my side, his hand discreetly

moving to my back and rubbing comforting circles across my skin.

“How did you figure out I was here?” I asked, the question burning through my mind as I wondered how our whereabouts were continuously being unveiled.

His expression switched to concern, or perhaps confusion. “That’s the odd thing. I didn’t come here to find you. I had a meeting here earlier when you two stumbled in, outrageously out of place.” He took a sip from the steaming mug on the table. “I only knew who you were because of your Earth clothing and because you bear a closer resemblance to the king. An even closer one to his sister, Alya, but she passed many years ago.”

He furrowed his brow. “How did you get here?”

I crossed my arms and raised a brow. “Why should I trust you with that? I barely know you.”

He shrugged. “True, but if my thoughts lined with the queen’s, we would not be sitting here speaking nicely. I would have portaled to the palace and brought back a legion of guard to secure you.” He rubbed his hands together. “The interesting thing about portals is that they only work through intent.

“Let’s say you were looking for someone but didn’t know their location. All you would have to do is focus on them when you open the portal, which is

probably what happened with you. You likely wondered about your family, so it brought you to the closest family member.”

He looked between me and Ryder. “How intriguing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LENNA



Shouts and clamor of a fight shocked me to consciousness, the metal ring around my throat prodding into my neck. I could no longer feel the pain I knew my body was experiencing. Multiple bones were shattered, and lacerations covered my mostly bare skin, the blood no longer dripping.

I could only imagine that meant I'd been unconscious for a while now, long enough for the blood to stop its flow and congeal. I wasn't quite sure how I was still alive as I was unable to reach my healing powers; the only thing I felt internally was the soul bond that I desperately clung onto with the last dregs of my energy.

The noises increased in volume and before I could process another thought, the door banged

open and feet hurried down the steps, the Day Queen coming into view as she rushed to my side.

Through my blurry vision, I watched as she knelt to the floor, fumbled with a key before slipping it into the manacles. The shackles fell off my trembling feet, and she moved upward, working on the rest of my bindings. My brain tried to piece together what was happening, and why she was removing me from the wall, but I was too spaced out to form coherent thoughts.

I couldn't manage speech, so I remained silent until she finished, detaching the wrist restraints from the wall, and connecting them together.

"Come one," she said as she finished unlocking the metal around my waist. "We need to go." She yanked at my wrists and I toppled to the ground, my body unable to hold my own weight.

An earth-shattering *roar* split the air and she cursed, wrapping an arm around my back and hauling me to my feet. She dragged me across the room and up the stairs, my knees thumping against a few of the steps as we ascended.

She marched me in the opposite direction from the commotion, continuing up another flight of stairs before reaching a doorway that led to the roof. It was pandemonium, gunshots, the clangs of swords, and the twang of bowstrings piercing

through the night air, my befuddled mind attempting to figure out what was going on as familiar voices rang out.

The queen moved me to the edge of the roof, pulling out a knife and positioning it against my throat as she held me up, hissing, "Don't move a muscle, you stupid cow."

Something tugged deep in my chest and I lurched forward, the beautiful melody meeting my ears. Tears swam in my eyes as I thought of Luka, devastated he was gone and hoping that the next life was real so that I might see him again.

I felt the knife pierce the soft flesh under my chin, but she quickly withdrew it, heaving me back against her chest as the shouting rapidly approached.

Kasai stormed onto the roof, a massive feline creature with her; two long fangs hanging low out of its gaping maw. It stood as high as Kasai's shoulder, and its fur was spotted like a leopard. Kasai's bow was out and drawn within a second, her aim directed above my left shoulder.

I wanted to say something. To tell her to leave. That it was pointless, but I couldn't make out the words.

"You wouldn't dare oppose me, Adiel!" The Queen screamed, her grasp on my body tightening in her anger. "Leave... now!"

The beast shook its large head, flecks of spit flying everywhere as it growled menacingly.

“Fine,” The Queen said, extending a hand as swirling blue lights formed into a portal beside us. “Take her back then.” She shoved me to the side before leaping through the portal, the blue lights blinking out the moment her body slipped through the gateway.

My feet slipped under the sudden increase of weight and I staggered backward, pitching over the side of the roof, Kasai’s terrified face the last thing I saw before she disappeared from view.

I plummeted downward fear absent from my mind as my soul song grew louder. I closed my eyes as my hair whipped around my head, imagining Luka’s honey-toned eyes, wishing I could see them one more time before I hit the ground.

Someone screamed my name as a force slammed into me. Arms wrapped tightly around my body, causing the chains to dig deeper into the flesh of my wrists.

Then everything stopped.

“Lenna!” A desperate voice called, the scent of autumn leaves permeating the air.

My brow furrowed. “Luka?” I asked, wondering why I couldn’t see him.

A sob rang out, the body holding me shaking

fiercely "It's me, little assassin. I have you. You're safe now."

Safe?

"Am I dead then?" I murmured, wondering why I still had no energy even in death.

He chuckled. "Of course not. You're just a little banged up." His hands roamed my body and he cursed. "Really banged up."

"I... I thought you were dead... am I dreaming?" I didn't know what was going on, I just wanted to keep hearing his voice, even if I was going mad, so I left my eyes squeezed shut. I was probably still strung up against the wall and the delusions had set in. I'd seen that happen with some of my victims.

"I'm not dead either, Lenna," he said, a gentle finger caressing my face. "And even if I was, you don't think I'd let something as ridiculous as death keep me from you? I'd crawl right out of Hell and come back to your side. Where I belong."

I scoffed quietly. "You mean heaven." I summoned whatever tiny speck of energy I had left and opened my eyes, blinking away the shadows until the blurring cleared.

"It's really you," I cried as I watched tears stream from those honey eyes I'd dreamed of as I plummeted to my death.

He shuddered, blood and gore covering his body

as he held me closer, carefully nuzzling my neck. “My heart stopped beating in my chest,” he whispered, stammering through his sobs. “Seeing you fall off that building will be the single worst moment of my entire life. I thought I’d lost you.” He gave up speaking, seemingly unable to continue, his face trembling against mine.



When we were finally able to calm ourselves down, we broke apart and wiped the tears off each other’s faces. Just seeing him alive imbued me with enough energy to take in my surroundings, noting that Luka had sat us down on the ground at some point, my body firmly encased in his arms.

“Why aren’t you healing?” Luka asked, sitting us up while keeping a supportive hand on my back.

I slipped my hand around his waist, unwilling to separate from him. “I don’t have enough energy to heal. I’m depleted.” Him being near filled my soul to the bursting point, but my body was still weary.

Luka swung me back into his arms and carefully got to his feet before moving slowly. He ignored the people calling his name and walked straight to a car,

buckling me into the passenger seat before circling around and starting the engine and driving away.

I raised a brow.

“They know I need to take care of my wife right now,” he said gruffly, his fingers tight against the wheel.

My brain halted.

Did he just say wife?

“Wife?” I asked as a smile ghosted across my face, and I found that didn’t bother me one bit.

He grinned mischievously. “I’ll ask you properly at some point, but we’ve already bound our souls together, Lenna. There is nothing more permanent than that.”

The cord connecting us hummed as if in agreement, and I nestled further into the seat. “What happens now?”

He shrugged. “All I care about is getting you the largest coffee that exists and an energy bar. Everything else can fuck off until you’re healed.”

“Hey, fang man,” I said, taking in his torn and bloodied clothes. “What happened to you?”

He glanced down at himself, a sheepish expression flashing across his face. “I might have lost it a bit when you were taken. The *Day Queen*,” he sneered at the name, “had brought a small army with

her, but she's the only one who escaped. I carved through most of her people."

He met my gaze, his eyes sad. "I killed way more of them than I should have. Many of them were surrendering, but I was blinded in my urgency to find you. I know I'm a monster, and you deserve better than that, but damn if I'll ever give you up."

I shook my head, reaching over to clasp his hand, ignoring the stabbing pain that radiated through my body. "You're my monster," I said fiercely, determined to make sure he believed it. "And I love you exactly the way you are."

He looked vulnerable, more so than I'd ever seen him. "Do you mean that Lenna?"

"With every fiber of my being."

His shoulders relaxed. "I feel like I've been waiting my whole life to hear you say that." He squeezed my hand, bringing it up to kiss my knuckles. "I love you too. More than all the flowers and plants in my garden, more than all the citizens of my court. And I'll never stop loving you, not even in death."



We stopped at a drive through and he ordered

me a large coffee and a bunch of protein bars and to update our friends that we were okay. Within twenty minutes my energy levels were high enough to feel the cap of my healing gift, and I opened it, relishing in the warm waves of power rushing over me.

My bones fused back together, and my flesh mended as I sat in the passenger seat of the black SUV. I'd never been this injured before and bones snapping back into place sent a strange feeling coursing through me.

"All better?" Luka asked, rubbing his thumb over my healed cheek.

I nodded, and it was the truth. Luka being alive was all I truly needed to be better.

Luka parked the car outside a hotel and pulled out a room key. "We set up rooms for everyone before coming to find you. All we need to do is sneak in, so we don't scare the staff with our gory clothes."

I hopped out of the car, holding out a hand for him to take. "I got this."

"Are you sure?" he asked, concern lining his face. "You were hardly awake a few minutes ago."

I nodded, and he took my hand, grinning down at me as the cool sensation passed through us, making us invisible. He led me through the hotel,

up the elevator to the third floor, and into our room.

I deactivated the invisibility and pulled him to me, pressing a kiss against his lips.

He withdrew and stepped back, taking my hands in his. "Are you happy with this life? You don't want to try and settle down with a human and get a regular job?"

"A regular job?"

He nodded.

"What would I do with one of those? Regular jobs are for ordinary people, Luka. I am most assuredly not an ordinary person. Besides, if I go gallivanting off into mainstream society, who will keep you out of trouble? And where would you be in this strange universe?"

He shrugged. "At Court, alone."

"Is that what you want?"

"Of course not!" He said hurriedly. "I just want to make sure you have everything you could wish for."

"I want to be wherever you are Luka." I closed my eyes, listening to the beautiful harmony that was our soul bond. "I want to be wherever you are."

I opened my eyes to see Luka an inch away staring at me, the honey tones of his pupils blazing. "Well, that settles it then." He dropped down on one knee, pulling a simple, princess cut diamond ring

out of his pocket. "Little assassin. Lenna. My love. My bonded soul. Would you do me the utmost honor of agreeing to be my wife?"

"You're sure that's a good idea? I'm not a vampire, and I'm definitely not royalty. Would your people even accept a marriage between us?"

He grinned. "And that is precisely why I want to marry you."

"You want to marry me because I'm not a vampire?" I asked, brows furrowed.

He chuckled. "No. I want to marry you because the first thing you said was ask if it's a good idea for my people. You don't look at me and think about what my crown can do for you. You love me for who I am, not my title."

"Well, to be fair, you didn't tell me you were a prince when we met."

"What? You think you wouldn't have stabbed me if I said I was royalty?"

I touched my chin, debating it. "I would maybe hesitate a moment or two."

He threw his head back and laughed.

Pulling me against his chest, he lowered his face to mine, a hairsbreadth away from my lips. "I need to hear you say it."

I smiled. "Yes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LENNA



The morning rays of light on my face woke me up, my legs tangled in the white, cotton sheets. I moved my arm to my side in search of Luka but came up empty.

Worried, I sat up and opened my eyes, glancing around the room until the sounds of the running shower met my ears, the sound calming my racing heart. Getting out of bed, I made my way into the bathroom and slipped into the shower, wrapping my arms around his waist from the back.

His chest rumbled and he held on to my hands, leaning backward into my touch.

“What happens now?” I asked as I pressed my forehead into his back, water streaming down our bodies. He’d told me before we’d fallen asleep that all the hybrids had escaped from the blast and he’d

gotten ambushed on the side of the house by assassins. That's why I hadn't been able to find him before the blast. I wished I could bring them back to life just to tear them to pieces myself.

He sighed, turning around in my arms to face me. "I'll be honest, it isn't looking great." He rubbed the dark scruff that had lengthened in the recent weeks. "There is at least one leak, and we have no idea who it is or how they are disclosing confidential information. Aside from that, the Day Queen escaped, and can open portals to Earth anytime she wants." He paused, trailing a finger down the side of my face. "And let's not forget the Night Court Queen, who is still refusing aid even with the new information."

I grinned, despite the circumstances. "We really won the lottery in the mother department, huh?"

He chuckled, brushing his lips against mine. "So, I guess the only thing left to do is to have you take over Ibrida, figure out and kill the informant, and kill the Day Court Queen. No big deal, right?"

"If Ryder was here, he'd say *easy peasy*. Hang on a minute... where is Ryder?"

"He and Kasai portaled back with the Day Court Prince and helped us fight. I'm not going to lie, that prince is a bit terrifying," Luka replied, his voice more amused than scared. I was interested to hear

about Kasai's new brother, the parallels in our lives not escaping my notice.

"Why, who is he?" I asked, taking the opportunity to shampoo my hair.

"His name is Adiel, and he can transform into a Smilodon. It's similar to an extinct feline species called the Saber Tooth Tiger," Luka said, and a memory from the night before rushed back.

"I saw him! He was on the roof with Kasai when I fell." I rinsed the soap out of my hair. "I honestly thought I was hallucinating." I opened the shower door and grabbed a towel off the rack, wrapping it around myself before handing another one to Luka.

"You should probably know," he started, my eyes glued to where he was rubbing with his towel, "we haven't told Sofia what's going on. Partly because she's in Ibrida, but mostly because we were worried how she'd react knowing you were captured."

He followed me into the bedroom, handing me a bag with my belongings inside and my heart warmed from his thoughtful gesture. "Zander heard she's progressing really well in her pregnancy, but since they don't have ultrasounds, they can't really confirm what's going on. We don't want to needlessly stress her out."

I would have made the same decision, not because of Sofia's reaction, but just in case there

were listening ears around her. I wasn't sure if her being there was the right move, but ultimately, we'd had no choice. A sudden wave of excitement rushed through me at the reminder that I was about to see my closest friend again. It had been *far* too long.

"Fang man," I said, pulling on my new suit, glad I'd have the extra protection for what was to come. "How long was I... how long did she have me there?" After those first awful hours, I'd completely lost track of time, everything blurring together whenever I emerged into consciousness.

His face crumpled, pain radiating every in of him. "It's Wednesday. You were with her for a week."

My mouth dropped open. "A week?"

"Yes," he growled. "She and I are due for a meeting." The way he said it made it clear he intended her to suffer long before ending her life.

I kissed his cheek before running a brush through my golden locks. "Make sure it hurts."

His eyes snapped back to me in surprise before he grinned. "My vicious, bloodthirsty, little assassin." He walked up to me, tilted up my chin and kissed me. "All *mine*," he growled.

I threaded my fingers into his hair, jerking him closer and sucked in his bottom lip. "And you're mine."

“Until I take my last breath, and then for whatever comes next.”



We finished getting dressed and went to meet the others, who were all thankful for my return to health, before gathering the hybrids and heading out to Ibrida. I was lucky I could heal so quickly, what with all we had to do.

After parking outside the seemingly abandoned property, I fell into step beside Zander as Joe swooped down to perch on my shoulder. “Is everyone in position?”

We’d decided the best way for our plan to work was to have Zander’s inside people bring as many vampires into the shopping complex at the entrance to the city as possible. Making the most noise as we could so Eleanor wouldn’t be able to deny us.

Zander nodded and turned to the crowd. “Alright, everyone. Remember to be as cheerful as possible, and make sure to yell out thanks to the Regina.” He finished, smoothing out his shirt and stood taller, confident. The crowd raised their hands and cheered, the children running around excitedly.

“Zander,” I said, trying to find the words. “You know what I’m going to do... right? You know that I need to...”

“You’re going to assassinate her,” Zander stated, not asked. “I know. I’m not saying I’m happy about it, but she wasn’t a real mother to either of us. I won’t stop you when the time comes, but I won’t help you kill her.”

I nodded. “That’s understandable.” I’d spent the last two hours conserving my energy, drinking coffee and protein bars until I was too stuffed to eat or drink anymore. I was buzzing with energy, my gifts humming beneath my skin.

Part of me was a bit anxious to confront Eleanor, but it wasn’t out of fear... it was because I still wished I could deny that she’d tried to have me killed. I also hated that she was too much of a coward to do it herself. I wasn’t sure which part bothered me more; that my own mother wished for my death, or that I was born from someone so weak-willed.

Luka entered the building first, Quinn and Nikita flanking him, their swords in their sheaths. We were trying to put on a jovial facade. Trey and I took up the rear, letting all of the hybrids and their companions into the city before making our way in.

The glamour Min-Jun Nai created was nothing

short of impressive to say the least. The moment we exited the dilapidated structure, the noise that erupted from the city was deafening, and I clapped my hands over my ears until they adapted. No guards stood at the entrance; Eleanor completely relied on the glamour to keep her people safe.

Shopkeepers and customers exited the stores, disregarding their wares as they watched our party walk down the street; children's hands clasped in their parents', and the elderly supporting each other as they sang the Regina's praises.

Zander addressed the public. "The Regina has graciously accepted these wonderful people into Ibrida, some of which are hybrids like many of us. It is my mother's wish that those who have the space, step forward and offer to house these people until we can find them alternative residences."

The citizens of Ibrida immediately came forward, extending invitations to our group, though I couldn't help but realize the hybrids were offered first. Baby steps. I had fully been prepared to respond to any naysayers, but they seemed animated by all of them, especially the children. The people crowded around them.

Leaving the crowd with Zander to handle the sleeping arrangements, I stalked toward the estate, pulling on my substantial reservoir of power as I

drew closer. Footfalls came from behind and I spun around, materializing my light armor before seeing that it was Luka.

I relaxed marginally, dissolving the armor and waiting until he was by my side before continuing my march. "You don't have to see this," I said, almost wishing he wouldn't have to witness me commit matricide.

"I think we're past worrying about witnessing each other's darkness. We are the same, little assassin. It just took me too long to figure it out. We constantly battle between the light and dark when it comes to what we perceive is justice." He held out a hand, intertwining our fingers as the estate came into view. "I see you. Every broken, dark, and ruthless part of you, and I love it all."

I halted as warmth poured into my heart, those tattered parts strengthening and piecing themselves back together. I grabbed the front of his jacket, jerking him forward so I could press my lips against his, the scent of autumn leaves and the melody of our souls drifting through the air.

We broke apart, and he grinned that smile that always stopped my breath. "I have your back, little assassin. Go get your revenge."

Feeling full to the brim of love despite the upcoming confrontation, I stormed into the build-

ing, my light inching over my skin until it formed full body armor. I was taking no chances.

“Ms. Turgenov, what is the meaning of this?” Wyatt’s voice called out as he hurried forward, his white hair slicked back, emphasizing his blood red eyes.

“Where is she?” I barked, tendrils of light shooting off me in every direction. I must have been a sight to see, as his eyes widened in fright.

“Um... she’s in a meeting with the Council members.” He glanced at his watch. “Th... they should be out sh... shortly.”

“Show me.” My tone left no room for argument, and he didn’t bother, preferring to lead the way in silence, throwing side-eyes in my directions every few steps as Luka prowled behind us.

He pointed to a door and stopped. “If that’s all, Miss, I’d like to be on my way.” He clearly had no real loyalty for his wife, though from how she treated him, I wasn’t about to judge.

“Wait,” I said quickly, before changing my mind. “Things are about to change here, especially in regard to how the vampires will be treated. If you have someplace safe to wait it out, I’ll have Zander come find you when it’s over.”

His face blanked. “Oh... thank you very much. I...

I will do that.” He walked away without a backward glance.

I inhaled, gathering my light into two massive balls of energy and launched them into the double doors, flinching slightly as wood exploded, shouting ringing out from within the chamber.

I entered, my light katana materialized and in my hand, my face a picture of absolute violence. The Councilmembers were on the floor, crouching behind their chairs, shock and fear covering their expressions. *Cowards.*

My eyes whipped around the room, disregarding everyone until they landed on her. Eleanor. The reason for my existence, and the reason for my near-death. How poetic. I wasn't ashamed to admit that seeing her disheveled skirt-suit satisfied me greatly.

Her ice-blue eyes flickered between me and Luka as I stalked closer, Luka lingering by the door.

“Hello, Eleanor. Surprised to see me?”

Eleanor straightened, attempting to smooth out her skirt and it hit me what that movement reminded me of. Zander was prone to doing it, so it must have come from her. “I thought you were cavorting with those fools in the Night Court,” she sneered, all pretense at motherly behavior long gone. She must realize I know what she did. I was glad we wouldn't have to play that game.

“You hated me that much?” I asked, my anger rising as I looked at her unapologetic face. “You hated me enough to hire a hit against me?” I laughed, not giving her the opportunity to respond as I moved closer. “You thought to murder an assassin?”

I scrunched my nose in disgust. “Sweetheart, you might have learned to be an assassin, but I was born for it. You’re going to have to try a lot harder to kill me.”

She shrugged, some of the Councilmembers appearing shocked at her lack of denial. “After he begged me repeatedly, I agreed to keep the pregnancy and leave you with Alexei. I wasn’t supposed to ever see you again.”

“And that’s enough of a reason to have me murdered?” I yelled, light swirling around uncontrollably. “Why? Why not just leave me be? I never asked for a relationship with you, I merely wanted you to save innocent hybrids. Something you *already* do.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t save any hybrid; I choose the ones who will most benefit Ibrida. We are a small community, and cannot afford to allow any average ones in.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “So, that’s what the problem was? Not that you were nervous someone would follow us and find Ibrida?”

She scoffed. "Of course. Nai's glamour can withstand anything the assassins bring. They would never enter without a citizen's permission."

I walked around the table that separated us, making my way closer to her, laughing internally when her eyes widened slightly. "Have you picked up a history book? Did you forget what happened to the people who tried killing off those they hadn't deemed *perfect*?" I was shouting now, my hands shaking through my rage, my light escaping erratically. "That's right. They were all killed. All of them."

She backtracked, stumbling on the carpet in an effort to create space between us, but I wasn't having it.

"Ibrida is no longer under your control. Relinquish the Crown to me, and you can leave with your life," I said, swinging my blade up to settle beneath her chin.

She gulped, but glared daggers at me. "Or what?"

I looked pointedly between her face and my sword. "I thought that was obvious." Luka's chuckles came from the doorway.

"You wouldn't dare. I am Regina here!" She looked at the Councilmembers for support, but their gazes were all fixed elsewhere.

I laughed.

"It seems you don't even have the loyalty of your

own people. I guess they won't miss you." I lifted the katana, the metal glinting in the light, but then I paused. "If you had the chance to do it over, would you make the same choices?"

She smirked. "It must kill you to know that I don't love..."

I swung my blade down in an arc, separating her head from her body, her long, blonde locks splayed out on the floor in a tangled mess, the blood splattering across the nearest Councilmember, his face unreadable.

She never finished her sentence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KASAI



Many of the new arrivals had been taken to their temporary homes, and those that remained waited outside the estate for Lenna and Luka to emerge. We all pretended not to hear the shouting and crackling of Lenna's gifts as we sat around, finding ways to pass the time.

Ryder fiddled with blades of grass, putting them against his mouth and whistling through them. He was such an odd duck, but he was growing on me. Especially when he shut up and let me explore his mouth.

Youngling? Tali's voice entered my mind for the first time in weeks, and I whipped around as Violet ran into view, Titus and Tali at her heels. Sofia was a few steps behind, a hand clutching at her distended belly.

Tali!

I dropped the bag of chocolate-covered nuts I'd picked up from one of the stores, and sprinted across the field, my feet pounding on the grass until I reached Violet, wrapping her up in a bone-crushing hug.

"I missed you," she mumbled, sniffing into my shirt.

I squeezed her tighter, giving her back a rub before letting her go and grabbing onto the panthers, my body finally relaxing now that they were by my side again.

Never again Titus said, rubbing his head against my stomach as Tali's tail curled around my leg.

I agreed and ran my fingers through their silken fur, my eyes fluttering shut as I basked in the feeling of contentedness I felt with their arrival.

Something crashed and I looked up to see Lenna exiting the building, her entire body glowing like the moon, Luka by her side like a dark knight. A few hybrids filed out after her, standing off to the side, but seeming to wait for something. I was glad to see her healed with a healthy glow. The two of them were like a pair of reapers on their way to deliver death.

"Zander," Lenna called, her brother waving to get her attention before heading over to her. "Alright,

everyone. Listen up because I am going to say this only once. “Eleanor is no longer the Regina of Ibrida. I have taken up my rightful position and am enacting a few rules to be enforced immediately. Those who fail to follow these rules will be executed without hesitation.”

Shitsticks, she wasn't messing around. She should have been the one born for the throne, not me. Lenna was made for this. For ruling.

The hybrids glanced at each other anxiously, but wisely kept their mouths shut. I wondered what they'd witnessed inside to keep them so complacent. One of them discreetly wiping blood splatter off of his face, his hands trembling.

“Zander is going to be my steward. This means he will be in charge of the day-to-day life in Ibrida when I am needed elsewhere.” She exchanged a sly look with Luka before continuing, ignoring the gobsmacked expression lining Zander's face. “He has the authority to make all decisions in my name, beginning with vetting the Council-members. He has the power to fire anyone from their post he does not believe is worthy of the position and can select people who fit the new vision we have for this city.”

She took a step forward, her light flaring brightly. “The way the vampires in the city are treated is despicable, and you should all be

ashamed of yourselves. Needless to say, that ends today. Everyone in Ibrida is equal, and that will *never* change, so if you can't follow these rules, *leave*." She shouted the last word loudly, her voice reverberating through the trees, a few of the citizens trembled at her words, their eyes full of worry.

Nobody moved a muscle. "Good," she said, roaming her mismatched eyes at the crowd. "You're dismissed." They scattered like bugs as Luka stared at Lenna with utter pride shining in his eyes.

Sofia waddled into view and Lenna dropped to the floor, her hand moving up to cover her face as tears lined her eyes. I was still confused by how swiftly her softer emotions came out when she was with her loved ones, moments after she killed without mercy. It was odd, but after being around Violet for so long, I was beginning to understand.

"What?" Sofia asked, taking another unstable step. "You're going to make the pregnant lady bend all the way down? Bitch."

Lenna choked out a laugh and sprang to her feet, enveloping Sofia in a fierce hug, whispering into her ear.

The moment was broken when the ground trembled, a tree a few yards away ripping from the earth and crashing to the ground. A crack in the earth

appeared out of nowhere, people screaming and running away in droves.

“What’s going on?” Quinn shouted, looking around wildly for the cause of the disturbance. He didn’t have to search for long, the sounds of an incoming army getting louder and louder by the second.

“They must have found us,” I said to Ryder, gesturing for Violet to come to my side.

“Were you able to get any help from Faerie?” Lenna asked as she ran to my side, Sofia staying back with Luka and the others.

I nodded, “I can portal back to get some help,” I glanced through the clearing at the upcoming army. “It might take some time before I get back, will you be okay?”

She nodded and grinned, a whip popping into existence in her hand. “We got this for now.” She looked at Ryder. “Are you with Kasai?”

He met my gaze, a question gleaming in his stormy eyes. I nodded and Lenna ran back to the others.

Violet slipped her hand into mine. “I don’t want to separate again, Sai. Don’t leave.”

I pulled her into another embrace. “This will be the last time. I just need to make it safe for you, then we can be together so much you’ll get sick of me.”

"I'll only agree if you promise to have an annual pizza holiday with me," she said stubbornly.

"You got it." I looked Titus and Tali in the eyes. "You keep her safe. Do you understand? You will not leave her alone even for a second."

Perhaps one of us should remain by your side? Titus suggested, pawing the shaking earth.

Get her someplace safe, far away from here. Then you can find me. I compromised, waving them forward.

They bobbed their heads and shepherded her away with their snouts, her sorrowful gaze piercing my soul.

"You need to get out of here," Lenna was saying to Sofia, who was glaring at her, twin daggers in her hands. "You can't fight in your condition."

"You're lucky you're my favorite person on this earth, otherwise I'd beat your ass for calling this," she gestured to her belly, "a condition."

Lenna grinned. "You know what I meant."

Sofia sheathed her weapons and glowered. "Fine, I'll sit on the sidelines, again. They don't tell you how useless you become the minute you become pregnant. There should be a warning," she grumbled as one of the elderly vampires took Sofia by the hand and gently coaxed her away, tears swimming in her eyes.

Lenna's lips turned down. "It'll be okay. You just take care of that baby, alright?"

Sofia nodded and left with the vampires, a hawk flying beside her at Lenna's command.

I couldn't take another minute of the emotional mess happening around me, so I pulled forth the kernel of power and thought of Sanas, imagining his bustling tavern in my mind. I prayed that they would honor their agreement and come to our aid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
LENNA



*K*asai and Ryder jumped through the portal, leaving the rest of us to hold off the army until they could bring reinforcements.

“Are you ready?” I asked Nikita, who was sitting on the ground, sharpening her sword.

She finished and rose to her feet, her weapon gleaming. “Hell yeah!” She pulled at the sleeves of Sofia’s suit. It didn’t quite fit her since Sofia was a lot curvier than Nikita’s slim frame, but it was better than nothing and would protect her from stray bullets and slashes from blades. A direct stab had a chance of penetrating if it was driven with enough force, but she was safer than she’d expected, and for that she’d been grateful.

“They’re coming,” Trey yelled out as he readied

his sword, a grim expression gracing his features as Luka stepped to my side.

We wouldn't be able to stick together for the entire fight, but I appreciated his presence now, our song drifting through the light breeze. It calmed me in the face of the upcoming battle.

They filtered into the clearing through the trees and my heart stopped. I'd thought she'd gathered maybe twenty or thirty rogues and fae with her. But no... there were at least one hundred people stampeding toward us, grasping swords, bows and arrows, axes, and other strange weapons I'd never seen.

We would be slaughtered.

Terror overcame my senses thoughts of Sofia and Violet being discovered after our deaths running through my mind. I couldn't let that happen. I *wouldn't* let that happen. I summoned the gift I used the least often and called out to the world, bidding the hawks to listen to my wishes. It wasn't a gift that worked instantaneously. Hawks didn't appear out of thin air like my weapons.

But calling out to the hawks that existed in the area was something else. I sent a beacon to the birds and begged them to heed my request. Now all I had to do was wait and try not to die. Simple, right?

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," Quinn said as the warriors

ran forward, some with guns out and pointed in our direction.

I yanked up a shield just in time to shelter us against an onslaught of bullets. “Quinn,” I said, rolling my shoulders as my gift hummed in excitement. “Can your power reach them from here?”

He narrowed his eyes in concentration, cries and giggles broke out among the Day Queen’s people, some of them halting their advance.

“Trey, Nikita, you two spread out on either side and pick them off one-by-one. Just like we practiced at home. Don’t give them the chance to gang up on you. Get in, kill, get out.” They nodded and ran off, feet silently hitting the trembling earth as they sped toward the enemy, their bodies blurring.

The crowd parted and two people stepped forward, I recognized them as Guild assassins instantly. The male was tall and dark, his hands outstretched, the dirt moving with each tremor of his fingers. An earth manipulator. If he wasn’t trying to kill me, I’d be impressed. It wasn’t a common gift.

The second was a female with slated eyes and sleek, obsidian hair. She cracked her knuckles and grinned maniacally.

“I’ll take her,” Luka said, gesturing toward the female.

I raised a brow. “Look who’s lazy now.”

He laughed and zoomed forward, entering into a fight as the earth manipulator drew nearer to me. I checked on my energy levels, and they were good, the light armor strong and secure over my body. I made a mental note to thank Trey for forcing me to practice on my gifts.

I cracked my whip and flung it out in his direction as earth and roots exploded from the ground and flew upward in his own form of shield. I kept at it, flinging my whip again and again, only to be met with stones and dirt and roots.

Quinn was weakening, his hold over the army lessening by the minute as they crowded in, surrounding us by all angles.

I ducked under a wooden spike and spotted the Day Queen in the distance as she fought against Luka. The air vibrated as a kettle of hawks swarmed across the sky, swooping down and tearing at our attackers, focusing on their eyes as I'd commanded.

While the earth manipulator was distracted by my new friends, I took the opportunity and slapping my whip around his throat, yanking the cord until his neck snapped.

Hawks began dropping out of the sky from the multitude of bullets, arrows, and swords, my heart screaming at each wasted life, the pain piercing my chest.

We were outnumbered, overwhelmed, and they were closing in on us. Quinn's voice shouted out and I whipped around in time to witness Summer slipping a broadsword through his back, before using her foot to push him off her blade.

My breath caught in my throat my lips parted in a silent scream. An anguished bellow pierced the air as Trey sprinted through the fray, slashing his weapon at anywhere who dared come close to him, his face murderous.

Summer, noticing his advance, yelped and scampered backward, tripping over her feet as he reached her. He threw his blade to the ground and leapt at her, lowering his face to her neck and ripping out her throat with a snarl.

She was dead before she hit the ground. But so was Quinn.

Barely able to keep my emotions in check, I parried off the advances of my attackers, sending bolts of light into everyone who drew near, tears blurring my vision.

Blue swirls popped into existence beside me and a stream of massive, horned people stormed out, weapons at the ready, their swords and hammers clanging thunderously. Kasai must have given them proper instructions because they were only

attacking the fae and rogues, leaving the vampires and myself alone.

Kasai and Ryder were the last to exit the portal, instantly jumping into the battle, swinging their weapons around. The massive, Saber-Tooth Tiger from the roof, now revealed as Kasai's brother, was there in his feline form, tearing and clawing at the assassins. I noticed he left most of the fae unharmed.

Even with the added help, there were still too many of them for us to fight alone. It was looking bleaker by the moment when I heard my voice being called.

Turning around, my eyes popped wide at the sight of Hailey and Brielle, who had a legion of assassins with them. *Finally*. Hailey waved them forward, and they moved in the way they were trained; silently, not bothering with the yells and shouts the fae and vampires utilized.

I dimmed my light as Brielle and Hailey approached me. "Boy, am I glad to see you."

Brielle gave me a warm smile. "Well, it's the least we could do. Especially since you figured out who was behind all the attacks."

We both looked toward the Day Queen who was now fighting against Kasai. Luka had abandoned her to rip through the army in an effort to reach us when Quinn was killed.

They were both fierce fighters, their bodies powerhouses, their skills different, but still on an equal level. The Day Queen might not be intimidating, but she knew how to wield a weapon, I'd give her that.

My thoughts were interrupted when a group of fae sprang toward me suddenly, attacking from all angles. I switched to my katana and fought them off, spinning and slashing with my blade, warding off their attacks as Hailey and Brielle were caught in their own battles. Even with all of the coffee, it'd been a while since the fighting had started and my energy levels were lessening.

Hoping my suit would be enough to protect me, I dissolved my armor to conserve my power as I battled the three opponents simultaneously.

It seemed like we were finally gaining the upper hand, the fae and rogues losing more numbers as the fighting continued, and I was beginning to feel more confident until something caught my attention of the corner of my eye.

An arrow protruded from Kasai's shoulder, another one piercing her thigh, and she dropped to the ground, her swords falling to her sides, her face unreadable from my position. I cried out in warning as I parried an attack, the queen stepping forward triumphantly.

Time slowed as she raised her blade, the iron shining as she positioned the weapon for a killing blow when an arrow shot through the back of her head. Straight between her eyes. A figure stepped forward as the Day Queen toppled to the ground, dead, a bow in his hands and a quiver on his back.

His umber skin and angular face matched Kasai's perfectly, the only difference was his shaved head and his age. That *had* to be her father. He crouched on the floor beside Kasai and lifted her chin, smiling at her in a way that made my heart clench.

It was the way Papa had looked at me. I turned away, tears in my eyes as I slashed the throat of one fae before gutting a second, all the while letting out a scream of rage. I kicked the knees out of the third before impaling him in the heart, adamant to give my attacker the same pain that I felt.

Everything quieted down considerably once the Day Court Queen was dead. Most of the fae dropped their weapons, choosing to yield rather than fight, which Nikita said meant we had to accept.

Otherwise, we'd be the bad guys. *Politics*.

I rushed over to Luka, launching into his wide open arms, and buried my face into his neck.

He held me tightly while I dissolved into wracking sobs, Quinn's death finally hitting me.



The next few hours were spent with gathering the fae and rogue assassins who had yielded and bound them in chains. They were going to be brought back to Faeries with the fighters that King Eldor had brought over, Kasai deciding to return with him.

Thirty-four lives were lost on our side. Stolen because of one woman's selfish need for control. The Day Queen had felt so threatened by Kasai's claim to a throne she didn't even know existed, that she'd infiltrated the Guild to take out all hybrids. The Guild, already bearing hatred toward anything different, were happy to help her exterminate them.

It was the most insane, convoluted scheme I'd ever heard. The king had laid it all out for us in the aftermath, explaining how the queen found out about Kasai the year before, when she'd discovered the letter from Ahriman. Apparently, the owner of the fighting ring had known who Kasai was the *entire time* and had been giving Eldor reports every few months.

It didn't seem like Kasai was happy with that knowledge. She'd gone into an epic rampage, chopping her mother's body to pieces with her swords.

Once the fighting was over, Trey had vanished into the night, leaving nothing but his phone with a message not to come looking for him. Luka was sure he'd be back when he was ready, but I didn't expect to see him again.

They'd never confirmed it, but I'd been wondering if there was something deeper between him and Quinn for a while. Their connection was deep and sincere. It would probably hurt him too much to see us and be reminded of what he lost for a very long time. And I understood.

I'd healed Kasai's wounds easily, the rest of the fae and trolls politely declining my offer of healing. Their Chief, Sanas, explaining that they had their own methods back at home. They stuck to the sidelines and kept to themselves but accepted our words of gratitude with simple nods. They all departed for Faerie not long after.

Hailey's injury was more complex. One of her hands had been chopped off, and no matter how much healing power I pushed into her limb, I couldn't get it to reattach, so she'd grabbed a sword, stuck it into a fire and cauterized her own wound. The smell was atrocious and brought bile up my throat.

Master Doku had been killed, along with a few other Guild assassins, so we built pyres to burn the

dead. Despite the fact that most of the fallen were our enemies, we honored the traditions of the Guild by adding them to the pyres as dawn crept along the horizon.

Sofia had returned to the clearing when it was safe, breaking down in tears at the news about Quinn, but happy to see the rest of us alive. We sat on the ground together, her head leaning on my shoulder as we watched the flames flickering away, the smoke spiraling upward toward the clouds. A sudden sense of peace swept through me, and a smile touched my lips, the feeling so similar to Quinn's gift.

Cade hadn't made an appearance, and I hoped he'd had a change of heart, choosing to leave his hatred behind him. That was really all I could hope for anyone, myself included.

It would take some healing, the kind I couldn't create with my mind, but I hoped we would all get there one day.

ONE YEAR LATER
LENNA

The past year had been a whirlwind of emotions as our entire lives changed. My hostile takeover of Ibrida had gone over quite well, despite the occasional outbreak from the old Council, who'd apparently not wanted things to change. A few of them had attempted a coup, but Sofia had seen right through it and brought me the evidence.

I'd strung their bodies up as a warning, and it hadn't happened since. Luka had thought it was hilarious.

The vampires in the community were thriving, the hybrids accepting them into the mainstream community rather seamlessly. The earlier bad behavior had stemmed from a select few hybrids, who I'd taken care of swiftly and viciously, making it

abundantly clear I wouldn't accept any further hatred. My methods had yielded positive results.

That had lasted about half a year, until I moved to the Night Court to be with Luka, who had made it clear to his mother that he was taking back his crown. She'd reminded him that it was only possible if he was married officially, so here I was, wearing a tight, floor-length white wedding gown.

I stood opposite Luka, his honey-toned eyes warm and bursting with love as we were surrounded by our friends. Kasai had come from Faerie, telling me how she'd spent the year learning about her people and her future responsibilities. They had the same nonsense rule about marriage in order to rule, and she was contesting it. She was going through trials to prove her ability to rule on her own. I had every faith she'd succeed.

I didn't know what had happened between her and Ryder, but they were standing at opposite ends of the wedding party, refusing to meet each other's eyes. I offered to rescind his position as official liaison between the Night and Day Courts, but he refused, preferring to stick it out.

Sofia had given birth a few weeks after the battle to a beautiful baby boy, who she named Mikon, after Ekon and her brother. A few months later, she ran into my room in the middle of the night, frantic

because he'd transformed into a tiger cub and she didn't know what to do. He'd refused to switch back for a week and she'd been terrified, thinking she'd have to raise a cat as her baby. Looking back, she laughed about it, but it was terrifying for all of us at the time.

Nikita stood beside Sofia, their matching sunflower-yellow bridesmaid dresses shining in the light. She'd taken Trey's disappearance and Quinn's loss pretty roughly this last year, only coming back to herself these past few weeks once Luka had promoted her to head of the Guard, a position she'd taken seriously.

Luka grinned that beautifully mischievous grin as he held my hands in his. "Do you agree to stand and rule by my side as equals. To share every victory and every struggle all the days of our lives?"

The beautiful melody that bound our souls together as one wrapped around me, sinking into my chest and caressing my heart. There was nothing to be frightened of. This was simply another chapter in my life, one that I would spend with the most important people by my side.

I smiled up at him, my entire being emanating love and affection for the male in front of me. "I do."

THANK YOU

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Shana fell in love with reading as a child by escaping into the fantasy lands of Hogwarts and Narnia. When she isn't writing or taking care of her kiddos, Shana spends her time reading, exercising, experimenting with cooking, or traveling around the world.

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The Assassin's Daughter

The Assassin's Revenge

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