

# Prologue

*Location: The Genesis Territories of the Vampire on the eastern side of the States of America — the former United States*

*Philadelphia Territory — Military Headquarters*

*Date: Thursday February 22, 2056*

*Time: 22:41*

Romeo marched into General Galen's chambers gripping the bottom end of the transfer papers given to him moments before.

"What the hell, Galen. Do I do my job like I need a partner?"

Slightly annoyed by the interruption, Galen looked up from what he was doing. He ran both hands over his dark hair, pulled back and clubbed at the nape of his neck, making sure any stray pieces were caught behind his ears.

"I can't stand it when you presume to know what I need." Romeo waved the official documents at him.

"I hardly presume to know what you need." Galen stood, picked a pile of workbooks off his desk, and moved to the presentation area of his room, arranged with black board and chairs neatly set for a seminar on domestic violence for new cadets coming into the academy. "She is who I want you to have."

"She?" Romeo pulled at the crumpled forms in his hand. "What? No, he's a he. His name is Andrew."

"Her name is Andru."

"That's not right. I saw it. His name is ..." Romeo ran his finger along the information boxes at the top of the page. "Anastasia Drucilla Weber? Her commanding officer says she goes by the name Andru." He looked at Galen, his brows pulled together. "That's dumb. What girl has a name like that? I already can't stand her."

"She will be good for you," Galen smiled.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Romeo put his hands on his hips and his weight on one leg, wondering why every so often Galen decided he needed to be saddled with a neophyte or an old-timer headed for retirement. "I do just fine on my own."

Galen opened his mouth, only to be cut off by a hand gesture.

"I'm a first captain — your first captain, correct?"

Galen nodded, looking a little exhausted by Romeo's attitude.

"That makes me above all the other captains and their little lieutenant partners, correct?"

Galen nodded again.

"And you're my sire, right?"

Romeo knew how it angered Galen when he spoke of their relationship in that way.

"Yes," Galen agreed, "you are a part of me, and I would like you to —"

"We've been through this many times," grumbled Romeo. "I don't like partners. I don't like someone answering to me, and I certainly don't want to answer to someone. I don't like having to deal with the needs of a human during my shift."

"Vampires eat," said Galen accusingly. "You break for dinner."

“I stop at the bar, pay for a warm body, and leave. It takes me ten minutes — fifteen if the place is busy. I never have to piss. I never have an upset stomach.” Romeo looked at the papers he was still holding. “And I never have to fix my makeup.”

“Well, you are in luck,” smiled Galen and he made his way to where Romeo stood. “She seems to be one of those ‘goth’ people. I think I have only ever seen her wear heavy black eyeliner. How long can it take to fix something that looks a mess already?”

“Are you kidding me?” Romeo slumped into the chair in front of Galen’s desk more agitated than he was the moment before. “A goth chick?”

Galen put a hand on the back of Romeo’s head and the other on the chair’s arm. He kissed the younger man’s forehead and then set a series of small kisses on his cheek.

“I think she will make a good captain one day. Will you teach her? For me?”

“She’s a rookie,” complained Romeo even as the feeling of Galen’s hand in his hair drained the tension from his shoulders. “I mean literally. She’s just stepped out of the academy. She’s only been an officer for six months and three weeks. She has years to go before she can take the captain’s test.”

“I know,” Galen whispered. He ran his hand down Romeo’s chest until it was between his legs. “Please.” He squeezed until Romeo squirmed in the seat. “For me.”

Romeo turned his face so his lips touched the man that converted him — the man who could infuriate him and yet make him feel as no other person or vampire could. He kissed the vampire that would die for him, and he knew he couldn’t deny him no matter how much he wanted to.

The soft touch of Galen’s fingers on the back of his neck was so relaxing it sent chills down his spine.

“You owe me one,” said Romeo softly, and when Galen drew back Romeo pulled his shirt to bring him in for another kiss. “And just so you know, I let you seduce me into doing this.”

“Of course you did,” said Galen as he straightened. “That would be the only reason you acquiesced with such ease. Not at all because you are weak to the pleasures of the flesh.”

“Fuuuck you,” said Romeo, trying not to smile.

The bell chimed and the door to General Galen’s chambers opened. A woman — no, a girl — dressed in urban fatigues, a black long-sleeved button-down shirt, and tie closed the door and walked to the last row of empty chairs awaiting cadets. She looked around the room and then at the two men looking at her. She set her backpack on the floor and fell into military stance.

Romeo glanced at Galen and then back to the girl. He didn’t know her, but he thought she was attractive, even if a little odd looking. Her hair was a short, black mess, as if she hadn’t combed it that day, or ever. Her ears were small, maybe slightly pointed, although it was hard to tell with so many earrings trailing the edge. She didn’t have overly large eyes, but he could see them just fine. They were greenish and a bit wider set than average. Her jaw was strong, but not like a man’s, and she had a ring in her nose and bottom lip.

“New cadet?” he asked Galen. “Your twenty-three hundred appointment?”

“Hello, Andru,” said Galen. “I expected you half an hour ago. You knew to come here, yes?”

“Wait? Seriously?” Romeo scoffed and sat straighter in the chair. “This is her? She’s tiny. She’s not even five and half feet tall.”

“I apologize, my Lord,” said Andru, frowning at Romeo and then putting her eyes back to the floor, as is proper when in military stance. “I was told you wanted to see me the day before I went on vacation. That was two weeks ago. I just got back, and I forgot and went straight to roll call.”

“Vacation?” asked Romeo, glaring in her direction.

“Yes, sir.”

“Who takes a long vacation when they’ve only been at a job for six months?”

“It was planned a long time ago.” She looked up, allowing Romeo to think more of her for disregarding the archaic rule of not looking a superior vampire in the eye, and mentally punishing her for thinking the rules didn’t apply to her. “I told my group captain when I got out of the academy.”

“I see,” said Romeo, noting the slight tremor in her voice and enjoying it. “Where did ...”

Suddenly he smelled something so wonderful, but so strangely out of place it made him pause. It wafted around the room the way good cooking tends to move slowly throughout the house. Only this smell punctured its way into his brain the way the metallic odor of blood pushes aside most other thoughts.

It was a smell he loved. The scent of deep woods, of swamp oak, cedar, and the honeyed pine of cottonwood buds. It was a damp smell, as when the rain saturates the earth, matting the leaves to the ground in clumps. It brought back memories of childhood and family and young love.

“Romeo,” said Galen, staring from behind his desk.

“Hmm?” Romeo startled as if poked. “What?”

“You were about to ask the lieutenant a question?”

“Oh.” He looked at Andru, puzzled by what happened. “Where did you ... where did you go?”

“Excuse me?” Andru looked around; she was standing in the same spot.

“Where did you go on vacation?”

“Oh, um, Baker Trail.”

Romeo heard a faint cuckoo sound and rubbed his jaw, bemused.

“Near Pittsburgh,” offered Andru.

“I know where it is.” Romeo squinted at her. “It must have been freezing. Why would you do that in February?”

“It was really cold,” she nodded. “My boyfriend likes to live outside no matter the temperature.”

“You do everything your boyfriend wants?”

An unkind expression flashed across her face. She twisted her mouth and clinched her jaw. Romeo was fairly certain she’d bitten into her cheek. He wondered if it hurt or if she were used to it. He smiled to himself, thinking she was a feminist, and how he would have fun yanking her chain about it.

“I like it too,” she answered with an edge in her voice.

Romeo got up, walked toward the lieutenant, and sat on the edge of his father’s desk.

“Why do they call you Andru, Anastasia Drucilla?”

“It’s a combination of —”

“Yeah, I got that. But why Andru? Why not Ana or ...” He looked her up and down. “Shorty?” *Or pain in my ass*, he finished in his head, thinking loud enough for his father to hear it.

She looked at him, none too happy with the interrogation.

“Because that’s what my parents called me.”

He stared at her, deciding if he should acknowledge the chip on her shoulder, make her cry now and get this over with, or wait it out and slowly pick away at her over the next few weeks until she begged Galen to be transferred.

Another low cuckoo sounded.

“Well, it’s a stupid name,” he said, unable to keep his cool at her brusque tone.

“It’s a nickname. I suppose my parents could have pulled a misnomer from ancient poetry and called it a day, but I wasn’t so lucky.”

Romeo frowned at the big smile on Galen’s face.

“Did she just call me a misnomer?”

Galen put his hands up, not wanting to comment.

“How is my name a misnomer?” Romeo glared at the woman who seemed to grow larger with her attitude. “What do you mean by that?”

Andru stood quietly looking at the floor, clearly trying to decide if she should say anything else that would get her into more trouble.

“Please, lieutenant, don’t be shy.”

She finally looked at him.

“Go ahead; enlighten me.”

“A misnomer is a meaning that is known to be wrong — as if maybe a thing was named before it was known what it was. And from what I’ve heard from the men and women around here,” she said confidently, “you’re nothing like your namesake, Romeo.”

Romeo’s eyebrows rose so high he thought they might leave his head. He didn’t know if he should laugh or be completely pissed. He did admire her audacity even if he didn’t want to.

“Take the rings out of your nose and lip.” He motioned to her face with his hand.

“What?” She blinked at him.

“Take the rings out of your face, lieutenant.”

“It’s regulation,” her hand went to the small ring in her lip.

“I said take it out.”

When she hesitated, he pushed out a sigh.

“Have you ever been in a fight, lieutenant?”

She hesitated again, looking as though she felt inadequate or bothered by the question.

“No, sir.”

“That nose ring will be the first thing to be ripped out. And the lip ring the second, so take them out.”

Andru sighed but did what he told her to do.

Romeo heard another soft cuckoo sound. He looked at Galen.

“What the hell is that?”

“I have no idea,” Galen frowned.

“It’s um ...” Andru’s voice shook just a little. “It’s my phone.”

“What?”

“My phone. It fell in the river, and now I can’t change the settings. It’s broken.”

Romeo looked at the ceiling as if patience would fall from it. Again they heard the cuckoo.

“Jesus, who’s pinging you?”

“How would I know?”

Romeo narrowed his eyes at her blatant lack of respect.

“Give it to me,” he snapped. “Give me your phone!”

He walked to the lieutenant as she bent to the floor and searched her backpack. She pulled out a small shirt, a scarf, gloves, a toothbrush, a banana, soap, and a hairbrush and put them on the floor.

“Really?” remarked Romeo. “Did you seriously just get back?”

“Yes,” she huffed. “I said that. And I couldn’t change the setting so I tried to hide it under my stuff.” She found the phone and stood. “Here.”

She held it out for Romeo, but the thick scent of that forest blew over him, stunning him speechless. He couldn’t believe it. It was coming from her! And she was suddenly all he could see. He wanted to be near her. He wanted to crawl inside that smell until it coated him. He wanted to put his fingers in her mouth to see if her spit smelled like river water or wet leaves. He wanted ... he wanted to

do things to her.

“Here,” said Andru, waving her phone back and forth. “Do you want it?”

At that moment the cuckoo chimed again, bringing Romeo back to himself.

“Did you even shower before you got here? You smell like you slept under a pile of wet dirt. And you look exhausted.”

Her expression of embarrassment nearly made him feel bad, and he hated feeling bad. He snatched the phone from her hand.

“It’s big enough,” he said, staring at the picture of the blond-haired, blue-eyed man that had popped up on the screen. “You’ll need a hands free while on duty. Do you have one?”

“No, I don’t.”

He flipped angry eyes to her, but only for a moment. The color of her eyes seemed to have changed a little. They were more amber, as if a fire were inside of her, and he suddenly felt that he didn’t want to give her too much attention or he might lose his train of thought again.

“Who’s Ibex?” He turned the phone out so she could see the photo. “That’s what you have for his name.”

“That’s Dacon, my boyfriend.”

“Really?” Romeo turned the phone back to see the photo. “The way he’s blowing up your phone, I thought he might be your drug dealer. He looks like a drug dealer.”

“I don’t do drugs.”

Romeo frowned; everyone did drugs. He held the phone out for Galen to see the kind of delinquent his new partner wasted time with camping in the woods.

“What’s an Ibex?”

“A particularly wild mountain goat from the European alps,” answered Galen after a moment of thought. “The male has a long beard and quite large curved horns.”

“He’s got the beard.” Romeo lifted his brows in question. “So your guy has really large horns, huh?”

Andru stared at him, not exactly sure what to say.

“This guy could be a leader in Hitler’s utopia. You know who Hitler is, right?”

Andru nodded.

“Don’t get any blonder and whiter than that.” Romeo tapped the phone. “Looks like a Viking.”

The phone cuckooed and Romeo heaved a sigh.

“Sorry,” said Andru apologetically. “We usually meet up after roll call. He knows I’m in the building and is probably wondering why I’m not responding.”

“Ibex is a soldier?” asked Romeo. “He works here?”

“Yes.” Andru nodded again.

“Tell him it’s broken.”

“What?”

Romeo dropped the phone onto the tiled floor, covered it with his boot, and crushed it under his weight.

Galen frowned. Andru’s mouth dropped open wide.

“Why would you do that?”

“So I don’t have to listen to that cuckoo anymore!” Romeo kicked the broken pieces of phone across the floor. “Now you can get a hands free.”

“I can’t afford one of those,” she nearly whined.

“He’ll buy it for you.” Romeo jerked his thumb in the general’s direction.

Andru looked at Romeo and then at General Galen.

“Sir,” said Andru confusedly. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Galen looked up from what he was working on. “Understand what?”

“Why I’m here.”

“You were not told why I wanted to see you?”

“No,” she answered, clearly concerned.

“You are to be the first captain’s new partner.” Galen motioned to Romeo, who had sat back in the chair in front of the general’s desk.

“Why?” Andru looked at Romeo, her distress rising exponentially. “Am I in trouble? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” said Galen, clearly wanting to calm her down. “Not at all. This is a promotion.”

Andru looked at Romeo, unable to keep the panic off her face.

“Not really promoted,” smiled Romeo. “More like a lateral move.”

“She will be a first captain’s partner,” said Galen.

“Yeah, but just because she’s with me doesn’t give her any more authority than she has now.”

“Granted,” said Galen. “But she is still a head above the rest simply by being placed in your care.”

Romeo thought the girl looked like she was going to be sick. The thought made him smile wider.

“Is this ...” she said to General Galen. “I mean ... can I ...” Andru looked at Romeo. “Can I ... decline?”

The happiness drained from Romeo’s face. He couldn’t believe this girl didn’t want to work with him. The nerve. People were lined up to be his partner. It was he who didn’t want to work with her, or anyone else. He certainly didn’t need her. He especially didn’t need her stinking up his truck with her dirty human body. He didn’t need the distraction of thinking about how good she smelled. He always worked better alone, and Galen knew it.

“Well,” said General Galen. “I —”

“No,” said Romeo and stood. “You can’t decline.”

Andru looked at her general for some kind of support.

“Here,” Galen put his signature on a small military form and handed it to Romeo to give to her. “Give this to Lieutenant Katie. She will see you get a new phone.”

Andru took the paper and nodded glumly. She knelt to the floor, wiping at the tear sliding down her face as she put her things back in her pack.

Romeo walked past the girl toward the exit. He banged on the door and his new partner nearly fell on her ass. “Let’s go, dirt bath. I’m late because of you.”

Andru slung her pack on her shoulder and turned toward her new partner.

“Lieutenant,” called General Galen.

She turned around, her expression hopeful that he was going to say this entire thing was a huge mistake and she could go back to her unit.

“Yes, Lord.”

“I know that he can be a bully.”

Romeo impatiently knocked his knuckles on the door, annoyed that Galen called him a bully. Clearly he was the inconvenienced party in all this.

“Yes, Lord.” Andru sighed, her hope deflating like a popped balloon. She turned again to follow the first captain.

“Lieutenant, wait.”

She looked back to see the general walking to the black board holding a handful of pens. His

expression was concerned, maybe regretful.

“Try not to let him get you down.”

“I won’t.” She took a deep breath. “I won’t.”

There are days that pass with ease, so fast you don't know what happened to them. Then there are days that dig in their heels and refuse to move on. As if the Universe takes hold with such a tight grip it would tear off your flesh before giving in to your wishes. I'm beginning to have too many of those days.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The year is 2065...*

If he says we're going to war, I might have to shoot myself in the head.

"Everyone knows we're going to war, Dru. It's in the air."

My fingers brushed my holster. I was glad there was no gun to fill it. Weary, and more than somewhat bored, I pulled the gray beret from my head to wipe a line of sweat trickling down the side of my face. When you're this high up, conditioned air and window shades can't save you from the heat burning its way through the triple panes. I leaned a shoulder on the glass and traced the red thread that created the full moon emblem of the Philadelphia Territory on the front of the hat.

"Stop it. There won't be a war."

Lt. James Von Warner, Loki to his friends, tugged a twisted white cord and pulled the window blind up past his head. Small black goggles forced the light brown hair from his face, leaving his expression open and exposed.

"This is Philadelphia, Andru," he said, motioning with a nod to the tiny people on the city street below.

I nearly rolled my eyes and punched him for using my name in such a paternal manner.

"We're the flagship city."

"No we're not," I frowned.

"Yeah we are."

"New York is the —"

"How long do you think the vampire lords will put up with this level of violence? I think ... do you wanna know what I think?" He continued talking before I could answer, as usual. "I think the vampires are used to being the aggressive party. I don't think our king is happy about being on the other end of

it.”

“Maybe not, but King Jagen is old —”

“Ancient.”

“Okay, but he’s not crazy. He hasn’t made it to where he is with impulsive thinking or action.”

“The separation from the States of America was only sixty-four years ago.”

“I know the history; you don’t have to go over it with me. You sound like a newsagent. And it doesn’t mean we’re headed to war. What do you think? We’re due?”

He shrugged. “There are always random attacks, but I think the last few incidents were antagonistic.” Loki wagged a finger at the window. “If they don’t stop killing us, King Jagen’s gonna declare war, and we’re gonna try to fight, but we’re gonna lose, and we’re gonna die.”

My posture slumped. I think even my eyes slumped.

“By the gods, Loki, you’re too young to be this ... I don’t know, depressing. The States don’t want to go to war. The territories may be small, but we’re not completely incapable.”

“They could nuke us.”

“No they can’t. We’re on the same continent.” I was sure my head was going to crack open. “Understand? The same bit of rock.”

He looked skyward and sighed. I followed his attention and squinted at the bright yellow ball in a perfect August sky. Its white rays were far behind the tree-lined horizon, relentless, and still so beautiful. I slid a pair of goggles over my eyes, unable to fight the harshness of the sun god’s intensity. Most of the soldiers stationed here for any length of time on the high turret of Galen Manor seemed to become immune to the sunlight. I don’t think my eyes could ever adjust to such a degree of brightness. I swear Loki’s irises have faded from a dark chocolate brown to the same honey color as his hair since he started this position two years ago.

My eyes fell to the street encircling the military mansion like a blacktopped moat. Then I looked beyond to the woods of Galen Park. Everything appeared peaceful, but I understood his fear. If the violence from the States continues, King Jagen will declare war, and we will probably lose. Jagen, though not one of my favorite undead, is not a particularly bad ruler. Nor can I completely disagree with a decision of war. You can’t declare a section of the country separate, only to take it back half a century later or underhandedly try to destroy it. Maybe the vampire coerced the American government into handing him its northeastern states, creating our monarchical society as it stands today. However, that was a long time ago and long before a third of our population existed.

Besides, King Jagen never said he would set the vampire loose on society. He didn’t even have that kind of power, then. I’ve heard more than once that the general public’s distasteful reaction to the existence of vampires caught him completely off guard. Considering there were so many movies and books about them, Jagen assumed humans truly wanted vampires to be real. Unfortunately, people thought the Morning Star himself sent him and the other nine ancient vampires to begin the apocalypse. So to keep the peace, and save their asses, they coughed up the Eastern seaboard and a few surrounding territories. Then came the riots, and true mayhem broke out as the American government’s decision shocked and appalled most of the world.

Loki snapped his fingers in front of my eyes. “Gimme my weed, sweetheart.”

“Keep out of my face,” I said, slapping at his hand. “And don’t call me that again unless you want this to be the last time I make a run for you.”

His mouth turned into the sweetest smile I’ve ever seen on a grown man. That’s why I do these things for him. I also do it because, for most of the day, he’s stuck up here like a rat in a cage. I dug into my pocket for a blue plastic bag half full of homegrown marijuana. More accurately, it was New

York grown in Lord Orel's territory.

"I mean it. Those people are weird. Give me a reason not to go back, and I'll take it."

"Jacob's not that bad. Is the little military girl afraid of the big druggie man?"

"He's like five foot six, and how about if I let you drive down to that zoo to get your own pot?"

The green bud reeked in my pocket since I had picked it up, but he inhaled at the mouth of the bag anyway. "That Neanderthal's got the best stuff."

He sat on the edge of his desk and knocked over a full glass of tomato juice onto his materials and icona keyboard. He grabbed a wad of napkins from too much restaurant takeout off the corner of his desk and hurried to staunch the flow. Tomato juice is a real bitch to clean up. I know, I drink it all the time and have had my share of accidents. In fact, tomato juice is popular here in the Territories. It's the most abundant beverage we have. Since our beginning, we've held the favor of the farmers. The States have been screwing over the American planter for more years than I've been alive, so they decided to give Lord Multan, our domestic and foreign trade representative, firsthand buying privileges of their fruits, vegetables, and cotton. It was about 2040 when their government discovered what was going on. While legal, it was underhandedly sneaky. As you can imagine, the Americans were pissed. But if they didn't have their heads so far up their asses buying the same items from Canada, South America, and Puerto Rico, it wouldn't have happened.

The situation is unfortunate because by holding Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maine, and New York, we have plenty of farmland. What we lack is the technological industry. Most of the business moved west when the vampire took over. The States forbade its scientists to share new developments in almost any area, or to fraternize with the scientists from Genesis. Consequently, we're a little slow. Don't get me wrong; we're not in the Dark Ages. Our people come up with amazing technology all the time, especially for military use.

At the inauguration of the vampire's reign, around the turn of the 21st century, the States kept a silent political distance, apart from the necessary trade and peace agreements formed at the onset. Eventually, global curiosity grew, holiday tourism spread to us, and we became quite the novelty. With affordable rates, families can lodge in The Vampire's Bedroom. It's much the same as any hotel chain except there's a vampire behind the desk at night, and the lobby décor looks like a horror film set from any generic goth movie. No mints on the pillows though. Hot Dots instead, which are a soft, round, red candy that gushes red cinnamon liquid when you chew it, turning your teeth and gums blood red for a short time.

There are too many vampire nightclubs and restaurants to count. They serve things like Bloody Mary Burgers and fries in the shape of small wooden stakes. Vampire clothing shops sell dark flowing capes, giant hats with feathers in the top, and poet shirts. No real vampire would wear these items, even if they were born in the era. Keeping the tourists happy with coffin key chains and black bat pencil tops is essential if we want the revenue. Each territory weaves vampire lore into its natural tourist destinations. For instance, the territory of Maine's history had Samuel Mayall's first water-powered woolen mill in the city of Gray. The British would've lost money if the colonies began making wool, so Samuel smuggled his plans for the mill in bails of cloth that he traded to Native Americans. When the British realized what he did, they tried to kill Mayall with poisoned hatpins and boxes filled with guns ready to fire. What the tour now reveals is that Mayall dodged those bullets and survived that poison because he was a vampire. He's dead now, killed in the civil war, but his mill lives on.

Lately, however, the president of the States has been up front about her distaste for us. She meddles in our business negotiations with other cooperative nations, chastising them, and making it increasingly difficult for their citizens to get a permit to vacation here. The fact is that the longer the Genesis

Territories go on as a separate free country, the tighter it entrenches its fangs and weaves itself into societies everywhere with new allies. Only six months ago, King Jagen persuaded the strict German government to house a Genesis embassy outside Hamburg to make contact with the undead there. They hope to come here where they won't be viciously hunted.

The problem is that weeding out the psychos is a long, tedious process that expends military personnel and money. Let's face it, they are vampires, and some of them could use a vicious hunting. And although we have steadfast rules governing this nation, it's not an absolute monarch. Proper channels take time. Bureaucracy isn't racist. In the beginning, King Jagen and the governing lords enacted a standard set of laws, with special, quite specific regulations for the undead population, who are more docile than literature portrayed. This may have to do with being able to get a meal without trickery.

Our King Jagen, along with the other vampire leaders, holds a position and a title. Lord Multan is our trade representative. Lord Brasov, our Lord of Justice, heads our judicial system. However, we do elect judges, mayors, governors, and the like to do most of the work. In the end, Brasov's word is law, but mostly he lets his employees do their job. We're more of a constitutional, or limited, monarchy. Each lord shows higher interest in the grander and more ceremonial aspects of the position, like being a noble figurehead allocating most responsibilities to those elected to work for them. Each of the territories is run in the same basic manner as before they separated — or converted — as the States are so fond of saying. The vampires have never wanted total transformation or to get rich. They've always seemed to have enough of that. They sought the land where they had a safe haven to roam.

Loki finished blotting up the juice and handed me the soaked napkins to throw away. "You know what? You're beginning to sound like my mom."

"I'm not being your mom," I smirked, pursing my lips in a motherly gesture. "I'm just saying, buy your drugs from someone less gross — and don't worry about war. We're not going to war."

"How do you know?"

"Lord Galen will figure it out."

"And if our spooky Lord of War can't? Will you stay?"

"Here?"

"Yes, here. If there's a war, will you fight for them?"

"Them who?" I knew whom he meant.

"The lords. The day-cold. The dusty old vampyre."

"Yeah, I will. It's our job to protect the people living here. Be that human, or the nocturnal minority. Just because they chose a way of life different from the people in the States doesn't mean that life is worthless."

I rubbed my hand over my face. Now I was up on my soapbox. I stopped before I said I'd fight to the death, because I wouldn't want to find out what the States would do to anyone, civilian or military, human or vampire, if that government caught them alive when that war was over.

"I wish I had your conviction."

"Look at it this way," I said, "if we go to war and die, we'll get to the afterlife sooner."

"I'm too young to die! Besides, Heaven isn't ready for me ... or I'm not ready for Heaven."

Heaven is not where I'm going, I wanted to say, but didn't want to start another debate over religious afterlife.

"I don't like fighting," he said. I wanted to make the obvious comment about him being a soldier, but he suddenly looked too young for this job. "Everyone on the outside is so angry at the vampire that they fight amongst themselves without realizing where the animosity comes from. My parents decided

to move here because there were fewer restrictions than in the States.” He smiled. “They’re potheads. Back then, it was peaceful. They didn’t care if there was a king representing the country. England still has the royal family, even if only in name. King Jagen doesn’t do much to run this country either.”

“He runs enough.”

“Not really.”

I didn’t agree. Jagen micromanages. He has to. One thing he needs to be successful as a ruler is happy, healthy humans — not only for food, but to sustain his way of life politically and militarily. There aren’t enough vampires to put his territories in the running as a super power — not even close. King Jagen needs humans to want to live here.

Loki shrugged. “We’ve never been to war, and it seems the States are involved in a military dispute every few years. It’s different now. There’s too much tension. I knew someone who died in the attack at Penn University.” He shuffled about uncomfortably. “War is remote, but still ...”

I put my arm around his shoulders to hug him sideways. He’s about four inches taller than I am, maybe five foot eight, but his broad frame made him hard to hold.

“My grandmother always said not to waste time worrying about what might never happen. If Jagen declares war, then worry. Even if he does, we’re not going to die.”

The change in his eyes was subtle, but those sweet Bambi orbs turned dark. It wasn’t the color, but the thoughts behind them. They fell to my muddy uniform. He picked a finger in the buttonhole at the top of my black shirt. Caked-on mud fell in a semi-dry plop to the floor and I pushed his hands away.

“Don’t touch me. I’m dirty and I’m sore.”

“What happened?”

“Some idiot tried to beat me up.”

“Who won?”

“He’s at the hospital. You wanna go ask him who won.”

“Calm down.” Loki plopped into his desk chair, gliding backwards as he leaned. He stretched his arms behind his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bruise your ego. Let me make it up to you with dinner and a little reefer.”

“No.” I waved my hand. “I’m fine. I’m going to Romeo’s apartment to watch a movie.”

A buzzer sounded. Loki rolled his chair to the view screen that monitored the outside hall. He rolled back and banged the door lock on his desk. His partner stepped inside with a red sack, a newspaper, a cup of something hot, and a donut stuffed in her mouth. She motioned hello with her elbow as she raced to her station. I yanked off the goggles on my way to the door.

“Oh hey,” said Danielle, smiling. “Don’t leave me alone with him.”

“I was going to molest him, but now that you’re here I feel a bit uncomfortable.”

She laughed. I tossed the goggles. She dropped her pastry to catch the flimsy plastic. The door closed on my smile.

## CHAPTER TWO

I wiped the sweat off my chin and refrained from overthinking that conversation. I was depressed enough. The latest attack Loki spoke of forced night-shift human soldiers like me to work days for the

last three weeks. The vampires picked up the slack at night, but the streets needed a heavier presence during the day. I had been trapped in despair with the sticky, heat-crazed lunatics. I really didn't need to contemplate the long-term social and mental ramifications of terrorism on the community and state.

I dusted some of the mud off the front of my uniform. I clicked the button for the elevator and automatically reached around for my backpack — that I left in the Emergency Dispatch Office. I smacked the elevator button again, and chewed a layer of skin off the inside of my cheek. My body slumped against the wall, and I wondered who would clean up the mess if I ripped my head off my shoulders. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I smelled damp earth almost immediately. Darkness crept around me. Whispers filled the silence. I called for Romeo. A barely audible ping swam in the dank confusion. There was a sudden bright light.

“Lieutenant.”

Romeo?

“Lieutenant.”

My eyes flew open. I pushed away from the wall in a panic. It took a few seconds to gain perspective and to understand that I was still in Galen Manor, in the hall of the high turret. Not in a dream — I wasn't in that damn dream.

“Are you all right?” asked Lord Galen. I turned toward the end of the hall to confront the vampire. The owner of that deep voice had a sometimes odd, almost eclectic, European accent. He was looking at me from inside the elevator. “You called your partner.”

He commanded the elevator to wait and he came to me. I was a bit dazed. Whether it was from him or the dream, I couldn't be sure. He looked perfect, as usual, almost like a statue. His hair, easily mistaken for black against his skin, is the darkest brown. Although he usually wore it bound and clubbed back, today it was loose and pulled to one side, ending about mid-hip. His dark brows framed the palest green eyes. And he was frowning, which forced the inner corner of his eyebrows close to his narrow nose.

“General,” I said, straightening to a courteous military stance, with my head straight, eyes down, feet apart, and forearms flat against the small of my back.

Lord Galen, our Lord of War and Peace, is the only vampire leader that doesn't hide out or delegate anything. He takes his duties as general of the Genesis Militaries very seriously. Like the other generals, he has a proxy during the day, General Simon DeFarr. But like most of the vampires over eight hundred years old, he's awake much of the time, so DeFarr's job isn't so tough. However, I'll admit that in the past two years we've all had our hands full. The vampire lords are more vulnerable now than ever. Such is the price of fame, fortune, and land ownership. Giving up their anonymity has cost them the element of surprise, which is a predator's greatest asset. With so many vampires in one large area, a few well-placed missiles would make them history. Of course, the cities would fall into ruin, and many innocent humans die on the same continent.

“Are you all right?” he asked, waving for me to relax my stance.

“Uh ... yeah ... I'm fine. I was ... I think ... I mean I was having a nightmare.”

He always makes me stammer. I truly hate that I sound like a moron — the way my brain shuts down when he's around. You'd think nine years of close connections would rid me of this childish infatuation, but at times like this, it seems to get worse.

“Sleeping while standing can do that,” he said.

“Do what?” I said.

“Give you nightmares.”

I frowned. “Huh?”

“Are you quite sure you feel all right?” he asked, waving his hand in front of my eyes.

“It’s been a long, hot day,” I said, pulling at my beret and running a tired hand over the top of my head.

“I would not know.”

“No,” I said. “I guess not.”

He stepped closer. I moved until my back hit stone. He took another step forward, ignoring the thumping of my heart. He raised a hand, and the heat radiating off my body charged the space between us. His fingers skimmed the area around my right eye where I was hit, and he traced my eyebrow around the steel barbell pierced in my skin. I inhaled a deep breath from his closeness — and from pain.

“The skin has swelled around your jewelry,” he noted.

I nodded because I find it difficult to speak or think clearly when he’s near me.

“You should hold ice to it.” He slowly wiped the corner of my mouth and then turned his pale finger out for me to see the smear of bright red across its tip.

“I bit my cheek,” I said, my fingers blotting where he had just touched.

“While dreaming?”

“I guess.”

“Do you have nightmares often?”

“Well,” I smiled, “only if I fall asleep against the wall.”

See, I do have a sense of humor. It just takes a bit of pain to bring me out of the lust-induced stupor I sink into when he’s around.

His mouth turned up in a thin smile, and he didn’t move, even though he was so close common etiquette would suggest he do so. My nerves wouldn’t allow me to look in his eyes, so I stared at his mouth. It had an intense redness to it, like a perfect apple, and his teeth were as white as freshly fallen snow. It’s not an abnormal condition. The inner mouth of a vampire, especially the older ones, is almost always deep, rich red. Without any other fluids going into their system, all the naturally pink body parts deepen in color, especially the mouth and the rims of the eyes. It even affects their nail beds. King Jagen keeps his fingernails long. They look as if they’ve been painted crimson, and the extended length is cloudy white. It’s creepy.

The awkward moment turned to panic as Lord Galen considered the blood on his finger. For my own personal reasons, I’d rather he not taste it, but Romeo tells me he doesn’t drink the blood of humans anymore. He says that since they’ve been in public, Galen hasn’t wanted to do anything to force the vampires back into hiding. Apparently, at one time his eating habits were vicious. I’ve heard exciting rumors that he hunts deer and other things in Galen Park, the wooded area around the manor. He stared at the blood on his finger.

“You don’t have to ...” What am I going to say? “lick that.” Oh, that was perfect. “That is, I mean, I ... I won’t be offended if you don’t.” Fabulous recovery!

He wiped his finger on his palm and then smoothed his hands together until the blood was gone. I was irrationally insulted. I kind of wanted him to lick his fingers uncontrollably as people do after eating fried chicken. As if we were teenagers, and he couldn’t get enough of me. The things I think at times are truly pathetic.

He brushed his hands down his pants, and I noticed his clothing. The long-sleeved shirt was emerald green and awakened the blanched green in his eyes. The shirt was snug, and the lines of his undernourished chest were visible. His black pants laced up his abdomen, and full-length military boots covered his calves. The clothes, though well-made and of good quality, made him look almost emaciated. I liked it, just as I like almost everything about him.

When I remembered that he could see me, I closed my mouth and forced myself to breathe. He stood still and let his eyes wander. His gaze can be a real palpable thing. It makes me nervous. He does that type of subtle magik on me often. I find it confusing, because most of the vampire lords don't bother with the human class unless to feed. For that they have what the media has labeled "habits" — an elite group of humans passed around for bleeding and sometimes sex. None of them are as young as me. Younger people are naïve, in essence too easy to control. Apparently, that's a turnoff if you're looking for a challenge in your food.

I've asked Romeo why all humans aren't considered too young. He said that some vampire see us as pets, sort of. Consider the attention span of a puppy. Then think of the calm, almost sly machinations of an older dog or even a mature monkey. The adult animal understands and does things the younger have neither the patience nor experience for. I understood, and then I smacked him in the back of his head for comparing humans to dogs.

Older vampires stay away from military personnel because Lord Galen doesn't appreciate his soldiers treated that way in any of the territories, even if they're willing. For the most part, the lords don't want us anyway. They sum up military personnel in one phrase: definition-mindless. We hear it often.

Lord Galen finally stepped back. His eyes focused on my chest, or I should say my shirt.

"Dirty," I said. He raised his brows slightly, and my eyes went wide. "Not me, I mean the shirt. I'm not dirty." I looked at my sleeves, coated with a fine layer of mud dust. "Well, I am dirty, just not ... I only meant I'm not a dirty girl." I opened my mouth, but nothing else came out. By all the gods, my stupidity amazes even me.

He moved to the elevator, motioning for me to follow. I did, and it wasn't only his stature that had me feeling like a lost animal trailing the wolf into his den. He seemed a tad predatory this evening. I moved to his right, twisted my beret in my hands, and placed my back against the wall. I needed the distance. I truly hate these feelings, because I'm not like this with the other vampires in our manor, Lord Cherkasy and Lord Pune. None of the others make me feel like an elevator is a sacred space where you can't talk. The general brought his brows into a frown, as if he were studying me. He clasped his hands behind his back.

"Up early again," I said.

"The sun is down."

I glanced at my watch: 19:15. I looked at the sunrise/sunset clock hanging high over the steel doors. Big green numbers read 19:57. "Not yet."

"One of the benefits for living so long, being so old," he smiled, white fangs barely visible. "Level five?"

"No, I uh, I have to stop by the E.D.O."

"Right," he said, "your belongings."

"Yes. Wait, how did you know?"

He grinned the way Romeo does when he knows a secret, but coming from Lord Galen it was freaky. "I know most of what goes on here, lieutenant."

I stared at him for a moment. I wasn't sure what he was implying, but I knew I didn't like it. "I'll be sure to keep my thoughts secure — around you." And I meant it.

His expression changed from slightly amused to, I don't know, agitated maybe. His head lowered a touch as his body shifted position. The whole movement was far too delicate for a human, and I would've missed it completely had I been able to blink. Unnerved, I pushed a little harder against the wall. My heart thumped again. I knew he could tell it wasn't from fear — not completely. It made the

small elevator a little bit smaller, and much more uncomfortable.

“Lieutenant, your thoughts are more difficult to reach than anyone I have touched in a long time.”

“Have you been touching where you’re not allowed?” The words were sharp, accusatory. I shouldn’t have said them. But my life depended on keeping the vampire out of my head, and I was curious why he would say such a thing.

He said nothing. He gave no acknowledgment of my tone, and no answer to my question. The next few moments passed slowly, unnaturally so. The soft hum of the elevator was the only sound. It was disturbing how he watched me, almost as if I wasn’t there. Still ... I didn’t hate it.

“Always whin,” he said softly to himself, “and broom.” He moved, and my initial thought was that he meant to come closer, to touch me. I flinched, and he turned away. With a sudden rush, the elevator doors opened, siphoning the intimacy from our tiny cage. In poured the warmer and more public air, until I felt let down and cold. I acknowledged the figure standing in the doorway waiting to enter. Roeanne James, a doctor at Jefferson Hospital and a fellow movie nighter, stood waving at me, with her big, giant grin. Her long, naturally curly hair was pulled up high, and long dark ringlets fell over her little ears.

“Hey,” she said. Her smile faded when she realized the general was with me.

I nodded, remaining quiet against the wall.

“Ms. James,” said Lord Galen.

I have to admit I was curious how he knew who she was. I slid my beret down on my head and peeled myself from the wall. I motioned to the door with a firm hand. I wanted him to go first, and not out of respect, but because I truly didn’t want him at my back. He nodded his head to Roe as a greeting and good-bye, nothing kooky. He stepped off and veered right towards his office in headquarters. He threw a sideways glance back to me. “Good night, lieutenant.”

His voice danced inside the elevator. A rush of power around my feet spiraled up my body like a tingling ribbon until the current reached my head. I took a sharp breath, because I could almost see it. The whole thing took maybe three seconds, and still I was dazed. I shook a fierce tremor up my back to clear away the magik.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Roeanne.

I moved past her to the middle of the lobby to watch Galen open the doorway and walk into headquarters. “Could you feel that? Did you feel it?”

“What are you doing? Feel what?”

I’m not stupid. I know he can scent the changes in my body when he’s near me, even if he’s never acknowledged it. I’ve caught him watching me. There are even times he seems to want to tell me something, but he stops himself just as he did a few moments ago.

“Feel what?” asked Roeanne, waving a hand in front of my face. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“Never mind. I’ll be back.”

“You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.” She groaned. “And I was ten minutes early.”

“Sorry.” I started for the dispatch doorway. “The elevator was slow.”

I quickly made my way through rows of cubicles that made up the Emergency Dispatch Office and saw my bag in a corner near the desk of my friend, Relina. Without disrupting her, I snatched the pack up and then backtracked to the lobby, where a group of soldiers was making their way into headquarters from the main entrance. They walked closer to Roeanne than was necessary. They had big smiles, and one wished her a very good night, but only if he had anything to do with it. When she flipped him the finger, the laughter bounced around the generous lobby. Before anyone had the chance to say another word, I pulled Roe behind the information desk to stand by the elevators.

We settled by the shiny black doors, strangely modern in the middle of the dark stone. I had a strange thought of how many times I've stood on this very spot waiting for the elevator to take Romeo to his apartment. I know he's the big bad vampire, a first captain under the general, but sometimes I need to see him safely on the elevator before I go home. Crazy, but it's something I can't seem to help. Many days I sat on the steps of the main entrance watching the sunrise over the trees of Galen Park. Except today, like everyday for the past three weeks, the sun is on the other side of the building when my shift is over. The white marble steps outside are already covered in a dusty shade of gray, giving a soft, touchable appearance to the day. It's a pretense. All day I worked in that ninety-nine degree sauna, and unfortunately, when the sun left he forgot to take the heat and humidity with him.

The heat is only one of the reasons I enjoy night work. Even in the frigid days of winter, the nighttime is gentler and gives the meanest criminal a softer guise. For some, like my best friend, Alivia, night work makes her feel lonely and isolated. For me, I like to watch the sun through the front window of our home roll under the horizon. I wait for my day to begin as most others wait for theirs to end. Romeo thinks I'm obsessed, but really, I'm fascinated with how the world can shift from one type of socialization to another by the mere rising and falling of that one big star.

I heaved my bag over my shoulder and felt impatient, exhausted, and dirty. I brushed the crackled mud off the knees of my black and white fatigues and wondered who the hell has a pigpen in the middle of the city anyway? It can't be legal. I pounded the elevator button and dropped my bag onto the floor.

"Why can't this thing ever work the way it's supposed to?" I grumbled.

Roeanne shuffled in her white rubber doctor's shoes. The blue surgical scrubs made her average height seem short, and her slightly over average weight seem heavier. Her small blue eyes stood out against her naturally freckled nose and cheeks.

"You should look into anger management," she said. "I heard about your run-in with the car thief, or vandal, or whatever he was."

"Why me for anger management?" I frowned at my words.

"I was there when he came into the E.R.," she said. "From his state, I assumed his assailant would be right behind him. Then I heard the attacker was you, and I felt sorry for him."

"I didn't just attack the guy. If you can believe it, he was stuck, hanging out of a car window. He and his pals were trying to steal the damn thing, and he literally got caught by it. The others ran when they saw us. I felt bad for him — until we pried him out and he hit me."

"Is that why you broke his hand?"

"It was the first thing I did!"

"I feel so much safer when you're out there," she said, playfully patting my back.

"Nuh-uh. No more. Do you know how many weirdos I meet on a daily basis? I've had more incidents in my three weeks on days than some have in a year. The daytime squad is calling me Flypaper!"

"Flypaper?"

"For freaks." I threw her an irritated glance. "I'm getting very tired of it."

She covered her mouth to muffle her laughter.

"You're going to hurt yourself." I poked at the elevator button. "Anyway, I'm done. I asked to go back on nights. Maybe, finally, being the partner of a first captain will get me something other than ragged on."

"Even with all the grief, isn't it a nice change of pace to be in sync with the world? You know, out amongst the living? At night there's all those mean, nasty, stray vampires, and of course, your partner,"

she smiled.

“No. I can handle the strays and Romeo. It’s humans that give my nerves a workout. Give me a nasty vampire any day, and I’m in ecstasy!”

The dark-haired lieutenant at the information desk laughed.

“Not me. Some of them are creepy, and that one scares the hell out of me.”

“What one?”

She leaned in to whisper, “Lord Galen” and then moved closer. “I think he looks evil. Don’t you?”

I couldn’t disagree more. Galen’s face might be severe, with the contrast of skin and hair, but I think he may be one of the most beautiful men I’ve ever seen. The elevator doors finally opened. Roanne’s arm jerked when she grabbed my bag. She had to drag it instead of carry it.

“What do you have in this thing?”

“Romeo’s clean laundry.”

She flashed me a look.

“Don’t,” I said. “Just don’t say a word.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“Five,” said Roe.

Her voice isn’t on computer recognition, so the elevator didn’t move. She raised her eyebrows, and I repeated the order. The steel box hummed to life. Relief was only five floors away. To shower, eat, and unwind with a movie would certainly make my day.

“What’s the show, *Alice in Wonderland*, or something Disney?” Roanne asked, leaning her body against the elevator wall. “I don’t think you can trust a vampire who likes Disney movies. It’s weird.”

I couldn’t argue. Romeo’s fascination with all cartoons is a bit obsessive. Although I’m not sure if his interest in cartoons is worse than any man’s interest in childhood things. Of course, the sadistically sexual aspects of the films that Romeo swears are deliberate elude me most of the time.

“It’s Alice, but not Disney. We’re watching a version from around the nineteen-nineties. It has real people in it.”

“The nineteen-nineties? That’s ancient.”

“All the movies he picks are ancient, Roe. He’s a hundred years old.”

“He’s a freak. There’s always a princess and a nasty queen who wants someone’s body part in a grinder. The young prince is trying too hard to get the princess to marry him before she’s hacked to pieces. It’s all psychotic symbolism.”

“I think he has fantasies about the wicked stepmothers and their daughters.”

“Stop,” she groaned. “I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Have you ever seen Alice?”

“I’m not much into children’s stories.”

“This is a good one. It’s my favorite of the Alices.”

We stepped off the elevator into a long stone hallway. The passage was dim, not to say gloomy. The same electric torches from around the manor decorated the walls on the upper barrack floors. Only vampires use these levels, and they don’t socialize too much, so the walkways are narrow. There’s enough room to stand next to someone, with a little bit of space extra. Light gray doors lined each side.

Identical keypads are at the left of each door, which remain unnamed and unnumbered for safety. If someone, somehow, broke in, and wanted to harm one vampire in particular, they'd have to take the time to go through each room. In this hall alone are over twenty rooms. There are five floors, three halls per floor, and each hall looks exactly the same. Romeo and I have been partners too long for me not to know his room.

Roe stayed close, as if our upper arms were glued together. I could feel her energy, which was anxious and vibrant, almost painful. I understood why she was afraid. I just didn't agree.

"Why is it so dank?" she asked. "It's like the basement at the hospital. I don't think I'll get used to it. Three months or thirty years, it'll still be scary."

I touched the stonewall with my fingertips. It wasn't cold to me. Roe touched my arm and it gave me a shock.

"Is anyone here? I mean besides a sleeping vampire?"

"No." I rubbed my arm where it tingled from the jolt. "Alivia should be on her way. Dacon and Lucas aren't finished till twenty-thirty, and the rest aren't awake."

We stopped at the fifteenth door from the end. I scanned the bar code on my I.D. at the bottom of the keypad. I pushed my thumb on the screen and started the numeral code when the door swung open. I automatically shoved Roeanne to the side. I pulled my right arm back to punch whatever was in front of me. Livi's startled face was inches from my hand.

"Mother Moon," I said. "You scared the hell out of me."

Roeanne came to stand beside me, rubbing her arm where I had pushed her. Livi settled down and then smiled.

"I got here early," she said, stepping back so we could enter.

"Obviously."

The air conditioning unit was on, but the apartment was warm, with the smell of homemade tomato sauce and garlic. I hadn't eaten since this morning and wondered why I wasn't hungry.

Roeanne plopped herself on the black sofa against the wall. I kicked my bag to the corner before I made my way to the matching chair at the far end of the room.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Livi.

"I've had a really bad day," I replied, dropping my body onto the leather. I gave a halfhearted smile and was mildly surprised that my facial muscles would move into that particular position. What is it about a bad mood that when you're alone, it's not as bad as when you're around people — especially cheery people?

"Don't worry," she said, wrinkling her nose at my dirty clothes. "I have the best dinner planned."

Livi's eyes gleamed. She flashed her big smile, and it was almost enough to make me forget the events of the day. Her deep brown skin was nearly flawless, as always, and her lips were full, like her Jamaican grandmother's. Splatters of sauce and grease covered the old black shirt she wore shoved into an equally dirty pair of dungaree cutoffs. The tactical holster hung low and empty on her hip, the strap sliding just above her knee. She's taller than I am, about eight inches over five feet, and definitely much prettier.

"Salad. Pasta. You will be wined. You will be dined. What could be better?"

I rubbed my brow. Being left alone might be better. What I said was, "A shower would be good."

"I guess this would be a bad time to show you the windowsill," Livi said, her face changing into something of an anguished pucker.

I stared at her for a moment and then rushed down the short hall where double-lined darkening drapes were drawn over a small window. I pushed aside one of the panels and covered my eyes. A

piece of the sun hung lazy and unforgiving just over the horizon. Even with my eyes half closed, I could see that the once exotic, brilliant, and fully flowered plants were brown, wilted, and dehydrated, like a desert of fallen warriors. They hadn't been cared for in weeks. I got very warm inside and cursed that damn vampire.

This whole scene was sadly reminiscent of a year ago when there was an herb garden here in the most beautiful terra cotta pot. It was the length of the sill, about two and a half feet long, and full of life when I gave it to him. Livi used the herbs for cooking, but Romeo swore he'd take care of them. When I found their carcasses burning in the sun, I threw the whole thing at him. I missed him by a hair. He begged me to give him the plants. He swore he wouldn't fail me again. He was so eager to show me that he could care for them. I told him that even though these particular plants thrive in sunlight, this window has the sun for most of its descent. By 18:00 the sill is on fire, so he had to water them frequently. He knew to check them and talk to them every day.

I stomped back down the hall to the kitchen, a small room about half the size of the living area. I filled a cup with tap water and glanced at the clock on the wall over the doorway. Big green numbers blinked 19:45. I had ten minutes, maybe.

With the girls at my heels, I grabbed my pack from the living room and rushed back down the hall. I tipped the water into each pot, for what good it would do them. I shoved the glass into Livi's hand, and I pushed past her and Roe to the only door on the left side of the hall.

"What are you going to do?" Livi rushed to stop me as I punched in the code to unlock the bedroom door. She extended her arm between the reinforced wood and me. "What are you going to do, Dru?"

"Nothing."

"You're such a liar. Don't do anything like last time."

"Last time?" asked Roe. "What did you do last time?"

I smiled. Livi's shoulders hunched in frustration.

"To make a very long story short, she chained that vampire to his bed while he slept. She hung a makeshift crucifix, mobile-thingy over his head. Then she bloodlet him with cuts on his arms and burned his hands with an ultraviolet flashlight."

"That's horrible!" Roeanne gasped, raising her hand to her mouth. "Oh, wait, I didn't know he was Catholic."

"His parents were from a village near Tuscany," I said. "They moved to New York in the early nineteen-thirties. He and his sisters were the first generation born in the States, when they were still united."

"Ultraviolet flashlight?" asked Roe. "I've heard of them but haven't seen the effects."

"It's like having Amun-Ra right in the palm of your hands," I said. "We use them to search for vampires who've been sentenced to death, or sometimes when we find a nest of fugitives. They're good for any situation where you need a vampire on his knees."

Roe's eyes widened.

"What did he do to you?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"You mean to deserve it or afterwards?"

"Both."

"To deserve it, he bit me without my permission." She squinched up her nose in an elfy little frown. She knows it's his legal right to take blood from me, his partner, if he needs to. And I'm more than obliging. I mean, hell, I have scars on my fingers from him sucking on them like a lollipop. At the time, however, we'd only been partners for maybe two years, and we didn't exactly get along. "I was

asleep. He came into my apartment on my night off, and he bit me.”

“He can be such an asshole,” Livi said, shaking her head.

“I know,” Roe said, “but crucifixes and ultraviolet light? He must’ve been badly burnt. That seems a little harsh.”

“He bit me on three different parts of my body.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” she exclaimed. “He’s not usually like that, is he?”

Romeo isn’t usually like that? Which Romeo was she referring to? Livi and I stared at each other, dumbfounded by her poor judge of character.

“He said he hadn’t fed in a week, which was true, and that he couldn’t control himself. He said he came to talk, but I was lying there so naked and enticing.”

“And quiet,” Livi added. “Naked isn’t anything compared to quiet. Romeo’s most turned on by Dru when she’s not yelling at him.”

“He bit my wrist and said he got carried away because I tasted so good.” He also said he couldn’t control himself because my blood has a real kick to it, which is when I found out the differences in me went further than I’d ever considered. Still, it doesn’t matter what my blood tastes like. He shouldn’t have touched me without consent.

“Well, maybe he couldn’t control himself,” Roe said.

We stared at her. She shrank from our gazes as if we had pushed her.

“To answer the rest of your question, he apologized to me.”

“Yeah, but only after he broke his restraints and chased her out the door, down the emergency steps, and twice around the courtyard,” Livi laughed outright. “His hands dripped blood like melted wax. He finally collapsed in the horse stables. This guy Gabriel, a friend of mine, fed him so he would heal quicker. Well, Dru paid him. She didn’t want Romeo to bleed to death. That is to say she didn’t want to go to prison.”

Livi and I smiled. It was a long time ago, but that recollection always affects me in a good way.

“What did Dacon say about the whole thing?” Roe asked, looking at us as if we were ghouls wading in the River Styx. “I’m sure he wasn’t too happy.”

“We were together at the time so, no, he wasn’t happy.”

“He didn’t condone what you did though?”

“Actually, Roe, I had to physically stop Dacon from doing permanent damage. Ultraviolet light was a compromise.”

“If you’re going to do something cruel just because he didn’t water your plants, I don’t want any part of it.” She huffed her way into the living room.

I thought about running after her and arguing that she didn’t understand. How dare she try to make me feel guilty for something she knew virtually nothing about? I think smacking her around was somewhere in that thought as well. Not that I had to burn Romeo, but he had no right to terrorize me, and I had every right to retaliate. He violated me. I didn’t feel safe in my own home for months. He’s just lucky I kept my mouth shut and Lord Galen never found out, or he would’ve paid with more than scalded hands.

I started when Livi touched my shoulder.

“She doesn’t understand vampire dynamics. She hasn’t worked with them the way we have to know he was trying to dominate you. Dru, crosses and all that crazy shit aren’t necessary. I mean, really, they were only plants.”

My body practically lit on fire. Never, ever, say anything against nature to a practitioner of witchcraft.

“He killed them. They are living beings, and he killed them.”

She cringed, and her grip tightened on my arm. Then she leaned into me.

“I know how you feel about that stuff, but burning him or lining his bed with rosaries is fighting dirty. You have to be above it. Be a good person,” she spoke out of the corner of her mouth to conceal her words. “You are more than that. Literally.”

“I won’t hurt him.” I smiled and turned the knob. “I’ll play with him a little, that’s all.”

Livi threw her hands up and I crept into the dark room. I whispered his name as I closed the door. Nothing. I had about five minutes before the sun set completely, but it never hurts to be sure. Romeo is one hundred years undead. He was twenty-five when he was converted, but the living age doesn’t count. One hundred is young as far as certain powers are concerned. He doesn’t have the strength to rise while the sun is descending, like Lords Galen and Jagen, so I still had time.

“ ” ”

The layout of his room is more than familiar, so I managed in the darkness without stubbing a toe. I shoved my muddy clothes in the left corner by the closet, along with my holster. I patted my chest and inner thigh to make certain the patches still covered my cross tattoos. Like a cross, a tattoo of a religious symbol can repel a vampire if the undead were a Christian. Unlike ultraviolet light, a symbol won’t do much to physically stop a threatening vampire, but it’s nauseating. It mentally weakens them, so you have the opportunity to strike. Most Christian vampires can’t help but feel ashamed of their decision to become the undead. They’re so hungry to have a new start, an immortal life, that they convince themselves their god will understand, until they’re converted. This is why there’s a legal age limit and two years’ worth of steps to go through before turning to the unlife. The churches haven’t softened on the subject of vampirism as the undead hoped. Not even close.

Romeo was a devout Catholic before he changed. He’s vomited at the slightest touch of a cross, or even if one was in the vicinity. It’s something I don’t want to see twice and why I will never hang a religious artifact over his head again. Holy water should not hurt anyone, but Romeo, like so many other vampires, is plagued with the guilt of the ages and held hostage by those ancient superstitions. The truth is that the water and the crosses wouldn’t hurt or debilitate vampires if they weren’t so ashamed of what they are. With that in mind, I’ve wondered what fueled Romeo’s unlife decision when he was so devoted to his faith.

I crawled into bed wearing only my underwear and bandages. I was dirty, but he wouldn’t care. I felt around, traced the outline of Romeo’s body, and found his arms up with his hands behind his head. He sleeps that way because he says it makes him feel less dead when he wakes up. I lay on the soft cotton sheets beside him and snuggled under his arm, with my head in the crook of his shoulder. I wrapped my arm around his waist. There was no point in keeping my eyes open. I couldn’t see anything in the blackness of his room.

I settled in, breathed deeply, and caught only the lightest scent of detergent from his sheets. Romeo doesn’t have a smell, good or bad, and I’m not sure why, but it bothers me. I rubbed my fingers over the top of his bare chest, looking for his aura. One of my strong suits as a practicing witch is compassion. I can feel the emotions, or even the personalities, of others. When a human sleeps, the aura relaxes. It doesn’t get weaker, but softer. That’s not how it works with the sleeping undead. When awake, their essence — who they are — isn’t easily felt, but I can feel it. When they go day-cold, all emotion seems to go away. I can’t sense their intent or energy, and reading a vampire should be no harder when day-cold. I do feel something, but I’ve never been able to name it. It’s a strange void. No,

it isn't a void. I feel a fog, a kind of naked fullness. I've wondered, does the soul flee or become trapped in the human shell, pushing to get out? Romeo either doesn't know or won't tell me. He says that in the minutes before he falls asleep and wakes up he feels tense, a panic.

"Like you're being trapped?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "Sort of. Maybe."

I molded myself around his body. He's told me that for all the people he'll share his bed with when he's awake, and there are many, none will lie with him once the day-cold hits. Not that he'd allow that kind of intimacy. That would be asking for death. Still, it must be sad to know the truth. I myself have never had an aversion to his stillness. Perhaps that's because there's enough about me that isn't quite normal, not quite human.

I dug my nails into his chest and thought how firm, yet pleasant, his body is when he's asleep. Of course, he's not speaking, so that could be the pleasing part. But truthfully, I like the feel of him. The sensation isn't human at all. Well, his skin is like human skin, only softer, without bumps or scrapes or anything to mar the sleekness. No matter how much blood a vampire has consumed, making their appearance seem human, you'll always know the truth by the feel of the body. It's strong like a machine. To this day, there's an unknown quality in vampire blood. It's called DNA-V, magik, a disease, and even demonic. It morphs both the internal and external fabric of the host. It transforms each organ into a nearly imperishable structure, working in unison to break down and utilize its only food: blood. The veins, arteries, and tendons become as tough as steel rope. Up to forty-three percent of fat cells are absorbed, and the elastin in the body shrinks, pulling the skin taut over stronger, firmer muscles. This is the source of the stereotypical emaciated vampire, though if you're a bigger person at conversion you won't become petite just because you died.

You can feel the raw power just beneath the skin's surface. If you trust your partner, it can be intoxicating, even frightening, if you're into that sort of thing. Of course, the one true drawback to being a vampire is that they're not alive. Their strong bodies degenerate quickly, which is why they need blood frequently. Because they hold no true moisture or water inside their systems, they burn like tissue paper. Some scientists believe the reason they fall into the day-cold sleep is to prevent accidents of the sun.

I lay against Romeo and thought about what kind of revenge I'd like to use on him. I can't do serious damage without being a devious bitch; frankly, I didn't have the energy. My body and blood are two of the best tools I could use against him. We share a mutual lust. Over the years, he's made it clear what he'd do to me if I'd let him. He told me how many times and in what positions. As long as I keep myself under control, I should be able to make the bastard suffer sufficiently. Most men hate a tease. Vampires hate to be teased like no one else. It isn't in their nature to ask. They're taught civility, but what they really want to do is to pick and take.

" " "

I relaxed my body with deep cleansing breaths for concentration and for centering the mind. I envisioned the air I was breathing had substance and weight. I visualized the bulkier mass surrounding me, then passing through each chakra and going around each limb until I was covered in my own breath. Using cerebral strength, I focused my thoughts to realign my belief of reality. As I drifted, I concentrated on the deep waters and the luminous flowers blooming along the lush green countryside of my ancestors. My soul, my spiritual body of energy, lightened and lifted. I detached, moving over to roam a familiar dimension — a wicked, enchanted world intricately woven and ingeniously concealed

on a plane parallel to the one in which my physical being resided. I flowed as though a phantasm. When my consciousness reassembled, I was safely on this new plane. I walked naked, the dewy grass cool under my feet. Before me, the ancient tangled trees of the forest stood.

My task is to find the hidden entrance to my home away from home. It always takes a few moments for my mind and eyes to adjust so that I can see the opening that is obviously there when you find it, and still nowhere to be found. I followed the green path leading to the realm of the Faerie Kingdoms. Yes, there are people who call it Fairyland, but it's so much more than the silly mythical place where Tinker Bell came from. It's a vast, complicated world of indescribable beauty. Here, the rainbow overhead has twice the brilliance that it does in the human realm. The air is clean and tastes sweet on my tongue. The smallest daisy flowers at my feet make the most exotic flowers of the earthen plane look and smell dull.

I plunged a hand into a puddle. The water is cold to drink, yet warm to bathe in. The sky here is always at a twixt or tween time, such as dawn, civil dusk, midday, or astronomical twilight. It changes from dusty, subdued blues to the clear brilliance of noon, to the rich textured blacks of midnight, and the awakening fiery hues of the morning hours. Flowers and herbs long extinct in the human realm prosper here. The woodlands are dense, with tall standing trees filled with diverse winged creatures bathing in the light, or mating in the rolled oak leaves.

I walked quickly, combing my fingers through the tight bushes of peppermint. Long stems of burgundy hollyhocks tapped against my thighs as I passed. The thick scent of heather clung to the air. I spied a black raspberry patch, and concentrating very hard, I picked one. I tasted the sweetness without truly eating it. The thick juice, oddly enough, sometimes stains the skin on my corporeal fingers on the physical plane. Further along the path, the powerful trees of apple, oak, and the faerie favorite, willow, widened on either side of me. Their overhanging branches create a thick green canopy that provides shelter and a cool breeze from the warm rays of our sun. The truly mystifying beauty, however, is the nebulous nature of the crepuscular rays forcing their way through the dark woven shelter. It illuminates the many shades of green, red, blue, and yellow from the flowers and the iridescent wings of the smaller faeries fluttering all around.

Two tall, thin elves made their way to my side. They're a strong, pleasant breed of fey, but not my kind. Both have long, golden hair, and large woodland brown eyes that change in shade with each species of tree they touch. They have no wings, but their untiring speed and aberrant grace make it seem so. We made eye contact, exchanging greetings in a way that isn't physically speaking, but not specifically telepathic. They settled their hands on my ghostly shoulders in a familiar familial greeting. For all practical reasoning, I'm a human being. Though I've been touched by fey magik, I can't tear a hole in space to enter or leave the realm as most others can. I must rely on my mind to take me there, which is why I'll never be a solid entity.

The native beings of this plane touch the flowing, thrumming energy that creates my presence. However, I'm also not as ethereal as a ghost, but something between the two. Solid enough to touch others, only not corporeal enough to firmly grab hold of them. I'm literally a tween faerie. I was born to human parents, but no human had to tell me I was different. At birth, my human soul was bound with the essence of a faerie creature, giving me the inner knowledge of life and magik that only the faeries possess. Shifting planes came naturally at an early age. To the best of my knowledge, I'm one of a kind. I've shared this secret with precious few. Early on, the fey elders schooled me in the animosity that the vampire has for other magikal creatures, but especially the earthen people. They taught me stories and riddles that will dictate my behavior around the vampire forever.

A few small River fey passed me. Their sparkled wings held their golden jelly-like bodies off the

ground. Deep in their oval faces were large, round, mirrored eyes that glitter the same as their wings. A human will see his or her most desired wish in those eyes. I see only the faerie-human blend I become when I'm in this world. It's a bit smaller than my human height of five foot four, though the shape of my body is human. The color of my skin is black, just like that of the Fear faerie with whom I'm connected. My hair is dark forest green and a mess of short shaggy locks. My teeth are sharp and my ears are pointed. My eyes aren't their normal hazel. They are the color of chrome, shining like the bumper of an antique car. My wings are dark as onyx, and attached to my spine, shoulders, elbows, and wrists. When I extend my arms, the wings resemble those of a bat. I have control over them as an animal has of its tail. I'm, obviously, of the dark breed of fey.

The River faerie collected speed, and in turn, the elves made haste. I picked up my speed to a half run, heading up the steep green hill to see the Kingdoms that lay beyond. Catching a glimpse of the tips of the castles, I broke into a full run and raced the creatures around me. As I neared the top of the hill, I ran even faster until I reached the hill's edge. I flung myself into the air. I spread my arms and my wings wide. I glided smoothly, changing my body's position to alter direction toward the valley where the castles stand. Where they have stood for many millennia. They're majestic in their glimmering splendor, yet inviting to even the most impoverished passerby. No matter how many times I come to this realm, the sight of the enormous and secretive world of Faery nearly paralyzes me.

To the east is the gold and silver castle of the light fey — to Scotland the Seelie Court and to Ireland the Daoine Sidhe. Some refer to them as the Trooping faeries, a term coined by humans that were lucky enough to see the trooping of their horses through the hills called a faerie rade. They're most aristocratic and simply amazing in their white, valiant splendor. A wide variety of species belong to this class of fey, including water and flower faeries, sprites, and golden elves.

To my right in the west is the Onyx Castle of the dark fey. The Unseelie Court. My clan. Our family is also ancient and imperial. Since Romeo had me watch *Snow White*, I've always felt our oldest matriarch, the faerie Sage, rivals Snow White's stepmother in elegance, stature, and sagacious nature. No other matches her consort, Alder, in darkness, cunning, or sheer beauty. We're dark, ranging from the slightly mischievous to the possibly deadly. But we've suffered a cruel injustice in the minds of humans. They deem us wicked and thoughtless. Okay, we can be, but no more than a hurricane or volcano eruption. We're a part of society, because there can be no light without dark. We're a necessary function. The dark and the light make each other possible in every way. However, dark doesn't mean we're rogue. All families hold explicitly to the laws. There are no excuses for heterodoxy in the clan. Those who can't abide by the laws of land and nature are banished, or worse.

I flew swiftly through the air over the rich heartland separating the castles, in which was upwards of two hundred miles apart. A brilliant rainbow arced, cascading down beyond the kingdoms to another land altogether. I brought myself to the dark tower, searching for members of the Fear faerie. A deceiving name, for we aren't fearful. We provoke it. We're not deadly, not usually. Fear is something we ingest, gaining sustenance and satisfaction from all the negative emotions any human or being is capable of feeling.

My life has always been much more than the physical boundaries into which I was born. I've learned that not only are most of us not free, but we're also not what we seem. Most of the wonderful qualities in any species can't be seen. The extraordinary is something to be confided, shared, and brought to the surface through trust or love.

I stiffened my wings for my descent into the courtyard. I had intended to land near the king's butterfly stables. As I was some fifty feet above the ground, an unnatural feeling seized me. It ripped through my body. It shook me so that I was unable to stay in flight. I curled into myself, pulling my

arms around my body to create a protective shell from my hardened wings. I crashed into the smooth, black stone wall of the courtyard, and lay dazed, though not seriously hurt. I managed to push up on my elbows to look at my body. I was in one piece. I can't die here, but so much blood was on the ground, it made me wonder if I could. A Razain butterfly, as big as a pony on Earth, poked a tentacle near my face. It lifted its dark head as if to show me the small, curly haired girl skulking across the yard with pieces of my wings. She entered a doorway set into the black stone that wasn't there a moment before.

"Not my wings!" Dread broke my concentration. My mind pulled back to my material self. I screamed as the Realm thrust me out, and I jumped in the dark.

"It's me." Romeo stopped my hands from hitting him. He pulled me close so my cheek rested against his cool chest. "You're fine."

A knock at the door startled me again.

"We're fine," Romeo said.

"I fell," I whispered, trying to catch my breath.

"You were there? On the other side?"

Romeo is one of a few that know I'm different, though, to my credit, he doesn't know the extent of it. He thinks I'm a practicing Wiccan with faerie tendencies and a little magik. That's what I told him. The magikal power I possess is unheard of in a human, and he knows better than I do what a very bad thing that is if you're surrounded by vampires. Ancient faerie lore says few, if any, friendly encounters have occurred between the fey and the undead. They are notorious throughout the supernatural community for usurping the power of other beings. To some magikal species like shamans, they're known as siphons. They're paranoid as well. Always looking for threats, waiting for someone to try to take them over. Vampires see pressures that may not even be there. They would consider me a true danger — a danger big enough to kill for, if only for the magikal power I may be able to give them.

I twisted around to get space, but Romeo snuggled against my back.

"You have that smell I like," he said, pulling my arm to his face so he could run his lips against my skin. "The woods ... freshly cut grass."

"Something happened. There was someone, but she was ... a shadow."

"A shadow?"

"Yes and no. She took my wings. Only ..." I was having the hardest time explaining, because I didn't truly understand it. "It wasn't real. She felt like intuition or forewarning. Not so much genuine."

"You can't get hurt there, can you?" He buried his nose in the back of my hair.

"I can, but not like this. Not usually."

I took a few deep breaths and cleared my throat. I felt Romeo's worry. I felt his questioning mind, but I had questions too. My inability to be a complete entity on the faerie plane renders me unable to experience certain things. I can smell food and taste it slightly, but I can't gain sustenance from it. I can feel pleasure and pain, but not in the physical sense. Only in the positive or negative energy directed at me. I fidgeted in Romeo's arms. His concern made me uncomfortable. He pulled me around so we were face-to-face in the dark.

"Your eyes are dull," he observed. "They're gold and green, and ... what are you afraid of?"

"I don't know." I tried to push away, but he wouldn't let me go. "Nothing. I'm okay."

The coolness of his skin was refreshing. I felt his lips against my shoulder a moment before he kissed me there. He pulled my hand to his face and bit softly near my wrist. He spoke in dulcet tones against my palm.

"I can hardly think over the pounding of your heart. Your rushing blood has a cloying scent, like overripe fruit."

“That sounds disgusting,” I said, making a nauseated sound.

“No,” he said, “I like it. You know how much I like it.”

Now my feeble game of “bleed me if you can” begins. I made the barest of moans when he licked my wrist, a small gentle sigh.

“Not yet. I need to get a shower before you suck me dry.”

“Why?” He pulled back and I could feel him thinking. “What’s going on? Why are you naked in my bed?”

“I had a really bad day.”

“Uh-huh.” He knows me well to sound so wary.

“I’m not naked,” I said, letting my body wilt against him. “I need a shower, but I wanted to see you.”

“You could have showered and saw me after. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I came in here to change, and the bed was inviting. It felt good to lie down.”

I moved myself to all fours above him. My hands were over his shoulders, but my legs brushed the sides of his body. I could feel his hunger and knew blood wasn’t all he wanted. That wasn’t unusual.

“Listen, I know you don’t like it, but can we watch a vampire movie next week? You know, like *Blade*,” I asked. “The old version.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“No.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“What?” I knew he was abstracted. “I’m an asshole?”

I felt the electric energy from his long fingers hovering near the silver rings in my belly button. The air hummed with his excitement to touch me. He didn’t. He was trying hard not to attack me, if only because his predatory instinct tells him that if he runs too fast, the little bird will fly, fly away. The problem is that he’s ravenous and truly starving.

“Please. It’s one of my favorite movies, and I’m tired of fairy tales.”

“I don’t care,” he sighed.

I smiled. He was making it easy for me to enjoy yanking his chain.

“Cover your eyes. I’m going to put the light on,” I said, sitting up on my knees.

With a hand on his wooden headboard for support, I reached up and clicked on the brass lamp that rested on his chest of drawers. The dusty yellow light settled softly on his naturally tan skin, ashen from lack of blood, yet dark against my coloring. When I met Romeo, his hair was a messy halo of tight brown curls. He wears it short now, but it still twists and separates into shaggy waves, giving him a bed-head look. Medium thick brows framed dark brown bedroom eyes, also dulled from lack of food. The line of his nose isn’t quite aquiline, but unmistakably Italian. He stared at me with drowsy, half-closed lids. He isn’t sleepy. Vampires are never sleepy. They’re awake or they’re not. There’s no in-between, unless they’re severely blood depleted or mentally drained, which Romeo tells me I do to him often.

“I like your outfit,” he said. “I should say I like the body in your outfit, and the blood in that body.”

He rolled his tongue over his bottom lip. He tapped the patch I used to cover the cross tattoo on my chest, near my heart. Then he reached up, unhooked the barrette to free the long hair from the top of my head, and roughly sifted through the short hair on the back and sides. He threaded strong fingers down the length of it, while little pieces of mud fell onto his chest.

“Tell me again why you’re half naked?”

“I was—”

“Don’t get me wrong. I like it. I’ll take it. It’s much more pleasing than the covered you.” He was about to grab my ass and pull me down, but he stopped suddenly, as if a light dawned and he knew better.

“What the hell is going on? Why are you being a cock tease?”

“I’m not. I missed you, that’s all.”

His expression softened, and he pulled me to lie on him. I stretched and laid my head in the middle of his chest. My body covered his, and I could feel his firmness through our underwear and thin cotton sheet, though not excessively so. Being deprived of blood doesn’t allow his body to show me how very happy he is that I’m on top of him. Not that he’d be embarrassed if he could show it. Confidence has never been his problem.

He pushed his pelvis ever so slightly, and I continued to do things I knew he’d enjoy, like gently moving my hips. I traced lines on his arm as I told him about my fight. I rubbed my feet over his, and when he sighed, I pretended not to notice. He loved the attention, the touching and squirming — even if he thinks I’m up to no good. He won’t touch me overtly or say a word for fear that these are truly innocent gestures, and if he calls me on it, I’ll stop. The mere fact that he can’t acknowledge any of it puts him in a bit of misery.

His phone beeped. He quickly reached a hand over to the small night table, trying to get out from under me.

“I’ll get it,” I said. I shimmied up, allowing my lower stomach to hover near his face. Forcing him to be so close to the pulse in my belly has somewhat the effect of shoving breasts in the face of a human man. He dropped his hand, defeated, as I had to straddle his stomach while I leaned over. In my awkward position, I managed to find his vid-phone unit under the papers crowding his night table. We use portable phones at work to keep our hands free. I have to use it here, because Romeo doesn’t own a computer or a standard phone. The blue light on the side of the unit wasn’t flashing, telling me the caller wasn’t on video, so I secured the small speaker cuff over my ear.

“First Captain Romeo Fortunato’s phone. How can he help you today? Oh, hi.” I glanced down. “It’s Dacon.”

As I spoke, I kept my attention on the vampire. He moved closer, tracing his fingertips over the pentacle tattoo on my left hip. His eyes closed as his hands caressed my bare legs.

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.” I tossed the headset where I’d found it and squirmed my way back down Romeo’s body. “Dacon’s going to be late. He said we could start without him. Romeo?”

He opened his eyes, and they were burning red in his head. The whites were veined and bloodshot. He pulled me down, licking my neck and collarbone. His tongue was cool, deliberate. I gave a double meaning groan. Maybe it felt good. Maybe I was irritated.

“Romeo,” I said, my voice huskier than I wanted it to be. “Let me shower. I’m not clean.”

“I like the way you smell.” He licked me again, a slow rough wash of the tongue.

“Let me get a shower, and I’ll feed you later.”

“No.” A command. Inhuman. He held me tightly. “Kiss me,” he demanded, his lips barely touching my ear.

“No,” my voice shook, as if I was afraid, but it wasn’t that.

“Let me.”

My thoughts muddled as his eager mind corrupted his voice, turning its natural melody into a seductive weapon. He chipped at the barrier of protection I held in front of my mind. His cold words sounded warm and inviting, so much so that I could’ve listened forever and done willingly what,

otherwise, I would not. How eloquent and persuasive he could be when the animal is hungry.

It was also very illegal.

He rolled us until he was on top, rocking his pelvis between my legs. When he's like this, his fangs seem longer to me. They're not; they don't grow. I think I'm overly sensitive when he's ready to strike.

"Let me," he whispered, poking his tongue in and out of the silver coil earring winding its way through the holes in the edge of my ear.

I nodded and then quickly pushed at him.

"Stop it," I said, shaking my head to clear my thoughts of his magik. "No."

His hand moved to my neck. His fingers tensed. It was a violent gesture even for him. Though I can admit he was famished, and I was playing with fire.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" I swallowed.

"Andru, I'm so hungry. I need to suck faerie."

I pulled him close for a small kiss. I traced my finger along the soft line of hair traveling from his hairline down to the front of his ear.

"Wait a little longer. Let me shower. Then you can have whatever you want."

"But you promised."

I sighed. That was true. I called him last night to find out if he was going to stay for movie night, or go to the local nightclubs and hunt for food. By hunt, I'm not suggesting he'd take without consent. We have clubs, bars, cafes, and the like for a vampire to feed on the conferrer. He had intended to go out, so I promised him my blood if he stayed. He agreed because he loves my blood. Almost any vampire would rather have blood from someone they know than a stranger. I wouldn't have been so quick to offer if I'd seen him in the three weeks I've been on day work, but I missed him. It's a miserable truth, and, goddess, it's one I can't seem to help. Only now, the ruined figures on the windowsill are a testament to my hatred, and I'll let him shrivel up and die like my plants before I feed him.

"I know; just a little while longer."

"You're up to something," he whispered.

"You're hungry and paranoid. What am I doing that's so abnormal?"

"You're being nice to me."

"I'm always nice to you, you big jerk."

He dropped his head on my chest, staying like that for a long time to control his hunger. His heat or power pulled back and drained away; when he looked up, his eyes were brown and shine free. I pulled myself out of the twisted sheet so I could settle on my side away from him. He snatched away the paper I had grabbed from his nightstand before I could read the first scribbled line of the poem he had written. He shoved it under his pillow.

"Romeo, I wanna see. Let me see it."

"No."

"Are they about me? Do I inspire you?"

"No. You irritate me. Ow! Fine, I suppose irritation is a type of inspiration, but not for poetry," he said, tracing patterns on my dirty skin with his tongue.

"I have something for you," I said.

"Chocolate chip cookies?" he asked, tightening his grip.

I wondered where he had gotten that idea and frowned.

"It's been so long since you gave me chocolate chips cookies."

"I told you I wouldn't do that again. You get carried away."

“I can’t help it,” he said, his weight pinning my body to the bed. “Between the taste of chocolate, and the taste of your mouth, I get delirious.”

“And that’s why I’m not going to do it. You nearly ripped me apart last time.”

“Come on, I’ll be good. I’ll drive the truck for an entire month.”

“You always drive. And no, I won’t do it. Don’t think I didn’t notice that you mentioned the taste of chocolate before me.”

“Not consciously, I’m sure.”

“Even worse, I’m sure.”

I pushed him to get off and he fell flat on the bed. His long legs and arms extended outward like a dark star in a sea of pale blue sheets. That man wants me, and all I can think of is my wonderful plants. My babies. My wonderful, dead plant babies. He’s such an ass.

“You owe me one, Dru,” he scowled at me. “Big time.” He sat up, bending at the waist — an odd move that humans just don’t do. “I want you, and I want it all.”

“Later. Find me something in your closet I can wear. I didn’t bring any clothes. Nothing else fit in my bag but your uniforms.”

“Hey, if you’re gonna bet with the best—”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re an idiot.”

“Is that the ‘something’ you have for me?” he asked, squinting his eyes. “Uniforms?”

I nodded.

“Don’t do that again,” he said. “I thought it was something good.”

I sighed. One minute, he’s sexy. The next, I hate the very ground he walks on. At this very moment, holy objects seem a better option than sexual torture, or any other kind of torture. He bounced out of bed, went to his dresser, and pulled out a pair of men’s black boxers along with a black tank top. He gave me a nasty smile.

“That’s not the best you can do.”

“Until you tell me what you’re up to, it’s the best I can do.”

I grabbed the underwear and went to my backpack for the medicinal balm I use when my muscles are sore. I left the room with him following behind. I could feel him looking at my ass. I didn’t care. Romeo’s leering eyes and constant sexual innuendo are about the only action I’ve been getting. It’s been years since I split with Dacon, but it’s just too difficult to start a relationship. Honestly, the thought of having to answer to someone gives me man-cooties. Still, it was good to have someone to hold on cold nights, and hot nights too.

Romeo passed me. His shadow drifted around my legs, a small, satisfying vampire prank. Similar in concept, not scale, to what his father did earlier in the elevator. I wondered if they conspire about how to harass me, or if they’re just so much alike they find the same things amusing.

I locked the bathroom door and flipped the light. It annoys me how clean Romeo’s bathroom is. I know he only uses the shower, but he’s still a human male ... or half of him is. There should be clothes lying around. Even the floor is clean. Apart from the endless pieces of notepaper from his poetic scribbling, and the dirty kitchen from his less nocturnal friends, the rest of the apartment is immaculate. A picture never moved. Granted, there are only four, all of which I gave him, but nothing is ever out of place. It’s never dusty — not ever. It just annoys me.

The mirrored cabinet over the sink contained three items, all mine. I took out a brush and dragged it through the length of hair on the top of my head. The dirt hit the sink like fresh sawdust. I touched the skin over my eye where Galen had touched earlier. It was sore, a little bruised, but not too swollen. The left side of my lip was a bit puffy; I saw actual clean streaks on my lower neck where Romeo

licked the dirt off. When my daytime partner swung at the guy we pulled from the car, he hit me in the kidney. It hurt, but I couldn't see any evidence of it now. My back reminded me of the weird little girl taking my wings. It disturbed me more than I could admit.

The gray under my eyes was becoming my prominent feature. I rubbed my face trying to wipe away the circles. One day of decent sleep would help, but I didn't get that if I wasn't sleeping in Romeo's bed. I still can't fully understand why he relaxes me the way he does. I wish I knew why he gives me the best sleep I've ever had. If he knew the answer, he'd never let me forget it.

I peeled off my dirty underwear, tossed the silk onto the floor, and flipped the thingamajig to start the shower. After I rinsed the caked mud from the piercings in my ears, the small barbell in my brow, and the two-inch barbell on the back of my neck, I washed it all with soap — twice. When all the mud was gone, when all the jewelry moved freely, and when my nails were clean, I stood with my eyes closed, allowing the misery to slide down my skin, circle the drain, and trail the pipes.

I dressed in the underwear Romeo gave me. The boxers were fine, a bit slim because Romeo has no hips, but they would do. The tank top was tight and revealing — I supposed that was better than loose and revealing. In the Realm, I would be overdressed, or at least considered modest. That difference in culture got me into trouble when I was a young girl. I had a hard time understanding that what was acceptable behavior in Faery wasn't acceptable here. Dacon helped me with my clothing choices when we started dating. He stopped me from walking around the house in my bathing suit. He said it made him, and all my brother's friends, a little nuts. He also made sure my party skirts didn't show less than what was respectable.

I emptied Romeo's clean uniforms from my backpack so I could make room for my dirty clothes. I would look later for something in Romeo's closet to wear home. The front door opened and closed. I listened for the usual greetings and recognized the voices of Lieutenants Lucas and Sara Jackson. They're brother and sister. She's the vampire. Sara's tall, about the same height as Luc, and I think he's somewhere around five ten or eleven. She's an incredible soldier. Years ago when I was in training, she was my designated sparring partner. She taught me a bunch of tricks on how to kick vicious vampire butt. We get to work together every once in a while, and I always enjoy it. Her brother Luc is just about her twin, only with short blond hair and darker blue eyes. He's pleasant as well, and much more jovial. He's the light to her dark. When Luc graduated the program two years after me, Sara transferred from instructor to active duty to be his partner. They've been together ever since. Honestly, I think they're sleeping together. They're too cuddly. Not hanging all over each other. More like always holding hands and always touching in some intimate way. It's strange.

Romeo thinks I'm perverted. He's the only vampire I know that gets freaked out from incest. In fact, most of them are fine with it. Once someone becomes a vampire, it's as if they don't feel the ties that bind, or the restrictions that we do. Maybe they do and like it. Anyway, Romeo says he and I hold hands and touch, and we're not fucking. Still, if I find out Luc and Sara are sharing a bed, even platonically, I'm going to heave.

" " "

The sweet aroma of pasta sauce crept into the bedroom. I wasn't hungry, but I wanted to eat. I finished my hair, which means I combed it off my face only to have it fall back down. Luc waved when he saw me coming down the hall. The action caught his sister's attention, and she did the same. And ick, they're holding hands again!