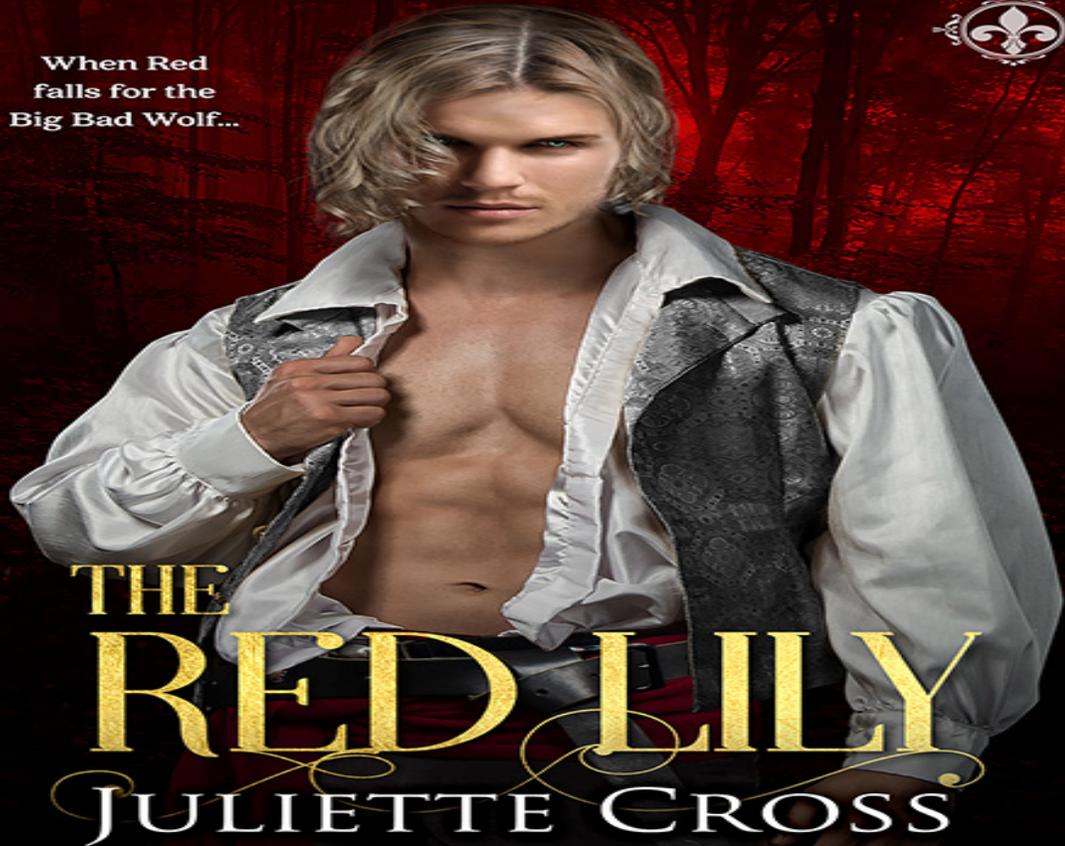


the
RED
LILLY

VAMPIRE BLOOD SERIES

JULIETTE
CROSS

When Red
falls for the
Big Bad Wolf...



THE
RED LILY
JULIETTE CROSS

A VAMPIRE BLOOD NOVEL

THE
RED LILY

A decorative flourish consisting of elegant, swirling lines that frame a central fleur-de-lis symbol. The flourish extends from the bottom of the 'R' in 'RED' and the 'L' in 'LILY', meeting at the fleur-de-lis in the center.

A VAMPIRE BLOOD NOVEL

JULIETTE CROSS

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For Rhenna, my soul sister

Prologue

Once in a faraway land, there was a dark and forbidding forest. No man had ever stepped foot within its shade, for there were whispers it was enchanted. Some said it was evil. Some said it was magical. Some said it held powers of good and healing.

They were all wrong. And they were all right.

The Silvane Forest was neither good nor evil. But within its heart beat a power greater than the world had ever known. The stone of making could transform any creature. But into what depended upon the soul of the creature who found the hartstone. It kept itself hidden from mortal eyes. Only the strong survived its everlasting touch.

One day, a girl and her grandmother made their home within the wood. The trees, the flowers, and even the wild hart wolves—guardians of the hartstone—fell in love with the fair girl. The forest loved her, but the hartstone loved her more, bestowing upon her the gift of magic. One might not detect the difference at first glance, but look closer, and there, within her eyes and fair face shone a growing power all her own. If only she knew to unlock it.

She was sheltered and protected within the wood. But if she ever dared to stray too far, danger and death would surely follow.

Chapter One

Sienna glanced over her shoulder for the second time since she'd entered the market of Hiddleston, the sense of being watched sending a tingle up her spine. Patrons bargained with farmers for their fall harvest—pomegranates, squash, and sweet potatoes. She'd passed the stalls of produce and cheese, her basket of pears, persimmons, and a fresh loaf of bread under her arm, and wandered along the lane of fineries. Pausing at a table of linens and fine quilts, she admired the patterns of interlacing rings and stars.

“Good day, miss.”

“Hello, Alice.” Sienna nodded a greeting to the quilt-maker she'd traded with on many occasions. Today, she needed no linens or fabrics. She strolled on, a sparkle catching her eye at the next stall. The jeweler was here today. He only ventured into the open market twice a year as he was the only jeweler from here to Dale's Peak. She couldn't help but meander toward his stall where a table was beset with all manner of intricate silverwork—combs, brushes, brooches, pendants.

“Hello, fair lady. Would you care for a new set of combs or pins for your lovely red hair?”

His speech was not as coarse as the local farmers, probably because his customers were of a more genteel breeding. He had kind, wide eyes, made wider by the round spectacles perched on his nose.

“These are quite beautiful.” She lifted a brush, the silver handle and back molded into an exquisite design of the Glass Tower. The last thing she wanted was a reminder of where the vampire monarchy ruled on high and where her dear friend Arabelle nearly lost her life. As leader of the Black Lily resistance, Arabelle had fallen into one of the queen’s traps. Fortunately, Prince Marius had saved her, and then they fled across the Cimmaron Sea to Cutters Cove, where they’d been building and training their army ever since. Sienna longed to see her friend again, but for now, she was happy knowing she was safely away from the wicked Queen Morgrid of the Glass Tower.

She set the brush down. “But I’m in no need of a new set.”

The hairs on the back of her neck raised on end. She glanced over her shoulder. No one was even looking in her direction, the townsfolk bartering their wares like any other market day. Peculiar.

“Oh, I have something that would suit you superbly.” The jeweler pulled her attention back to the table as he ducked beneath the skirt, riffled around, then popped back up with a square, red velvet box. “Now this,” he said, opening it. “This is something to match your beauty.”

Sienna sucked in a breath and touched two fingertips to the necklace pendant on a thin silver chain. “Oh.”

Inlaid in the finest silver she’d ever seen was a running wolf, the body made entirely of tiny diamonds except for a ruby eye. The craftsmanship was beyond compare.

“So unique.” She angled it toward the setting sun, the jewels winking like fairy lights. “So beautiful.”

“Thank you, my lady. Much like you.”

She smiled, having grown accustomed to such flattery over the years. But his compliment seemed genuine. She knew she could neither afford such a jewel nor did she need an adornment like this. She was no longer the fine

lady of Dale's Peak, milling amongst the aristocracy and courting the gentlemen to find a good match. Still, she wondered at the cost.

"How much is this necklace?"

"For you, I could let it go for fifty sovereigns."

She nearly choked. That was higher than she could have imagined, and he was giving her a bargain. "Thank you. But not today." Not ever, actually. "You are a fine craftsman, sir."

He bowed. "It pleases me to hear you say so."

The sun slipped lower. The sudden need to be safe in her cottage urged her on. "Good day, sir."

"Good day, my lady."

Pulling up the hood of her cloak, she made her way back down the road toward Silvane Forest. Once more, she had the distinct feeling she was being watched. And, once more, she saw no one who seemed suspicious when she glanced over her shoulder. It was a brisk walk to the woods. Once there, her guardians would be waiting for her, and she would be safe.

Rounding the bend, she turned off the lane abruptly and quickened her pace. While she couldn't spot anyone behind her, a shiver raised gooseflesh on her skin, a foreboding she could not shake. The line of trees was just ahead, whispering of safety. Unable to control her growing panic, she tucked her basket closely and ran. The old, gnarled oak stood just ahead, the marker that she was only feet away from stepping into the shade of the forest. A shower of red-orange and gold leaves drifted down, creating a harvest gown around roots protruding across the grassy lane.

Sienna fled into a full sprint and tripped over a particularly knotty root, catching her fall with her hands. Her basket fell open, pears rolling away.

A familiar masculine voice sounded on her left. "Am I that frightening that you must run at my nearness?"

Adrenaline shot like lightning through her frame. Leaning back against

the old oak was the man of her dreams. Quite literally. For the past few months, she would wake in the morning, sweating and breathless from the sensual pleasures he'd given her. She'd swear by heaven to never think of him again, and certainly not about the wicked things he was doing to her each night. Until the next night, of course.

And there he was, arms and ankles casually crossed, soft black leather pants fitting him all too well, blond hair falling partly over one eye, devilish smile in place. He looked like a mutinous pirate, taking a jaunt on land for a bit of pillaging.

"Lieutenant Nikolai. Have you been following me?" She sat back on her rump, gathering her runaway pears.

"Of course I was."

"Not very gentlemanly of you."

"I needed to speak with you."

"Well, the normal course of action is to walk up to a lady and say, 'Good afternoon. Might I have a word, my lady?' Not skulk about and frighten her to death." She slapped the top of her basket shut.

Vampire-swift, he was there, lifting her to her feet. She wobbled for it was too fast for her human senses, but his hands banded her waist underneath her red cloak, keeping her steady.

"I apologize, sweetheart," he said, voice low and intimate and entirely too close. "I did not mean to frighten you."

"I am not your sweetheart." She stepped out of his arms, quite sure he could hear the rapid beat of her heart. She hoped he presumed it was the fright he gave her and not the uncomfortable nearness of him. She bent to pick up the basket, but he was there, lifting it before she could. "Thank you."

"It's the least I could do after giving you such a fright."

She ignored the way his mouth ticked up in amusement and continued on

the path. “Why were you hiding?”

He followed alongside her. “Because I’m a wanted man, as you know. And the Glass Tower has spies everywhere.”

She laughed. “Even in Hiddleston? I don’t see the likes of squash farmers and quilt-makers spying for the queen.”

“You’d be surprised who Queen Morgrid would employ. Or seduce.”

Sienna shivered at the thought of the queen. She’d only seen her from afar once, when she waved to the peasants of Sylus from the castle’s terrace one harvest. Her black hair glistened like a raven’s wing, her porcelain skin pale like winter’s snow, and her regal beauty beamed like night’s brightest star. She was a beautiful yet dangerous force. Even from a distance, the queen’s evil seeped into her bones.

“I suppose you’re right.” She exhaled a deep breath, finally feeling at ease. Well, as much at ease as one could be in the presence of a man who’d seduced her nightly in her dreams. Not a man. A vampire. “So, lieutenant. What brings you here?”

They crossed into the shade of Silvane Forest. At once, a soothing tranquility washed over Sienna. A white flash zipped between the trees.

“I see your companions never stray too far,” he said, noting the black hart wolf stalking on his right.

“No. They don’t like it when I go to market. They grow anxious until I return.”

“I don’t think the black one likes me.”

“His name is Luca.” Sienna tossed a smile into the vicinity of the woods where the bear-sized wolf loped. “But don’t feel bad. Luca doesn’t like much of anyone. Except Duchess, of course. He worships her.”

When she said her name, the snow-white mate of Luca appeared on the path up ahead. She glanced at the two walking side by side, then trotted farther on.

“Oh, and Arabelle,” added Sienna. “Luca and Duchess both adore her.”

“Where are the other two?” He sauntered along, one hand holding the basket, the other casually in his pocket, but he studied his surroundings keenly. One thing she’d noticed on her few encounters with the lieutenant, he never missed anything.

“The brothers? Kai and Hugo are off with the other hart wolves most likely.”

“There are others?” This brought his attention back to her.

“Oh yes. Though I rarely see them. And when I do, they never come too close.”

“Haven’t you lived in these woods for many years?”

“Five, actually.”

“I’m surprised you wouldn’t run into the larger pack more often.”

“Silvane Forest is wide and deep. I only live on this little part.” Though Nikolai was certainly older than her, she knew he wouldn’t know much about these woods. Vampires steered clear of them, not caring for the enchantment here. “The rest of the pack avoids my side of the woods. They’re much more wild.”

Nikolai laughed. A pleasant sound that drew a smile from Sienna. “What is so funny?”

“They’re all wild, sweetheart. Quite so.”

He was determined to use that endearment for her. Each time he did, her stomach fluttered, even though she knew it meant nothing at all. Ever since the first night she met Nikolai, he’d had this effect on her. She’d tracked him down in the pouring rain to bring help to Prince Marius, who’d been injured. She could remember the way Nikolai had looked sitting atop his gray horse in the downpour, capturing her with his supernatural gaze. Throughout the following few weeks, before he left with Arabelle and Marius to their training camp, she’d caught him watching her, sending a

scintillating thrill through her body. Finally, at the midnight ceremony where she stood as maid of honor to Arabelle as she wed Marius in the small candlelit chapel, Sienna couldn't deny the sizzling heat of Nikolai's gaze. Many men had looked on her with lust, but none had looked on her with possessive need like the former lieutenant of the Crown's Royal Legionnaires.

"I suppose you are right," she finally answered. "They just don't seem wild to me."

"That's because they are so fond of you. But I can't blame them." A fallen branch crossed the path. He took her hand and guided her over it, shifting his body closer. "If I were a wolf in these woods, I'd gravitate to your cabin nightly."

His casual admission conjured the image of her dreams, Nikolai on top of her, kissing, caressing, stroking. While her attraction to him was undeniable, she kept hearing her grandmother's warnings in her head. *Never fall for a vampire, dear one. There can be no future with the cursed.*

She drew her hand away and quickly changed the subject.

"So tell me, do you bring news of Arabelle?"

His mouth twitched on one side as if he knew why she quickly changed the subject. "Actually, I do." He pulled a folded letter from within his vest pocket. "She was going to send it by post, but since I was heading here anyway, I am happy to be your courier."

"Oh!" Sienna snatched the letter from him, noting the black wax seal embossed with a blooming lily.

She ran a finger over the official seal of their resistance against the vampire monarchy, the Black Lily. The symbol of their cause to fight against the Varis Crown and their way of life that oppressed the poor and working class as little more than slaves to the human and vampire aristocracy. Arabelle had seen that only a revolution would break through

the shackles of injustice, and so the Black Lily had been born. But they were a long way off from victory.

The shocking reality was that the vampire walking next to her had joined their cause alongside Prince Marius, now Arabelle's husband. He had once been a high-ranking lieutenant in the Royal Legionnaires but had given it up to fight alongside his best friend.

Sienna broke the seal and unfolded the letter, scanned the first few lines, then hurriedly refolded and stuffed it in the pocket of her mantle.

"The letter was longer than that," said Nikolai.

"Aye. But I want to savor it. I'll wait till after dinner." She glanced sideways, finding the very tall lieutenant studying her. "So if you're still a wanted man by the Legionnaires at the Glass Tower, pray tell, what are you doing here?"

"I'm on a mission to speak with my cousin who is still within the ranks of the Royal Legionnaires."

They crossed into the grove of black oaks, their sable trunks and silvery leaves looking like ghosts in the growing darkness. Thankfully, her cabin was not far off.

"How do you plan to get word to him?"

"Actually, you might want to read that letter sooner rather than later. I believe Arabelle has put a request in there for you as well. For the Black Lily."

Winding into the clearing surrounding her cabin and small barn, she tucked her hand into her pocket and drew out the letter again. "I see."

Her old goat with one broken horn baaed at their approach, craning her neck through the paddock fence.

"Quiet, Mildred," said Sienna. "Well, sir. Would you like to stay for dinner before you move on?"

Her heart tripped double when she realized what vampires preferred to

eat for dinner. The lieutenant's blue eyes glowed with an unnatural luster. He said not a word at her invitation, his keen eyes assessing, dropping to her throat.

“What I meant to say was that you may rest here while I have dinner. Give me a moment to read the letter. If you don't mind.” She opened her door, then turned back to him in the doorway.

His smile nearly buckled her knees. “I would love nothing more.” Then he sauntered into her home.

Chapter Two

She was the most exquisite creature Nikolai had ever seen. More so than he remembered. Since their all-too-brief meeting a few months ago before he was swept away to Cutters Cove with Marius, his new wife and leader of the Black Lily, Arabelle, and the rest of the resistance, he had been haunted by the image of this woman now moving about the room. When Marius had mentioned they needed more soldiers to stand against Queen Morgrid's Legionnaires, Nikolai had swiftly pointed out that they needed someone to recruit on the mainland, someone the Legionnaires would never suspect. Arabelle finally came around to the idea of Sienna, giving Nikolai the perfect reason to return to her. Just as he'd hoped.

And so here he was, examining her with a subtle eye while she pulled the stew off the fire and served herself a bowl. Yes, he was there to serve as her protector and to recruit for the Black Lily, but his primary quest was of a more personal nature. Her alluring scent had gotten under his skin, and he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd gotten under hers. His fangs ached at the thought. He shifted his cock in his pants where it strained against his trousers. He'd planned to tread carefully and slowly, but that idea fled the second he saw her.

What had he been thinking? The lie he'd told himself was that he'd serve as her guardian and keep her safe on this mission. For the Black Lily, of course. And if they *happened* to fall into bed together, then so be it. Fool

that he was. What he'd completely forgotten was the maddening pull this woman had on him. She drew out his fangs too quickly. If he was anything in life, it was calm and controlled. *Especially* when feeding. Therein lie danger.

A flicker of memory—dark hair, a foul room, too much blood, distant laughter.

No. He mustn't lose control. Never with her.

He had refused dinner but accepted the hot tea she'd offered. She ate quickly, hopping up repeatedly for a glass of water, a napkin, or to refill his tea. Finally, she settled down in a chair opposite him to read the letter.

While many vampires ate and drank human food as a pleasure rather than sustenance, Nikolai had long since given up the practice. He was a vampire of efficiency. But he could see in her wary gaze and hear in her fluttering heartrate that he made her nervous. So he sipped the tea to assuage her fears. The truth was, she had every reason to beware of him.

She flipped the letter over to read the back. A thin line along her smooth brow showed concern. Her milk-pale skin and slender throat called to him like a siren song. Moss-green eyes darted up from the parchment as she flipped to the second page. Firelight danced on the auburn waves she left loose about her shoulders.

He warred with this driving need to haul her into his lap and kiss her senseless, to feel her in his arms, pressed close. His craving for her went beyond the desire for her flesh and blood. Her sweet innocence combined with her independent nature was a heady concoction to a man like him. He'd only ever been surrounded by the vapid ladies of the aristocracy and the wanton women of the peasantry who sought him for one night's pleasure or silver sovereigns. Often both. And while his lust for this red-haired beauty was a dangerous, feral beast, he was cautiously aware his unusual possessiveness meant something deeper. Stronger. Something he

wasn't prepared to confront just yet.

With a sigh, she refolded the letter and looked up, clearing her throat. "Do you know what the letter says?"

"I did not read it, but I know what Arabelle asks of you. Will you do it?"

Leveling her chin up a notch with determination, she replied, "Of course I will. Whatever the Black Lily needs of me, I will do. How far north must we go?"

He set the tea on the side table and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped casually together. "Marius has heard from Friedrich at Winter Hill. There are signs that the blood madness *sanguine furorem* has spread into his region. We are to go there and recruit all we can along the way."

Back straight, her hands sitting in her lap like any aristocratic lady, she asked, "Why didn't Arabelle send Ivan or Evan? They're capable enough of recruiting."

A twinge of jealousy twisted in his gut. "Would you prefer one of the Barrow brothers as your guard?"

"No. But if her need for me is to have a human member of the Black Lily to recruit and not a vampire, why did she send you?"

"Because we must cross the countryside while the Legionnaires hunt down revolutionaries and the blood madness runs rampant. You need a vampire to protect you against vampires."

She swallowed visibly, a tell of her rising anxiety. "I see."

"Besides, the Barrow brothers did come, but they have a shorter assignment to fetch a cache of gold from Arabelle's mine and whatever recruits they can gather in Hiddleston, then return to the training camp. Marius's kin Friedrich sent supplies as well, what he could. The Barrow brothers will use some of the gold to barter for other goods to restock the training camp." He leaned back and rested one arm along the sofa back, the other hand casually on his thigh. Her gaze flickered to his lap as he

continued. “They’ll help with the first recruitment meeting tomorrow night in the basement of the tavern at the Bull’s Head. You and I will also be there. But before that, I have a mission of my own. And I need your help there as well.”

“What is it?”

“I must speak with my cousin working in the Glass Tower. But I need someone to bring him to me.”

“And that someone would be me.”

“Yes. If you will.”

“Well, of course I will.” She stood and walked toward the door, lifting her red cloak from its hook and pulling it over her shoulders.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” She clasped the hook beneath her chin. “I’m readying to go to the Glass Tower.”

Nikolai stood and walked to her. “We are not going tonight.” He slowly lowered her hands to her sides, then unclasped her mantle, keeping her close. “The Tower is dangerous during the day, but for a delectable woman like you, it is surely fatal at night.”

Her green eyes darkened, pupils dilating, her gaze dropping to his mouth. His fangs elongated, aching for succor. But he would take none from her. Not yet.

He whipped off her cloak and stepped away to hang it back in place.

“So we go in the morning?” she asked, hesitantly, her voice softer, weaker than before.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a place to sleep?” she asked, moving away to clear his tea and saucer to the sink.

“No,” he declared clearly. “I was hoping you would allow me to sleep here with you.”

The tea cup rattled where she dropped it in the washbasin. She turned, one hand clenching the sideboard till her knuckles were white. “Stay here?”

“Yes.”

“With me?”

His lip twitched. “Unless you were planning on sleeping outside, then yes.”

“But I”—she swallowed visibly, drawing Nikolai’s attention to her beautiful throat again, that creamy alabaster skin—“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I—I know what you’re thinking.”

He eased back to stand near the hearth. “Do you?”

“I know what you want of me,” she said boldly. “What all vampires want. But I cannot give you that.”

“Sweetheart, you do not know what I am thinking.” He couldn’t help but let his gaze rake her from top to bottom. She was indeed the most tempting woman he had ever seen. “If you knew, you wouldn’t have allowed me through your door.”

Her eyes widened. The emotion flitting across her face was a mixture of panic and excitement.

“Rest assured, my lady. You are in no danger from me. I was sent to be your guide and protector on this journey north. And I will do so. I will protect you with my life.”

She let go of the sideboard and moved closer.

“Why would you do that?”

She shifted the subject away from the two of them alone in the cottage. Smart girl. But too late. She’d revealed something she shouldn’t have. For underneath her rising alarm was the heady scent of desire, and it had hooked him deep. Encouraged his hunt.

She continued. “Why would you help the Black Lily, the resistance who despises all vampires?”

He smiled at that. “The way Arabelle explains it, the Black Lily wants to free the peasantry from the yoke of the aristocracy, both the human and the vampire aristocracy.”

“You’re right. But many members of the Black Lily have suffered greatly at the hands of vampires. Many despise your kind, and yet you help them. Why?”

Nikolai considered answering her, then stepped closer. “You are safe with me, Sienna. That is all you need to know.”

She studied him for a split second, then walked away to her bed behind a dressing screen and returned with a quilt and a pillow. “You may sleep on the sofa. We will leave at first light.”

With a bow of his head, he took them from her. “Thank you.” Turning for the sofa, he added. “For a moment, I thought I would be sleeping in the barn with your goat.”

She laughed and disappeared behind the dressing screen. A sweet sound.

“And don’t forget Willow.”

“Ah, yes. How is Arabelle’s old mare?” He set to pulling off his boots.

“She’s healing well from her fall, but the poor thing still limps.” The sound of her boots hit the floor. “And I don’t dare ride her. Not yet,” she called out.

Fabric brushed together then her arms raised over the dressing screen as she pulled off her dress. Nikolai could only imagine the heavenly picture being revealed behind the screen as each layer was removed from her exquisite form. After he’d heard the corset fall to the floor, he gritted his teeth on the vision of her in only her thin chemise as she climbed into bed and blew out the tableside candle.

“Good night, lieutenant,” she said hesitantly into the dark.

He stood and blew out the candle still lit on her dining table, then settled on the sofa. He lay back and shifted his painful erection, wondering how in all the heavens he would be able to focus on this mission when the woman he swore to protect scrambled his brains into mush. He was sure she was an innocent maid. He'd only ever had experienced women in his bed, and for only one night at a time at that. Emotional ties were dangerous for a lieutenant in the Legionnaires who needed to keep his focus sharp. It was even more dangerous now as a loyalist to the Black Lily and traitor to the crown. It was wise to keep his liaisons short and impersonal. Still, the thought of Sienna sent his blood pumping hot and furious through his veins. So much so that he couldn't stay away, jumping at the chance to serve on this mission. Anything to be near her.

He sighed, then whispered, "Good night." This was what he wanted—to be near her, to protect her.

Punching his pillow, he rolled to face the fire, now dying to orange embers, and knew damn well he would dream of a red-haired witch he craved more than breath itself.

Chapter Three

Nikolai had been silent since they woke this morning. Of course, so had she. She could hardly look at him after having the most erotic dream she'd ever had about the man sleeping only feet from her.

Dawn peeked through the elm trees as they reached the farther end of Larkin Wood. The narrow path intersected with a wider road. Sienna turned left, but Nikolai reached out and grabbed her hand. "This way." He tugged her a moment before glancing at his hand around hers. He swiftly dropped it.

Sienna found herself wishing he'd held it longer. Then chastised herself for wanting such a thing. Her dreams were nothing more than fantasies. And yet, a slow burn flickered in her belly when she remembered last night's. It was summer and he'd laid her down in the tall grass. She'd been completely naked, and he'd been fully dressed. He'd used his mouth and tongue in wonderfully wicked ways. Not to mention his long tapered fingers which had teased into her cleft. The heat of the sun beamed down on her naked breasts as she arched into his touch, and he'd pushed his fingers

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Your heart is beating alarmingly fast."

What an *idiot*. How could she forget his heightened senses?

"I'm fine." She smiled awkwardly, turning the subject quickly. "The entrance to the Tower is that way, through Sylus. Why are we going in the

opposite direction?”

“There is a path over here that will bring us to the southeast gate,” he said, strolling ahead. “There is usually a single guard on duty. It’s more discreet to deal with him than the front gate.”

She followed behind him, admiring the view of his tall, lean form taking lengthy strides along the path. So what if she was attracted to a vampire. A beautiful, fierce, warrior vampire. That was only natural. Any warm-blooded woman would be. It did her no harm to have fantasies, did it? Or a few naughty dreams. That’s what she told herself anyway, pushing any and all grandmotherly warnings far to the back of her mind.

A brook gurgled on the left side of the road, winding in and out of the woods like a slithering snake.

She caught up to him. “I didn’t know there was another entrance to the south of the palace grounds.”

“Few do. When we get there, you’ll go to the gate and simply ask to speak with Riker. They won’t bring you to him, they’ll bring him to you. They’ll be hesitant to bring any stranger on to the palace grounds.”

“I can handle that.”

He stopped at the edge. The roadway was particularly steep and the ravine rocky with jutting shards of stone where a deep pool coalesced. “Here’s where we cross.”

“What?” Sienna gaped. “I can’t climb down there.”

Nikolai grinned, then scooped her up into his arms, his face close to hers. “Hold on, sweetheart.”

“Oh no.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck a split second before he leaped and landed safely on the other side, much softer than she expected. The feat wasn’t humanly impossible. But, of course, he wasn’t human.

For a moment, he held her close, his fingers curling tightly at her ribcage.

“This is why you need a vampire to escort you to the north for recruits.”

“So you can lug me around like a potato sack?” she asked, arching a brow. “Of course. Why didn’t I know that already?”

A laugh rumbled in his chest as he set her carefully onto her feet, keeping her within the circle of his arms.

“You may release me now, lieutenant.”

“Why are you so afraid to be close to me?”

“I’m not.”

“I make you nervous.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Liar.”

She pushed on his shoulders, and he let her go. “I just don’t want to tempt you...unnecessarily.” She smoothed her crimson skirt though it wasn’t ruffled. “I mean, I don’t want to be a burden as I know vampires have trouble sometimes. With the whole blood thing.”

He let out a bark of laughter that snapped her attention back to him. “Oh, sweetheart.” He stood, one hand loose on his hip, the opposite leg casually bent as he studied her, blue eyes flaring bright. “You tempt me beyond reason. Beyond the ‘blood thing.’ But I am a man of my word. I won’t do anything at all to you...that you don’t want me to do.”

With that, he marched ahead, leading her through a dense wood.

Frowning at his insinuation, she called out, “I never said I wanted you to do anything to me.”

“No. But you will.”

“So sure of yourself, are you, lieutenant?”

“Quite sure.”

“Arrogance is not an attractive trait.”

“It’s called confidence.”

“Ha! I have known some arrogant men in my time, but you—”

He stopped short. “Shh!”

She froze immediately. He turned and placed a finger to his mouth to assure her silence, then took her hand and edged forward slowly. She could still hear nothing until they rounded a bend where light shone from a clearing ahead. Voices rumbled together. Two men. His keen hearing had heard them first. Begrudgingly, she admitted there were reasons a vampire would serve as the best escort on this mission.

Nikolai motioned for her to go ahead, though his scowl told her that he wasn't happy. With a tight nod, she stood tall and sauntered forward the last few feet of the thick brush and into the clearing. The two Legionnaires turned at once, both apparently hearing her footsteps at the same time. Both soldiers were pale with dark hair, similar in stature and rigid in stance at the gate entrance. Their Legionnaire uniforms in the royal colors of blue and silver gave them an air of sophistication and civility. But Sienna wasn't fooled by appearance. She knew some of the royal Legionnaires suffered from blood madness and had been bleeding peasants dry for the past few years. Her pulse tripped faster as she drew closer under their watchful eyes.

“Good morning, officers.” She stopped a fair distance away.

“Good morning, my lady,” the one on the right said with a grin, casting a look to the other soldier. “How may we be of service?”

“I must speak with Sergeant Riker.”

“Sergeant? You mean Lieutenant Riker.” His grin vanished. “What do you want with the lieutenant?”

Sienna had prepared to sell the idea of being one of his current bleeders, but a bleeder would know his status in the Legionnaires. After all, a lieutenant could pay more money for his bleeders. But she could always think on her feet quickly.

“My name is Sarah York of Hiddleston. The lieutenant and I were well acquainted last year upon his visit to town. I'm newly arrived to Sylus and

wanted to...rekindle our friendship.”

The leader of the two leaned to one side in a more casual stance. “I have not heard of a new family of the aristocracy moving into Sylus.”

“Oh, we are only visiting some friends at Sterling House.”

Sienna had heard the Barrow brothers mention the old baron at Sterling House and how he often hosted visiting noble families from other provinces.

“My lady,” interjected the other guard, “how might you know of the south gate entrance? This is not for public access.”

“No,” she agreed with a sultry smile. “That is what Riker told me when last he brought me here.” She used his first name, an intimate privilege.

The officers, both frowning, shared another look, obviously wondering if she was telling the truth.

Steadying her nerves, she flipped her cloak back over her shoulders, revealing the black embroidered bodice overlaying her crimson dress, knowing full well the gown accentuated her womanly curves. Leaning forward, she pretended to pull a loose string from the hem, giving both men an eyeful of her cleavage. “I am quite sure Lieutenant Riker would be awfully disappointed if he missed my call.”

When she straightened, both of their gazes were centered on her bosom. The leader then snapped a command.

“Garrett. Fetch the lieutenant. Quickly.”

His thick speech told her his fangs had extended. She batted her eyelashes and smiled, pretending she wasn't afraid. Officer Garrett disappeared in a blur, moving in super-speed to find the lieutenant. Then she was alone with the dangerous-looking one, except for Nikolai watching from the bushes. That was the only thought that kept her fears from taking over. She knew he would let no harm come to her. Still, if she couldn't manage this small mission without needing him to come to her aid, it could end their mission

before it began. If Nikolai blew his cover, the Legionnaires would be on the hunt for them both.

“Might I ask your name, Officer?”

“You may, my lady.” He remained in his casual posture, observing her closely. “My name is Sergeant Aleksander Volkov.” He clasped his hands at his back, a posture to appear disarming, then strolled forward. “I have never seen you here at the palace before, my lady.”

She held her back ramrod straight, refusing to take a step away, which her instincts told her to do. “No, sergeant. As I said, I’ve only been to the palace once. And as I mentioned, that was with Ser—I mean, Lieutenant Riker. I had not realized he was promoted.”

“You are quite lovely.” His pale eyes glowed, a sign his vampire senses were at the forefront.

“Thank you, sergeant.”

He inched closer, his nostrils flaring. “You smell lovely.”

“Thank you,” she said, voice falling to a whisper.

“I wonder how you taste. I’ll bet you’re sweet.”

With a defiant lift of her chin, she dared him to touch her with a narrow-eyed glare. If he did, Nikolai would be forced to reveal himself.

“Sergeant, while I am sure you are quite popular with the ladies, I am not one to be tossed from one man to the next. I have been a bleeder for Lieutenant Riker alone. I have no desire to serve another.”

For indeed, that was what a bleeder was, a servant to her vampire.

“You should reconsider.” Another step closer, his hands falling to his sides. “My bleeders tell me the elixir in my bite is most...erotic.” He lifted a strand of her hair and twined it loosely around his forefinger before letting it go. “You know, the other officers speak of a beautiful red-haired woman who was seen with a traitor, a peasant woman, a few months ago. Before I came into the service of the Royal Legionnaires.”

“It was not me,” she protested, perhaps too strongly. “As I’ve said—”

“Yes, as you said.” He traced a finger along her jaw. “Interestingly enough, this woman matched your description, right down to this blood-red cloak you wear.”

Damn it to hell, why had she not thought of that? Everyone in Sylus knew her by her distinctive red cloak.

“A mere coincidence,” she said, hearing the lack of confidence in her own words.

He grinned, pointed canines long and sharp. “This lovely red-haired woman was seen riding atop a white hart wolf from the enchanted wood. They’re all calling her the Red Witch of the Wood.” He let his finger slide down her neck. “They said she was blindingly beautiful, a temptress in every way.”

Prickling heat tingled along her skin, a strange sensation she’d felt before when she was in danger. Though she knew not where it came from.

“You are too close, sir.”

“I’d say not close enough.”

Sienna stepped back. Lightning-fast, he grabbed her by the arms and pulled her against him.

“Unhand her, Volkov,” came a commanding voice behind him.

At once, he let her go and stepped aside, snapping to attention. The other guard named Garrett stood next to a tall, black-haired vampire with blue eyes the same shade as Nikolai’s. By his description, she knew him to be Riker.

“You asked for me, my lady.”

Before he could blow her cover, for the frown he wore told her he was on the verge, she marched forward with a bright smile.

“Lieutenant, it is so good to see you again,” she exclaimed in a gushing voice, offering him her hand. “It has been entirely too long.”

He took her hand and bent over it with a gentle brush of lips on her knuckles. “Yes, my lady. It has.” He offered his arm. “Would you care for a turn in the palace gardens?”

She looped her arm through his and nodded toward the woods. “I had hoped that we might take a walk to the brook. It is a lovely day and”—she lowered her voice seductively—“we can have more privacy out here.”

“Of course.” He covered her hand with his own, a sign of intimacy. “Nothing would give me more pleasure.” He guided her toward the woods.

“Lieutenant!” called the sergeant. “Do you think that wise? We could escort you for safety, sir.”

Riker turned with an expression of superiority and bafflement. “I can handle myself, sergeant. We aren’t going far anyway. And *no*. I want privacy with my lady. Do you understand?”

“Yes, lieutenant,” he replied, snapping to attention again, eyes forward.

“And do you understand, Garrett?”

“Yes, lieutenant.” Garrett appeared as if he were about to faint from fear.

“Now where were we, my dear,” said Riker, pulling her close and strolling along again. “You are right. It has been too long. I’ve missed you.”

“Aye, darling,” she replied loud enough for them to hear.

They marched into the cover of trees, but they both knew the guards could still hear. Nikolai stood farther down the lane, one foot on the road, the other in the brush. He beckoned with one hand to follow.

Riker glanced over his shoulder, then wrapped an arm around her waist. “I am sorry to be so forward, my lady. But I know where he wants to meet, and it would be much faster if I carried you there.”

He was asking permission to lift her in his arms. “All right then.”

With a swift movement, she was once more in the arms of a vampire and speeding at a dizzying pace through the woods. A blur of green and brown made her nauseous. She closed her eyes, for he seemed to travel much

farther than she expected. Sounds of the forest whirred by—birdsong, creek water, the autumn breeze.

Then they were suddenly still, standing at the mouth of a cave. Nikolai took her from Riker and set her on her feet, his hands gently on her shoulders.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Fine.” She put a hand to her stomach. “Though I don’t much like to travel that way.”

“Not the travel. That bastard Volkov. Did he frighten you?” He scowled, but his hand was gentle when he brushed her hair away from her face.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she assured him with a tentative smile. “No need to fuss.”

He stepped away and turned to Riker. “Greetings, cousin. You are lucky your man Volkov isn’t lying at the gate with his throat torn out.”

“That might’ve raised the alarm, Nikolai.”

He smiled and pulled him into a hug. They both laughed, patting each other’s backs roughly before pulling away, still clasping forearms.

“I was afraid for you,” said Nikolai.

“And I for you. They’ve been sending out scouting parties in search of you, Marius, and his wife, as well as for the other revolutionaries. I’ve been afraid every time they’ve returned.”

Nikolai stepped away and glanced outside the mouth of the cave. “They won’t find our training camp. Come. Let’s sit and talk awhile.”

Riker walked ahead and disappeared into the dark tunnel.

“Do you have a torch or something?” asked Sienna. “I can’t see in there.”

Nikolai took Sienna’s hand. “I’ll lead you. There’s a place where there is light farther in.”

Sienna hesitated when he tugged her, staring into the dark. She bit her lip, hoping he couldn’t feel her trembling but knowing he certainly did.

He stood in front of her, blocking the passage so that she was forced to look up at him, and cupped her cheek. “I didn’t know you were afraid of the dark.” His voice rolled in a gentle timbre, soothing her in a way she thought impossible.

“It’s really that I’m more afraid of tight spaces. I feel like I’m suffocating.”

“This place is one from my childhood. I’ve been here a thousand times. The tunnel is wide, and it will open up to a larger cavern with an opening at the top where light filters in.” He continued to caress his thumb softly across her cheek. “Do you trust me?”

More than anything.

“Do you?” he asked again, his sky-blue eyes flashing bright.

“Yes.” She licked her lips. His eyes darted to the movement. “I trust you.”

With a flash of his gleaming smile, he held her hand tighter and led her into the dark.

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Nikolai kept Sienna close, hearing her heart thump wildly like a trapped bird. His one instinct was to offer her security. The tunnel was black as pitch, but he could still detect the outline of Riker walking farther ahead. Shifting Sienna to his side, he guided her with a hand at the small of her back, helping her make her way without tripping.

“We’re almost there. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” The slight tremble in her voice told him she was not.

Then a faint gray light appeared ahead. The silhouette of Riker disappeared beyond the opening. She quickened her steps. Nikolai smiled, feeling the tension dissipate from her tight frame.

“Thank God,” she murmured as they stepped into the spacious cavern.

Just as he remembered, there was a natural opening at its center, and the blackened fire pit beneath it that he, Marius, and Riker had used a hundred times. Autumn had blown in leaves and twigs from the towering treetops above, littering the floor. One huge branch had also fallen in, probably from a storm. Two large boulders and one log circled the fire pit.

“This place never changes,” said Riker, lifting and tossing the heavy branch out of the way before taking a seat on one of the boulders.

Nikolai led Sienna to the circle, where she took a seat on the weathered log.

“Where are we exactly?” asked Sienna.

Nikolai sat next to her. “Far enough away from prying ears.”

“So tell me, cousin,” began Riker, “why have you risked yourself coming here?”

“I need information. About the queen and her movements.”

With a stiff nod in military fashion as he so often did when Nikolai was still his lieutenant, he answered, “You must know I am not one of her favorites.”

“But you have been promoted to lieutenant, I see. Congratulations.”

Riker smiled awkwardly. “Aye. She put me in your position over your troops. But I know it was a ploy on her part. She keeps me close to be sure I am loyal. But she also doesn’t allow me into her inner circle.”

“And who would be in her inner circle?”

“Radomir. Her personal guard.”

“Of course,” scoffed Nikolai. “That bastard will guard her with his life.”

“Aye,” agreed Riker. “And believe it or not, she keeps men like Volkov close to her.”

“Who is that prick? I’ve never seen him before. He has the scent of one recently made.”

Riker clasped his hands together between his knees and clenched his jaw.

“He is. He’s one of hers. She feeds him her elixir to give him strength, to increase his power. And she’s making far too many.”

He stood and paced two steps before facing Riker. “She’s making an army, isn’t she?”

Riker’s mouth firmed into a thin line. He gave Nikolai another military nod. “Not only that, but she’s spreading *sanguine furorem*.”

“Spreading? How do you mean? There has never been a pinpoint of the origins of the virus.”

“I know the origins.” Riker leaned forward, voice gravelly when he said, “It is her.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sienna. “The virus comes from her?”

“No,” he answered, shifting his attention to her. “She *is* the virus. It’s in her elixir. That fool Volkov bragged about his liaisons with the queen. About how she bestows her royal elixir only upon those she chooses. He claims *sanguine furorem* isn’t a virus at all, but a gift of power. It gives them added strength.”

The tension steeling Nikolai’s shoulders stiffened his entire body painfully. When he saw Volkov toying with Sienna, it took all of his willpower not to launch through the air and rip out his fucking throat. Now that he understood that the blood madness held him in its thrall, he realized how much danger she had truly been in. Raw fear dampened his brow. A vampire under the curse of the madness could savage and kill an entire village to satisfy the blood lust. A dark memory tried to rise from the recesses of his mind. He pushed it back.

“How long do you think Queen Morgrid has had the blood madness?” Riker asked. “I’ve been unable to discover any answers myself.”

“Marius and I spoke of it.” Nikolai brushed his knee against Sienna’s, the comfort of even her slight touch grounding him. “It’s my belief that she always has. Marius discovered that she’d had men in her employ for some

time, using a secret chamber in the dungeon of the Glass Tower to feed their blood madness.”

“That’s true,” said Sienna. “Arabelle said that the bodies of peasants from Sylus and from abroad have been turning up in Larkin Wood for years. And many people have gone missing, never to be heard from again.”

Nikolai stared down at Sienna, fearful for her mortality on this mission they must complete to help the Black Lily. “This is why it’s imperative we recruit many if we are to beat them.”

“Aye.” Then Riker added, “You must be aware that she has sent scouts abroad, trying to find someone to give her the whereabouts of your training camp.”

Nikolai heaved out a sigh, responding with a tight nod. “Aye. We assumed so.”

Nikolai had never told Riker where their training camp was, and Riker had never asked. It was their military practice to provide sensitive information only to those who needed to know.

Riker stood suddenly, glancing up at the opening. The sun had moved, the light brightening the cavern. “I must go. If I am away too long, Volkov will know something is amiss.”

“Lieutenant Riker,” said Sienna, standing. “Sergeant Volkov thought I was the red-haired lady who was seen in the company of Arabelle a few months ago. That is, he thinks I’m exactly who I am. If he tells the queen, you could be in danger.”

“You don’t have to return,” said Nikolai, fearing now for his dear cousin.

“Yes. I do. If I do not, the entire royal Legionnaire army will be fast on your trail.” He stepped closer and placed a hand on Nikolai’s shoulder. “Do not worry, cousin. You have taught me well. I will leave if I must. But for now, I will play my part and give you and Lady Sienna a chance to do your work.”

Nikolai clasped his opposite shoulder, wishing he could change his mind, wishing to protect him as he did when he was a wiry, young soldier who looked up to him like a brother. But the truth was, he could not. Riker was right. They needed him to play his part. And that meant putting his own life in danger.

“I cannot tell you how much I appreciate what you are doing.”

“I know, cousin.” His mouth quirked on one side. “Never fear. You have taught me well. I will gain as much information as I can. Where are you headed for recruits?”

“North. We have contacts with the Black Lily all along the northern route to Dale’s Peak, which is our final stop. We’ll see how far we can go before we return to the training camp. I’ll mark the entrance with a black mark when we have returned in a fortnight if we’re lucky. Meet me here at dusk each night thereafter.”

Riker smiled, a gesture that softened his features and reminded Nikolai of when they were boys. “Like the old days, when we played ‘pirate and pillage’ and marked our secret hideaways.”

“Yes,” agreed Nikolai with a sad smile, those innocent days so far away. “Like the old days.”

“Aye. Stay well till then, cousin.”

“You too,” said Nikolai, his heart soaring with pride at the bravery of this young man he’d practically raised from a boy.

“Farewell, my lady,” he said with a proper bow to Sienna.

“Farewell. Stay safe,” she said with a small curtsy.

In a blur and a rush of wind, Riker vanished, speeding away back across the wood to the southern gates.

“Lieutenant,” said Sienna behind him. “I cannot return to the training camp when we are done. I vow that I will help with the recruits, but Cutters Cove is too far away.”

Approaching, he sensed a desperate sadness rattling around inside of her. “Why ever not?”

She glanced away, kneading her hands together. “I just can’t go that far away from the forest.”

“From Silvane Forest?”

“Yes.” She stood and paced away. “It’s difficult to explain, but I—that is, I can’t go that far away.”

“But we are heading north. You will be far away.”

“I know.” She spun, fear shining bright on her fair face. “I will go north and help with the recruits, then I must return to my cottage.”

He stepped closer, recognizing her growing anxiety—the slight rise of her voice, the shifting from one foot to the other, her fingers clenching in the folds of her cloak. This deepened his own concern.

“You do realize that after we are done crossing the countryside that it may not be safe back at your cottage. Many people know you reside there.”

“I will be safer there than any other place.” She walked toward the tunnel. “I would rather we return to the forest while we wait for nightfall.”

She paused at the dark entryway. Nikolai wondered at this attachment she had to the woods. It was true that the hart wolves would defend her. He’d witnessed their devotion to her before. But even four hart wolves were no match for the royal Legionnaires. Especially a troop with the blood madness coursing through their veins. But it was pointless to argue with her when she was so obviously out of sorts. Why was leaving the forest so upsetting to her?

Confused, he marched forward and took her hand in his to guide her back through the tunnel. Perhaps she feared living in a populated town again, having been on her own for so long. Did something happen to her in Dale’s Peak to make her fear the company of others? A flash of anger lit through his veins at the thought of someone hurting her.

One thing he knew for certain. When this was all over, he would not, could not forsake her to her own fate, letting her live alone so close to the Glass Tower. Too close to the evil lurking there.

Chapter Four

They sat on opposite sides of the small fire, neither having spoken for nearly thirty minutes. Sienna finished her meal of bread and cheese and brushed the crumbs from her skirt while she watched him. Nikolai busied himself sharpening one of the many knives he kept hidden in sheaths on his person. This dagger seemed to be his favorite—twelve inches long, two inches wide, and serrated on one side with wickedly sharp teeth. It was a beast of a blade. She marveled at the deft move of his muscular forearms and skilled hands working the knife against the whetstone.

Duchess had settled beside her on her belly, chin resting on her paws. Her mate, Luca, rested outside their circle, but Sienna saw his eyes glowing in the dark, blinking lazily. And she heard the brothers, Kai and Hugo, crisscrossing in the woods here and there. The four had been waiting for her when she stepped back into the Silvane Forest, as if they knew she would be leaving them for a while.

The thought of leaving the wood for longer than a few hours struck a cold fear through her body. As if parting from this place would be like losing a limb. And yet, Arabelle needed her. The Black Lily needed her. She couldn't allow her own fears to guide her in this matter. Her destiny lay beyond the safe haven of her home.

“Tonight will be your first speech in front of potential recruits,” said Nikolai, still stroking the blade of his knife along the whetstone in a steady

rhythm. “Have you considered what you will say?”

“Aye,” she said, wrapping the bread loaf in paper and stuffing it into her bag. She glanced at him, wondering when he had fed last. Vampires needed to feed on average once a week, so she was told. Her gaze slid to his lips, wondering what his bite would feel like. She wondered what his elixir would feel like as well.

“Is it true that every vampire’s elixir has a different effect on the bleeder?”

He stopped sliding his knife across the stone, his sharp gaze capturing her. The tension in his posture put her on alert, like the lamb catching the scent of the wolf on the wind.

“And why are you curious about such a thing?” he finally asked.

She shrugged and turned her attention to Duchess in an attempt at nonchalance, stroking a hand over her broad brow. The she-wolf blinked her golden eyes open, then closed them again. “No reason really. It was just something that Sergeant Volkov said. About his elixir being different.”

“I know what Volkov said. I heard him.” His voice was clipped and harsh.

“You were very far away. The sergeant didn’t hear you hiding there. I’m surprised you could hear—”

“The older the vampire, the stronger he is, the more potent his power.” He held her with his electric blue gaze. “In every possible way.”

The rough timbre of his voice made her stomach flip-flop. She returned her attention to him across the fire. “And how old are you, if I may ask?”

“You may,” he replied with a tilted smile. “I am one hundred twenty-four.”

The idea of being in the presence of a being over a hundred years older than her quickened her pulse. She had no idea. Compared to a human man, he looked no older than thirty. Though there was something about his eyes

that spoke of intelligence and wisdom, the kind one acquired from long years of experience.

Gaze narrowing, he spoke in a low rumble. “Are you asking me about the elixir because you’re curious what Volkov’s would be like?”

She wondered what she said to make him so angry. “No! That man was detestable.”

“More than that. His name means ‘wolf’ and my guess is it suits him rather well.”

Duchess let out a huff, raising her head. “Wolves are lovely creatures,” Sienna protested with a soft pat behind Duchess’s ear.

“Not all of them.” He leaned forward, the flames flickering on his grave features. “Some are vicious, cruel, and bloodthirsty.” He glanced at Duchess. “Excepting your hart wolves, of course.” He pocketed the whetstone in his satchel and sheathed the knife in a harness that crossed his chest over his shirt. “So, if you think the man ‘detestable,’ why ask about his elixir?” He pulled on his long coat, which covered the harness.

“You don’t listen very well, lieutenant. I asked about vampire elixir, not Volkov.” She shoved her canteen in her own small sack and stood, readying to go.

“Yes, it’s true,” he said with a sidelong glance. “Every elixir has a unique effect on the bleeder. Some experience euphoria or ecstasy, others numbness, or even fear.”

Duchess had stood at her side, so Sienna stroked her casually along the neck, which was at eye level. “And what do your bleeders experience?”

Silence. Nothing. She felt him behind her before she turned.

“Would you care to find out, sweetheart?” he asked. His expression wasn’t his usual arrogant, hard facade. Rather the opposite. Temptation swirled around her like a net, binding her till she was breathless. He kept an arm’s length between them, but it wasn’t enough. He needed to be leagues

away, with a sea between, for his powerful presence to have no effect on her. Even then, she wasn't sure it would be enough.

"No," she finally said. "That is...I think it is time to go."

Unmoving, he openly stared, examining her in minute detail, his intense study escalating her heartrate even further. "I agree," he said, the heat of a moment before vanishing behind his frosty exterior he wore so well. He stomped the fire down with his boot. "Best to keep moving."

Sienna felt the coldness seep in as she followed in his wake. He was right. Best to get on with this mission, so they could go their separate ways. She could return home to her cottage where she belonged, and Nikolai could rejoin the army of the Black Lily. And all would be right as before.

Except a niggling notion deep inside her gut told her things would never be as they were before. Something had changed the moment she saw him leaning against the old oak tree and he'd followed her home. Something indefinable and yet unmovable.

She focused on breathing evenly and listening to the night sounds of the forest. Her forest. Sorrow swept over her, thinking of the days ahead where she would miss her haven. A sable owl cooed out its sorrowful call as if it sensed her melancholy. She glanced up and caught the glow of its golden eyes in the branches, loving that it was one of the many creatures that lived solely within Silvane Forest.

"Thank you, kind owl," she murmured.

Nikolai slowed his gait. When she was even with him, he asked, "I'm not quite sure, but I thought I heard you speaking to an owl."

She laughed, knowing she must appear odd. "Yes. I was."

"And do you often speak to all the animals?" He walked so close, his arm brushed hers on one stride.

"I do," she admitted. "I suppose it's a hazard from living alone. Well, not alone. But without the companionship of another person."

“Mmm. Why don’t you leave this place and return home to Dale’s Peak?”

She glanced sharply up at him, unable to see little but his silhouette by the moonlight. “How did you know I was from Dale’s Peak?”

Silence. She was about to prompt him again when he answered, “I asked Arabelle.”

“Oh.” Sienna felt a twinge of uneasiness, not comfortable with someone else relaying her past. “And what else did she tell you?”

“Nothing. She only warned me of Dale’s Peak, as that is where your mother lives, and said we must use extra caution on our rendezvous there.”

“Lived.” Sienna corrected him, feeling a sense of relief that Arabelle hadn’t betrayed her at all, but rather told him only what he needed to know to ensure her safety.

“Pardon?” She felt his gaze swivel toward her more than could see it.

“My mother moved away long ago.” Though Sienna hadn’t spoken to or had correspondence with her mother since she left her northern home, she knew her mother well enough that she couldn’t abide the gossip that her daughter running away would’ve left behind. “There’s an old apothecary in Dale’s Peak. He was friend of my grandmother’s and they’d kept up correspondence over the years as he has such a wealth of knowledge of healing plants. That’s how we both knew she remarried a man in the east and left Dale’s Peak.”

“I see.” Silence fell heavy between them, but his curiosity seemed to finally get the better of him. “And why have you decided to live in seclusion in the solitary woods of the Silvane Forest? Why did you leave in the first place?”

She laughed. “I was wondering how long it would take you.”

“Were you now?”

“It is usually the first thing people ask me. Well, those who are *brave* enough.”

“Brave enough? And why would anyone be frightened to ask you such a simple thing?”

“Now, lieutenant. Don’t be coy with me.” Once more, she could feel his eyes on her in the dark. He was staring intently, she was certain. She continued on. “Don’t tell me that you’ve not heard what they call me.”

“And what, pray tell, is that?”

“The Witch of the Wood. Lord knows I’ve heard them whisper it often enough. Sometimes the Red Witch. They all think the only reason I am able to live alone in these woods is because I hold magic. You mean you’ve really never heard such rumors from those at the Glass Tower?”

He laughed low and deep, the sound traveling through her with a delightful shiver. “First, I must tell you that I don’t talk to people. I despise most people, so I avoid them as often as I can.”

“So you’re not fond of chit-chat.”

“Bloody hell, no.”

She couldn’t suppress her laughter. “And do you dislike the vampire soldiers you used to command? Or is it the aristocrats and royalty that bother you? Or perhaps the peasants?”

“I hate them all equally. I prefer to be alone.”

“But now you’re training all those men. You must never be alone.”

“That’s different. When I’m at work, I’m employed in something useful.”

“So you mean to tell me that you never enjoyed the grand balls at the Glass Tower?”

“I’d rather have slit my throat than attend any of them. But as Marius’s personal guard at such events, I had to.”

“That’s a shame.”

“What is?” They passed through a clearing, the sky opening up and shining more light on his grave brow.

“Only that I think you would probably look rather dashing in your formal

attire. I'm sure you disappointed many a young lady," she teased, uncertain why she chose to spill her thoughts as they popped into her head. Something about Nikolai was so easy. And yet so hard, at the same time.

Their hands touched on the next stride, giving her a quick shock. She swallowed her sudden gasp. If he heard, which surely he did, he made no note of it. Once more, her pulse quickened at his nearness.

"You know, I once had a little boy in Hiddleston come up to me and ask if I conjured up the hartstone."

He gripped her arm. "Watch that fallen branch."

While helping her over, he let go of her arm, his hand ghosting to the small of her back where he applied slight pressure. The small touch scrambled her wits to the wind.

"And what did you tell him?" he asked.

"What? Tell who?"

He chuckled. "The boy."

"Oh." Inhaling a deep breath, she focused her gaze ahead, the path barely discernible. "What else could I tell him?" She spoke in her scratchy, witchy voice, "Why of course I do. Every full moon, my boy. And the wolves howl. And the fairies rise from their bowers, then we dance in a round, breathing in the powerful magic of the hartstone."

She could hear him smiling when he said, "I imagine he was quite frightened by your reply."

"Terrified. Precious little boy. Though I never saw him again."

"I wonder why ever not?"

The woods opened up to the connecting field leading into Hiddleston. Sienna paused at the edge while Nikolai walked on. He stopped and returned to her.

"What is wrong?"

She glanced back, then toward the golden lights of the village. "The truth

is, I am not a witch.”

“Of course not.”

“But I do feel these woods are a part of me. There is...protection for me here.”

Nikolai stepped close, unclasped her cloak and flipped it inside out so that the black lining was on the outside. Apparently, he hadn't missed anything between her and Volkov. He then placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, his thumb pressing along the side of her neck where he brushed against her pulse gently. A warm comfort. “I am your protector while you are away from your home. I will not let any harm come to you.”

Laden with heavy sincerity, his voice reached inside of Sienna and gripped her heart with a tight embrace. How these simple words—which meant nothing more than he was doing his job for the Black Lily—could compel her to want to step into his arms and burrow into his chest, she couldn't explain. Swallowing her sudden urge to be near him, intimately near him, she gave him a stiff nod.

“Good,” he said, lifting his hand away but not before brushing his thumb along her collarbone. “Then let us get you to your first recruit rally. The Black Lily needs you.”

With a nod, she stepped in line beside him, relieved to have avoided answering his question about why she'd left Dale's Peak.

Chapter Five

The Bull's Head tavern was on the farthest tip of Hiddleston, where a rougher lot milled about well past midnight. Scantly clad women cackled on the corner. One of them, who bared her leg clear up to her thigh through a slit in her dress, tipped her ample bosom forward as they walked by.

“Oy, there, love. Want somethin’ a bit juicier to play with tonight?”

Nikolai took Sienna's hand, pulling her closer, and tossed a sovereign at the prostitute. “Not tonight, dear lady.”

She cackled heartily. “Ye 'erd that, Mable? I'm a lady t'night.” More laughter.

Heat flamed up Sienna's chest and neck. She'd seen women selling themselves in the streets of Dale's Peak before, but something about walking past them with Nikolai at her side and him receiving a brazen offer tied her stomach into knots. She whispered to Nikolai as they approached the door to the tavern, “Do you partake of women like that?”

He glanced over his shoulder with a baffled expression and shook his head before pushing open the door. Sienna didn't know if that meant *no*, *he did not partake of such women* or that he thought her question ridiculous. Either way, he didn't answer her.

The pub rumbled with boisterous laughter, filled with mostly men. A round table of five gruff card players sat at the center. None looked up as they entered. Booths along the wall were full of working men spending

their meager wages on ale and a pot of tavern stew. One or two eyed Sienna. She tucked herself behind Nikolai, keeping the hood of her cloak pulled forward, no longer with the telltale red exterior showing. Two waitresses bustled between the table tops, refilling tankards and serving bowls of hot stew.

A giant stuffed head of a black bull hung over the bar. His nose ring and black eyes gave the beast a fierce look. Sienna thought it an appropriate mascot for the place. The barkeep was a brawny middle-aged man, drying glasses with a rag and watching the newcomers as they approached.

Nikolai didn't slow his pace as he rounded the side of the bar and tossed a sovereign down. "The Barrow brothers."

The barkeep gave a stiff nod over his shoulder. Nikolai tugged her down the corridor, releasing her hand when they reached a door that opened to a narrow staircase leading down. There were murmurs of voices from below but not nearly equaling the raucous noise from above. Nikolai placed a gentle hand on her back to usher her ahead of him, then they made their way down to the basement. Sconces along the wall lit the chamber lined with barrels of ale along two walls. A group of nearly thirty men and women milled about the room.

"I'll be damned, he finally showed." Sienna recognized the merry countenance of Ivan Barrow, all broad chest and beefy arms as he clasped Nikolai's hand.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Of course not. Our lieutenant never fails," said Evan, stepping forward, Ivan's twin brother. Evan handed Ivan a tankard of ale. A serving wench carried a tray of tankards from man to man, tucking the coin in her pocket as she went along.

Ivan gulped his beer, then said, "Aye. Just thought you might have trouble getting to your cousin."

“Not with Sienna’s help,” said Nikolai, nudging her forward with a hand at the small of her back where he let it remain.

“Ah, we welcome your aid once again, my lady,” said Ivan with a bow and a bright smile.

“I will do all that I can,” she assured them.

Last time she came to their aid, she was in the company of Duchess and Luca. Without her steady guardians, she felt more vulnerable. Nikolai slid his hand to her opposite hip and squeezed reassuringly, which eased some of her insecurity but also stirred a small tempest low in her belly.

Glancing over his shoulder, he leaned in and asked low, “Did the goods come through from the duke?”

“Aye,” replied Evan, also keeping his voice low, though there was no one too close to overhear. “Not just goods. That man bought a sloop here in Hiddleston’s harbor and had it stocked with food, clothes, and blankets. Even some livestock. Chickens and goats. It was waiting when we got here.”

“Was Friedrich here as well?”

“No. His man Grant was waiting to sign over the title of the ship. Took care of business, then slipped off in the night, heading back to the north.”

“Marius will be pleased.” Nikolai shifted his body closer to her, his hip pressing to her side. “We were running dangerously low. With more recruits coming in, we’ll need as many supplies as we can get while on the mainland.”

“Don’t you worry,” said Ivan, his merry face more grave. “We’ve got gold to barter for more. We’ll be well-stocked for a long winter before we leave here, I assure you.”

“Good.” Nikolai’s hand tightened on her waist. “Then all is going as planned.”

“Aye. So far. Come on, then,” said Ivan, nodding his head toward the

center of the room. “There’s a few I’d like you to meet.”

Sienna followed with Nikolai still protectively at her back.

“Gentlemen, I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Nikolai and Lady Sienna,” said Ivan to three older gentlemen with an air of importance, though they wore working men’s clothes. He gestured to them. “Mr. Mills, Mr. Surry, and Mr. Lowe are the elder members of the masonry guild which comprises of all skilled masons of Hiddleston, Lobdell, and Dale’s Peak.”

The village of Lobdell was the smallest of the three, about the same size as Sulus. But the town of Dale’s Peak was even larger than Hiddleston. They would certainly do well to recruit there though Sienna had her reasons for wanting to stay clear of it.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Nikolai with a slight bow, noting none of the men offered a hand to shake.

“I don’t care for vampires,” said the sternest of the three, Mr. Surry, his white brows drawn tight as he puffed on a pipe.

“Aye,” said Nikolai lightly, not at all put off by the sentiment. “Most intelligent men do not.”

“How’s that?” asked Mr. Mills, the man with the roundest belly.

Nikolai rattled on in his lighthearted manner. “It seems logical that a man would steer clear of another who would prefer to drink a cup of blood than a cup of ale.”

Mr. Mills chuckled. Mr. Lowe smiled. Mr. Surry did not.

“But, rest assured, gentlemen. I am devoted to my prince, who is devoted to his wife, Arabelle, the leader of the Black Lily. We are all of the same mind.”

“And what mind is that?” asked Mr. Surry, his frown having vanished.

“That no man should live under the yoke of fear and oppression. And every man, woman, and child has the right to live free.”

Mr. Surry added, “And no man should worry if his daughter will come

home safe at night.”

“Aye,” agreed Nikolai. “If there is to be a change in the regime, your best chance is the Black Lily.”

The three men exchanged glances.

“Why don’t you all get one more round from Lizzie?” suggested Ivan. “I see she’s brought down another tray.”

They shuffled off, and Ivan urged them forward where three crates had been stacked together, a makeshift stage for speaking. Evan followed behind them.

“And those three curmudgeons are on our side?” asked Nikolai with a lift of his cynical brow.

“Not yet, but they are open to listening to what we have to say.” Ivan glanced around. “These three men have the eyes and ears of the Masonry Guild, which is comprised of more men in the peasantry than any other from here all the way to Terrington under the palace of Winter Hill. If we gain their support, then your work will be easier going forward.”

“When do you and Evan return to Cutters Cove?” asked Nikolai.

“Tomorrow morning. And hopefully with more men in tow. Evan will return with some men in two weeks’ time. Now that we have the sloop from the duke, a faster ship than our own, he can return with empty cargo and load up the recruits you two send to Hiddleston.”

“Ivan, I believe Mr. Surry is calling us over,” said his brother.

“Excuse us.”

Nikolai scanned the crowd, so Sienna did the same.

“Not many men are here,” she noted.

“But many head of households are. It’s safer not to meet in too large of numbers, but these older gentlemen represent a larger faction.”

Sienna wasn’t accustomed to the workings of an underground resistance, but what he said made sense. Especially when it was known that the queen

had spies everywhere. It also reminded Sienna there was danger for Nikolai even showing his face in a place like this. Not only because he was considered a natural enemy to most peasants but also because if the queen set a spy amidst this crowd, she could track his whereabouts and capture him.

“Well, well, lieutenant. Such a fine pleasure to see you here.”

Sienna was taken aback by the sultry tone of a brunette woman who sauntered forward. One hand on her rounded hip, her full bosom on display, she was obviously a woman who was proud of her assets and who knew how to use them.

“Good evening, Colette. I wasn’t aware you sympathized with the cause of the Black Lily.”

“Why ever not?” She positioned herself between Sienna and him, clasping his arm in an all-too-familiar way. “I am a mere peasant as well. But unlike most of those here”—she leaned closer and whispered—“I do not fear our vampire brethren.”

Sienna seethed. The woman was certainly no lady, but the fashion and quality of her blue dress and the silver bracelet on her arm denoted she had far more money than most of her class.

“I am well aware you do not, Colette. No need to be coy.”

“Then let me tend to you, lieutenant. Are you not hungry?”

His gaze flicked for the first time in the conversation to Sienna. She could hardly hide the anger sealing her lips shut so tightly as her neck flushed with heat.

“May I introduce my friend, Lady Sienna?”

The woman turned, still clinging to Nikolai’s arm, as if shocked to find someone standing there. Sienna knew good and well she was aware of her presence.

“How do you do?” She dismissed Sienna in a blink, returning to Nikolai.

“It is a dark night, lieutenant,” she cooed.

“Hear ye, friends!” shouted Ivan, drawing everyone’s attention to the makeshift stage of crates where he stood. “Lady Sienna, if you’ll please step forward and join me, we’ll get started so these good people can be on their way.”

Sienna swallowed her ire and waltzed forward. Ivan offered his hand and helped her up.

She let her eyes rove the crowd before beginning. “You all know why we are here.” The room fell silent. “It is no mystery that the Varis monarchy, that the queen herself, is set on destroying the Black Lily.”

“Then why the hell should we join?” asked a young farmer. A few in the crowd grumbled, and a few laughed in response.

“Because if the Black Lily falls, our people will fall further still.”

“We’ve been fine up till now,” said a barrel-chested man in the back. “Why should we risk our lives for a lost cause? I have a family of my own to take care of. If I join the Black Lily, who will care for them if I die in this revolution of yours?”

“Pardon me, sir,” interrupted Sienna. “You say you have a wife and family?”

“Aye.”

“How many children, sir?”

“Two sons and a daughter.” He nudged his companion on his right. “So far.”

Another round of masculine laughter.

“So if you do nothing and stay here, who is to say that you will be safe after all?” Silence and gloomy countenances flickered in the dim torchlight. “Let me assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that Queen Morgrid is raising her own army, spreading the blood madness as fast as she can. Rest assured, no matter what the crown promises, we are beyond the security we once had. I

have seen the carnage of the blood madness in Sylus and the woods beyond.”

Sienna heard a woman whisper to another, “She’s the Witch of the Wood.”

“Aye.” She lowered the hood of her cloak. “I am the Woman of the Wood.” Murmurs rose amongst them, but no one interrupted. “And I can tell you from what I’ve seen, the deaths are growing. The corpses of men, women, and children are piling up. Was it not that long ago that the sweet potato farmer’s son here in Hiddleston went missing?” Nods around the room. “He was a victim of the vampires with the blood madness at Glass Tower.” More grumblings of discontent. “I tell you this, sir.” She aimed her word at the man who spoke out. “If you all remain here and do nothing, you are sure to fall under increasing danger as the blood madness spreads abroad. And so will your families. Do not think that by staying home you will be safe in your warm beds.”

“Then we’ll move away,” shouted a thin woman, clinging to the arm of her husband. “We can go north.”

Sienna leveled her gaze, the audience seeming to hang on her every word. “There is no place far enough that you can run. If a doe flees into the forest as far as her legs will carry her, does not the wolf simply follow? Our only chance is to stand and fight.”

The burly man who started it all bellowed out, “And what if my family comes to harm while I am gone? Who will protect them if I’m off fighting your revolution?”

“Bring them with you,” said Sienna, remembering Arabelle’s letter and all that she offered to those who would fight alongside them. “I have been assured by Arabelle, the Black Lily herself, that where they are now is safe from prying eyes with room enough for soldiers’ families if they care to join them. And this is not just my revolution. It is yours, as well.”

“Where is the Black Lily? Why didn’t she come herself?”

“Too busy with her vampire prince,” the burly man’s friend said with a sneer.

“*Hold.*” Ivan stepped in with a hand up. “If it were not for Prince Marius, all of Sylus would surely be dead.” The room fell silent again. Only the guttering of the torch standing by the stage made any sound while Ivan let that sink in. “You’ve all heard the tales that Queen Morgrid held the peasants of Sylus captive. Her plans were to hang them all on the gallows, but it was Marius who staid her hand. And it was Marius’s lieutenant”—Ivan pointed at Nikolai who leaned against a side wall, arms crossed, watching in pensive silence—“who abandoned his post, his king and queen, and the safety of the Glass Tower, not only to join the Black Lily, but to train us for battle. And let me tell you, brothers, we are ready for battle. All because of him. This vampire on our side.”

“Aye!” shouted Evan, usually the quiet one. He threw a fist in the air, facing the crowd. “And I will fight and bleed with my brothers and sisters of the Black Lily until the tyranny of Queen Morgrid is *no more*. I will not sit by and die a slave. I will stand and fight as a man.”

A clamor of excited shouting ensued. A few men punched their fists into the air as well. Ivan grinned at Sienna and winked. “Come forward if you mean to join the Black Lily,” he said, jumping down from the crates.

The crowd rushed forward, shouting over one another. The three men of the Masonry Guild pulled Evan to the side, nodding and whispering urgently. Nikolai remained where he was, Colette now reasserting herself, pressing her breasts against him, and saying heaven knew what, her mouth mere inches from his.

Sienna balled her fists at her sides and leapt down from the crate. She pushed through the horde, bumping one then another before coming out of the crush to find the woman’s hand sliding past his belt and going lower.

Nikolai caught her by the wrist and said something Sienna couldn't hear.

She marched up to him and cleared her throat rather noisily. Both she and Nikolai swiveled their attention to her, the woman still glued to his side, her cleavage spilling out for his pleasure.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant Nikolai, but may I have a word?" She realized the tone of her voice was bordering on shrill, but she could hardly contain the anger humming through her body. "*Alone,*" she emphasized when neither replied.

Nikolai turned to the damnable woman and said in his low, soft voice that Sienna had begun to believe was held in reserve only for her. "Colette, will you please give my associate and me a moment alone?"

She let her hand graze his crotch as she leaned off of his body. Certainly not an accident. "Don't be too long, my lieutenant."

Her lieutenant? Sienna inhaled and exhaled out of her nose, willing her blood to stop boiling.

"What can I do for you?" he asked so casually that Sienna felt her pulse pound even faster.

"Are you utterly mad?"

"Sweetheart, you will have to come right out and tell me what has made you so furious."

"Lieutenant, she could be a spy for the queen."

"Who? Colette?" Nikolai's perfect mouth slid into a salacious grin, his canines sharp and ready. "Highly doubtful. Colette is motivated by other means."

"You're a fool to fall into such a woman's trap."

His smile faded. "Am I?" He edged closer, standing straight. "And what trap is that?"

"She's just using you." Unable to bite back her tongue, Sienna continued on. "She's a...a blood whore."

He corralled her till her back hit the wall. “Oh, she most definitely is that.”

“You’ve been with her before, haven’t you?”

“A vampire must feed.” He braced one hand above her head, his gaze intent and watchful. “And I am very hungry, sweetheart. The voyage from Cutters Cove was over a week on the ocean, and I haven’t fed since we set on land. I came directly to find you, my primary objective.” His voice dropped two octaves when he said the last, his body inching closer. “You do not like Colette? Fine then. Choose another for me, and I’ll proposition her.”

“Proposition?”

“A vampire must pay for his services. Either in coin. Or pleasure.”

Her breath came rapidly as she remained transfixed on his vampire eyes, glowing a supernatural blue. “Which did you offer Colette? For her services?”

“Ah, well, Colette is one of those women who pretends to be a bleeder for the money and the hardships she must overcome in life.” He swept a long lock of Sienna’s hair over her shoulder, one finger trailing across her collarbone and shoulder. She tried to hide her shiver but failed. “But what she really wants is the pleasure. If Colette upsets you, I will certainly choose another. There are at least two more in the room who would be willing.”

Sienna’s mouth fell open in shock. “How do you know that?” she asked, darting a glance to the side but seeing no one. The crowd still hovered close to the Barrow brothers, and Nikolai effectively blocked out the world, forcing her attention only on him.

He grazed a finger along her jaw, sliding it down her neck to where her pulse beat rapidly in her throat. She thought his canines grew even longer right before her eyes, but it must’ve been a trick of the light.

“I know, because I have been alive over a century. And in that time I have studied the mannerisms of mankind. I know all the tells a woman makes when she wants me. The furtive glance. The parted mouth. The rapid heartbeat. The light sheen of sweat on her skin as she pretends I cannot tell it is all for me.”

Hoping her voice didn't tremble too much, she asked, “And there are others in this room who fit this description?”

“Indeed. The barmaid, Lizzie, is one. And there's a farmer's daughter still sitting on a barrel of ale in the back who will serve. So tell me, sweetheart. Who will it be? I'll let you choose.”

The thought of his lips, his mouth, his teeth on the skin and inside the flesh of another woman lit a raging fire in her belly. Night after night, she'd experienced erotic pleasures from that mouth, even while the real lieutenant had been across the woods and the wide Cimmaron Sea in Cutters Cove. Even so, she'd somehow laid claim to him, and she wasn't about to let Colette get her hands on him.

Tilting her chin defiantly, she said, “None of them.”

He smiled again, though there was no mirth in it. “You would have me starve, my lady? I can hardly protect you on our journey north if I do not feed.”

She'd kept her hands at her sides for the duration of this abominable conversation in an attempt to quell the darker emotions swelling up to take hold. She wasn't aggressive by nature, but something about the thought of Nikolai drinking from another woman made her want to hit something, or someone, *very* hard.

Her hand shot up, gripping the collar of his shirt into a tight fist. “You will drink from me, lieutenant. I will not allow you to put yourself in danger with strangers.” She lied with such ease she almost laughed. If her grandmother could see her now. “It would be too easy for a spy to entrap

you...us.”

His voice was steady but his eyes had dilated, the only change in his features. “I cannot allow you to make that sacrifice for me.”

The memory of her grandmother cocking a dubious brow at her rose to mind. She willed her away. Sienna was in no danger of falling in love with the lieutenant from a bite or two. It was physical attraction. Nothing more.

“Lieutenant,” she said clearly and sternly. “Nikolai.” She had his attention then, for it was the first time she’d spoken his first name. “You will feed from me and me alone for the duration of our journey. It is not my sacrifice. It is my wish. Do you understand?”

He remained quite still as if carved in stone. The only movement was the clenching of his jaw.

“Lieutenant, I’d like you to meet someone,” called Ivan, drawing closer behind them.

Nikolai shoved off the wall and stood straight. Ivan stepped forward with the barrel-chested man who had questioned Sienna during the speech. He seemed much more affable now than before.

“This is Harrison. He is in charge of the wheat fields of Hiddleston for Lord Percy. We worked the fields many years together in our time.”

Sienna tried to focus on the conversation, but her thoughts were solely on the man, the vampire, standing at her right, and whether he would take her up on her offer. She couldn’t explain to him that thinking of another woman giving him succor and pleasure drove her nearly mad with jealousy. She hadn’t known he could evoke such feelings from her. And until she could tame—or quench—this undeniable desire, it would hold the reins. All she knew was that no other woman would get hold of *her* lieutenant.

Harrison shook hands with Nikolai, then nodded at Sienna. “I’ve decided to take you up on your offer. I’ll be making arrangements for my uncle to watch the farm while we’re gone. Ivan says the ship sails from Hiddleston’s

harbor in three days' time. Though he still won't tell us where to."

Nikolai spoke, his voice remarkably steady and sure after their heady conversation. "For the safety of all, it is imperative that no one who remains behind knows the location of the Black Lily. We are glad you've decided to join the fight."

"Aye. Not sure my wife will be," he added with a grunt.

Ivan clapped a hand to the man's back. "Harrison offers a place of rest to you two for the night. A safe place out of town."

"It isn't much. The loft of our barn is warm and away from prying eyes. My extra field-hands use it on occasion. But it's empty now, and you're welcome to it."

Nikolai's gaze slid to her before answering, "We are happy to accept the offer."

Though something in the tightness of his shoulders and the clenching of his jaw told her he was not happy at all.

Chapter Six

Nikolai heard her light footsteps up above in the loft. He'd allowed her some privacy before he joined her. He wanted her to have a few moments to reconsider what she'd offered at the Bull's Head. Those words that kept ringing in his ears.

You will feed from me and me alone. It is my wish.

No words had ever paralyzed him like this—both from fear and longing. He'd taunted her back at the pub out of pure mischief. The predator inside him had sensed a particular emotion shining bright in her eyes at the thought of him feeding from another woman. Envy. The devil in him teased, thinking she might storm off in anger, an emotion he could use to lure her closer later on, by gentler means. Never had he thought she'd offer herself. And now, he was almost afraid to accept this precious gift.

He was well aware of the erotic potency of his elixir. Even women who had offered only their blood always changed their minds once he'd punctured their skin.

Unlike many vampires, Nikolai was a man of his word. If he promised a lady there would only be an exchange of blood for money, then he would not succumb to her moans and sighs and pleas for him to do more once his elixir was coursing through her veins. There were other women like Colette who gave consent up front, offering their bodies as well as blood. But Sienna didn't ask for money or pleasure in exchange. *It was her wish.*

Nikolai stood on the barn floor, looking up, while a mouse rustled in the corner and a cow munched hay in its stall. Fear racked his frame, telling him that he would not be able to stop himself once he started. Not with Sienna.

A flicker of that dark memory—of black hair, of a pale throat, of blood—washed over his mind. He shook it away. He could never harm Sienna. And while her scent stirred him to near madness, there was another concern beyond losing control when her blood touched his tongue. It was his acute desire to sink more than fangs inside her body that also gave him pause. He tilted his head, popping his neck, and breathed deeply to rein in the monster inside rattling his cage.

He'd given her privacy so she could ready for bed in modesty. Nevertheless, he heard every movement she made and every breath she took. He heard the fall of her cloak, the removal of her boots and stockings, the unlacing of her bodice, the unsnapping of her corset, and the slide of her day dress as she put it back on. The thought of her sleeping in nothing more than her thin day dress and that flimsy excuse for a shift sent his mind to a dirty, dark place. A place he wanted to go, bringing her with him.

He couldn't close his mouth all the way, his fangs were so far extended, yearning, aching for succor. She'd offered herself as his bleeder, his host. Not for any gain of her own but simply to feed him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd fed without paying first in some form or another.

He shouldn't do it. He should march back into town and take Colette quick and fast, feed his hunger and leave Sienna's virgin throat unspoiled. Nikolai knew that ladies of her caliber didn't become bleeders for hire. She would be no such thing for him. He would take extra care. He would be gentle, if he could manage to rein in the beast prowling his cell. And he would keep his hard cock in his pants.

Though his primal instincts pushed him to leap from the barn floor to the

loft, he refused to do so. He would not frighten her any more than she already was. The soft patter of her pulse echoed in the air like a sonar calling him home. He climbed the ladder, his control held by a thin thread.

The loft had been furnished with two small mattresses on the floor and a lantern. Sienna's quilt lay folded on the one to the right.

She stood at the barn window, watching wisps of gray cloud cover the stars and half moon. A light breeze wafted through the casement. The lantern cast a pale glow on her fair skin. That perfect, alabaster, milk-white skin that he would feel and taste before too long. He stifled a groan before it could rumble from his chest.

She stood there in bare feet. Nikolai examined the delicate lines of her ankles and calves up to where the hem stopped mid-calf. Her bare arms wrapped around herself, her fingers clinging to her own waist. She appeared remarkably vulnerable. So beautifully vulnerable.

His hunger was a feral beast clawing at his insides and demanding blood. Her blood. The lavender-in-the-woods smell of her was a drug all its own. An addiction he could gladly drown in and never come up for air. Even now, he held himself in tight control, straining to keep the monster locked tight.

"You may change your mind, sweetheart." He balled his fists at his sides, hoping he could walk away if she refused him. "Tell me now, and I will go. I will find another to feed upon." She had one chance to stop him. He could do no more. "But once we start, I won't be able to stop."

His senses told him she was afraid and...excited. She turned, the lantern light catching the soft lines of her cheeks, nose, lips.

"You will feed from me," she said firmly. "Just...tell me what to do."

Stars above, he wanted to groan with satisfaction and he hadn't even penetrated her skin.

"It will be easier if you lie down."

She glanced at the mattress, then stepped lightly and lay down on top of the quilt, smoothing her skirt, leaving her arms at her sides. Focusing all of his energy on moving slowly so as not to add a spark of fear on her lovely face, he lay down at her side, propping his weight on one arm. Her bosom rose and fell rapidly as he eased his body over hers. She turned her head and lifted her chin, offering her neck, like the lamb laying herself bare before the lion.

Nikolai lifted a finger to her chin and guided her face back to his. "I will only take what I need, no more."

"I know." She licked her lips. "I trust you."

And there it was. His seal of doom. He could no more take advantage of her luscious body while she was under his enchantment than he could chop off his own limb. She trusted him. He would die before he broke that trust. So he must prepare her for what was to come.

"I must tell you that my elixir may affect you. Rather strongly."

She gulped, and Nikolai followed the workings of the muscles in her slender throat.

"In what way?"

He thought best to be gentle, yet honest. "Sensually. My lady."

"I see." She looked down, her eyelashes black against her cheeks. Rather than protest or beg for a reprieve, she locked her gaze on his. "I'm ready."

Lowering his head, he swept her auburn waves away from her neck and shoulder, relishing the feel of her silken hair between his fingers before clutching a fist in its thickness without pulling. He brushed his lips lightly across her pulse, the swift tattoo throbbing against his mouth. The roots of his canines ached in pain. An agony he'd never felt quite like this.

She lifted her arm and lay a delicate hand on his shoulder. Enough. He could take no more.

With a swift beat, he sank his fangs deep, groaning as pure heaven seeped

into his mouth. The tender aching eased as his elixir released into her bloodstream.

She threaded one of her hands into his hair on a soft sigh. Sliding the one on his shoulder up to wrap his nape, she held him close. With a whisper of a moan, she arched her back and neck, pressing closer.

“Nikolai,” she whispered, and he thought he’d come undone with his name on her lips, her voice full of yearning, calling him like a siren to the sailor.

He pulled his fangs free and opened his mouth wide over the bite, sucking hard, taking in her lifeblood, which surged through his frame, the sweetest nectar. Raw energy lit him from the inside out, and he lost himself in the euphoria until he realized Sienna had opened her legs, allowing him to seat himself perfectly between.

Heaven help him, he ground his hard cock against her sex, sliding his hand to her bare thigh where her dress had hiked up and squeezing her sweet flesh to keep his hand from going any higher.

“Nikolai,” she called again, clutching his hair, jerking his head away from her neck.

The fire burning in her gaze should’ve been warning enough. She was dangerous. He was dangerous with her. But like a wave rising and gaining speed in the ocean, there was no force to hold back this all-consuming tide.

“Kiss me,” she begged, eyes hooded with desire. “Please.”

Nothing in this wide world could keep him from obeying her sweet plea. He angled his mouth over her plump lips—parted and waiting—then stroked his tongue in deep, tasting the remnant tang of her blood, feeling the pliant softness of her mouth. He pulled his mouth away roughly and pricked her bottom lip with his fangs. Licking out with his tongue, he sucked her full lip between his teeth, then nuzzled down her neck to the puncture wounds for seconds.

She moaned and rocked her hips up, undulating against his painfully rigid cock. The friction was delicious, but not as much as her. Releasing her thigh, he glided his hand to her breast, the fabric so thin he easily found the taut peak of her nipple and pinched lightly.

“More,” she begged. “Please.”

Unable to think through the haze of desire, he yanked her top down off her shoulder below her breast, then opened his mouth over her pink nub and sucked, teasing her tight nipple with his tongue. He grazed gently with his teeth, then pulled hard with his lips, soothing again with his tongue.

With a sudden cry, she rubbed her sex against him, climaxing before he’d ever put a hand under her skirts. Maybe that was for the best. Her hand clenched in his hair as she whimpered with each exhalation of breath. He longed to feel her tight sheath clench around his cock. He flicked his tongue out once more across her nipple, savoring her sweet response to his touch. She flinched and whimpered louder.

Rising up to nuzzle her neck, he laved the puncture wounds with his tongue and waited till he saw the healing begin before he righted her dress on her shoulder and lifted up onto his knees. Still panting, she stared up at him, pupils dilated and kiss-swollen mouth parted.

“Is it—is it *always* like that?” she asked on a bare whisper.

“Never,” he declared. For it was true. He’d tugged many a fine woman over the centuries while drinking from her veins, and never had one of them rocked him from his foundation like this. He and Sienna hadn’t even coupled, and yet her blood, now mingled with his, raced like molten lava through his body. Like the gods’ ambrosia, it sparked from within, burning with potency unparalleled to other bleeders. Was it his infatuation with this woman that colored his senses, washing him with desire and electric power? Or was it the woman herself who lit him on fire?

He was happy to have given her pleasure, but he was still in torturous

pain. Especially as she lay there, sated, with her hair tousled and her bosom rising and falling so delectably. He leaped to his feet, then jumped from the loft to the barn floor, landing with a thud. The cow mooed in protest.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

“Not far, sweetheart.”

She peeked her head over the ledge of the loft, squinting into the dark to find him. “But what is wrong?”

He chuckled at his sad state. Everything was wrong. And right.

“Do not fret, my lady,” he said before opening the barn door. “I believe I saw a pond down the hill. If it’s cold enough, it may do the trick.”

Before he sped away, he heard her say in a small voice, “Oh.” He doubted she seriously understood how much pain she had put him in. For even now, he longed to leap back onto the loft and drive his cock deep inside her to feel the glorious satisfaction of taking her in truth. Of making her—

“Mine,” he whispered to the night sky, head tilted back, eyes closed.

With a heavy sigh and a shake of his addled head, he sprinted across the field and down the hill in vampire speed, needing the cold wind cutting across his face, needing to feel anything but the budding emotion tightening around his heart.

Chapter Seven

The gray light of dawn streamed through the loft window as Sienna blinked her eyes awake. A glass of milk sat next to a tin plate with a crust of bread, spiced pear preserves, and a slice of cheese on the side. The cinnamon filled her nostrils. Her stomach grumbled. Sitting up, she pulled the plate into her lap and devoured the unexpected breakfast. No sign of Nikolai.

After eating every crumb and drinking the milk down, she eased off the mattress and peered out the window. Across the barnyard, Nikolai stood with Harrison, talking of something, both of their expressions rather grave.

Sienna feathered her fingers over her neck where Nikolai had bitten her, the skin as smooth as ever. No mark of any kind. Well, that wasn't altogether true. He had marked her for certain.

Heat flushed her cheeks as she remembered her behavior. His elixir had been more than an erotic serum to open her inhibitions. It had demanded she obey her deepest longing when it came to Nikolai. And that was to lay herself bare, to accept whatever pleasure he might give her, to welcome him inside of her body if he chose.

But he did not. He had remained a gentleman as far as he could, it seemed. The memory of his mouth on her breast gave her gooseflesh in the cool morning air. She turned away from the window and started dressing. She wished she had a place to bathe but made do with a quick splash of canteen water on her face, then plaited her hair in a long, neat braid, tying it

off with a short green ribbon.

All the while, she wondered what her grandmother would think of her predicament. She'd chuckle and say something like, *Well, girl, you've gotten yourself in deep now, have you not?*

"Aye," Sienna whispered as she hooked on her favorite cloak, keeping it inside out for safety. "That I have, Grandmother."

Sienna had never hated vampires as Arabelle had. She hadn't a tragic past like Arabelle, caused by the suffering of their kind. As a matter of fact, her only experience had been the stories of her grandmother's love affair with a charming and devoted Royal Legionnaire. One her grandmother gave up, because she refused to become his bleeder and she refused to become one of the *cursed race* as she called them.

And here Sienna was, offering herself freely to Lieutenant Nikolai. She wished she could tell herself that she regretted the experience. But the opposite was true. She wanted more of him.

No. She wanted all of him. And that was what frightened her the most. She wanted to see if the pleasures she experienced in her dreams were true. For if last night's brief but world-tilting experience was any indication, Nikolai would be the greatest of lovers.

She reminded herself that pleasures of the flesh did not necessitate losing her heart. She wouldn't make the mistake her grandmother had, giving her heart to a vampire to be broken. A love between a vampire and a human was doomed from the start. Their lifespans were too vastly distant. The human would grow old and die while her lover remained young, helpless to do anything but watch as she wasted away.

Grandmother's words came whispering back over the years. *Do not lose your humanity for any man or any vampire, my child. For some will seek to steal all that you are. Be true to who you are and who you are meant to be.*

Sienna had taken those words and internalized them over time. So much

so that she'd determined to never leave Silvane Forest. There, she felt she was her true self, finding healing herbs and brewing medicinal tonics she could use to help others. Proper ladies didn't dabble in potions and medicines, but it was as natural as breathing to her. She'd left behind the life of a lady back in Dale's Peak more than five years ago, along with her disgruntled betrothed. After leaving him and her home, she'd decided that to remain true to herself meant she would lead a solitary life in the woods of her forest where the magic whispered to her.

But here she was, venturing abroad. This farmstead teetered on the edge of the woods, and the forest called to her even now. By the end of today, however, they would be leaving the forest behind for quite a while. The idea sent a wave of fear through her frame. There was no choice. To be true to her friend Arabelle and a cause she believed in—to help those suffering under the oppression of the vampire monarchy—she must leave and complete her mission for the Black Lily.

Sienna wondered if she was losing herself after last night's events. Had she given up her true self for Nikolai? Then she thought of Colette and of Nikolai feeding upon her, doing more with her, and her gut immediately tightened with anger. She'd offered herself to keep him away from another woman. But the truth was that she wanted to know him in that way. She wanted to know him in every way. Perhaps her true self was more adventurous than she originally believed.

She'd read the heartbreaking love letters her grandmother's Legionnaire had sent her—letters of desperate passion and longing. But Grandmother had never relented or returned to him, for she knew she couldn't give up her humanity to become a vampire. Their love could never be, because she refused to allow him to watch her grow old and die. She would save him from that pain.

“Enough,” said Sienna, hiking her satchel over her shoulder and carefully

carrying the tin plate and glass down the ladder with her.

She wasn't in love or anything like, she told herself. This was merely an infatuation that would end just as surely as this mission would end. Then she'd return to Silvane Forest and her happy life in the woods among the hart wolves. She'd put the lieutenant behind her and keep the savory memory of her adventure for lonely nights. And that was all.

Marching across the dew-laden grass and autumn leaves, she held herself steady, hoping Nikolai wouldn't tease her after she'd lost herself in his arms. He must've heard her with his vampire senses, for his head swiveled in her direction three steps out of the barn. No sneaking up on this man. The burly farmer followed his gaze, their conversation dying as she approached.

"Good morning," she said, keeping her eyes fixed on Harrison.

"Morning, milady. Hope you slept as well as you could in the barn."

"Yes. Well enough, thank you." She stole a glance at Nikolai. His countenance was unreadable, as usual. "Is your wife in the house?" She held up the plate and glass. "I'll return these to her."

"Go right in. She'll be throwing things about, packing."

Sienna strode toward the farmhouse. It was a long, single-story house made of gray stone and a thatch roof, complete with white shutters, giving it a clean look. The wooden door was ajar. Sienna rapped three times.

"Hello?"

The sound of sweeping stopped, and the door flew open. A petite, full-figured woman in a simple blue frock dress, an apron, and mobcap stood in the doorway, her hand on the handle of her broom, her brown eyes examining Sienna.

"Hello. I'm sorry to bother, but I wanted to return your dishes."

"Oh, aye. Come in, come in." She set the broom aside and grabbed the plate and glass. Sienna stepped inside the doorway. "Just tryin' to get the house in order before we have to up and leave. That man—" She turned

from the washtub, wagged a finger in the vicinity of the yard, then wiped her hands on her apron. “He could’ve given me more warning to up and pack me whole life in a few bags to go God knows where.”

“I apologize,” she said. “That was partly my fault, I’m afraid. I am the one—”

“I know who ye are, milady. Whispers all over of the fair woman o’ the wood has come. And we know you bring tidings from the Black Lily.” Her countenance softened. “That brave woman who is leading the whole revolution.”

“Stand guard!” a young boy with a mop of brown hair shouted as he leaped from behind a curtained door with a wooden sword pointed at Sienna. “Or I’ll cut you through if you’re with the black queen.”

Sienna actually jumped in fright, smiled, then wiped her expression clean, quickly thrusting her hands up in surrender. “I mean you no harm, sir. I’m certainly not on the side of the black queen.”

The boy grinned from ear to ear, missing his two front teeth.

“Ah, John. Go on and wash up,” snapped his mother, though there was a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “We’ve got lots to do before our journey.”

His brown eyes rounded. “A journey?”

“Aye. Be gone with ya.” She grabbed her broom as if to swat him with it, but he tore off into the next room before she could have at him.

Sienna laughed. “What a sweet boy.”

“Sweet? Pssh. A scoundrel, if ever one was born.” She shook her head and set her broom aside. “But I love ’im all the same.”

She turned and busied herself at the counter with a wrap of wax paper and slicing some kind of bread. Again the waft of cinnamon filled her nostrils.

“Well, thank you for the breakfast. It was delicious.”

“Hold on, milady. I’ve got a small parcel of vittles for ye.”

“No, I couldn’t take more from you.”

“Nay bother. This is a good working farm. Plenty to eat.” She tucked a few slices of that delicious-smelling cake she gathered with a few other wrapped items and tied it together in white sack-cloth, then turned with it in her hands. “Plenty of work, too.” Her face grew somber. “My man Harrison’s uncle will watch the place. Harrison said he doesn’t know where we’re going or how long we’ll be gone.” Her gaze left the window, questioning her with a glance.

“That is true.”

“Can ye tell me if it’s safe where we’re going?”

“It is very safe,” she assured her, taking the bundle of goods and squeezing her hand for good measure before she stepped back with a smile. “It is well protected and far from the prying eyes of the Glass Tower. That is also why we keep the whereabouts a secret.”

With a deep breath, the woman gave a nod, then snatched up her broom. “I wish ye well, milady. Heaven knows you be doin’ a fearful job.”

Sienna smiled. “Perhaps. But a necessary one.”

“Beware on the road.”

“Aye. And you send my friend, Arabelle, good tidings for me, will you? You’ll be seeing her before I do.”

That wiped away the frown puckering the woman’s brow. “Oh, aye. I will.”

Sienna stepped out of the farmhouse, imagining little John at swordplay with his wooden sword on the sands of Cutters Cove. Of course, Sienna had never been there herself, but she was one of the few who knew the location of the Black Lily training camp.

It was natural for the farmer’s wife to fear their destiny, especially leaving such a fine farm behind. But that was what told her how strongly

the people felt about the cause. A cause that had become so much of her own, no matter that she was born into the aristocracy. She'd always felt apart from her own people. Except her grandmother. She was her grandmother's granddaughter, not her mother's daughter.

Nikolai clasped Harrison's hand in parting, then the farmer strolled off toward the barn, and Nikolai walked toward Sienna. Interesting that she noticed a keen difference in his complexion. Normally quite pale, there was a distinct blush along his jaw. One might think it was simply from the overly cool morning air. But Sienna knew better. It was her own blood that put that handsome blush in his cheeks. Strange that this fact should make her swell with pride. And possessiveness.

"Good morning," he said in his typically austere manner. No sign that anything was different between them.

Sienna sighed with relief. "Morning."

"Shall we be off?" He gestured toward the woods behind the house. "I say we go by cover of the woodlands as far as we can."

"I couldn't agree more." She yearned to be back in the shade of Silvane Forest. For she knew today's journey would be the last time she was within the forest until their mission was over.

They walked side by side across the grassy plain behind the farm until Sienna caught sight of a white flash pacing the perimeter of the wood. Her heart burst with glee, and she sprinted toward the tree line. She drew closer, and the morning light grew brighter. The form of her dear friend, Duchess, stood waiting for her, wagging her tail.

Sienna crossed into the wood and threw her arms around Duchess's neck. "Oh, my girl. I've missed you."

Duchess whimpered in response as if to say she did, too. Luca and the two brothers, Kai and Hugo, circled nearby. They'd never come too close with Nikolai shadowing her. The natural enemy of hart wolves was

vampires. Sienna's grandmother had told her old tales of the vampires hunting hart wolves for sport and even as a rite of passage for young vampires, as hart wolves were the strongest and fastest prey.

Sienna pulled back, still with both arms around her neck. Duchess licked her face. Sienna laughed.

"There, there. I'll be with you for the rest of the day."

"If we make good time, we'll be beyond the forest by midday."

Duchess swiveled her head to Nikolai and let out a half bark, half growl, then padded away toward the trail.

Nikolai opened his mouth to say something, but didn't, watching Duchess trot away.

"What?" asked Sienna, following after Duchess toward the trail.

"It's like she understood what I said and didn't like it."

"Oh, she certainly understood you. And no, she didn't. She's worried for me." Sienna walked on.

Nikolai shook his head as he stepped in front of her to bend a low-lying branch out of her way. "They're wolves."

"Thank you," she said, passing before him. He joined her at her side as they finally found the trail. "They're *hart* wolves. I've told you. There is magic in them. Just as there is magic in this forest." Even now, she felt the tingling of magic singing along her skin, a soft caress that warmed her on the inside.

Sienna examined the overhanging branches of the black oak trees, the last she'd see for a long while. Now in autumn, their silvery leaves turned white before falling. Some drifted down, blanketing the path like new fallen snow.

"Perhaps you're right."

She scoffed. "I know I'm right. You're just a stubborn male, so it takes some convincing before you believe anything. No, a stubborn vampire male, which is worse."

“Worse? Hmm. You didn’t think so lowly of me last night.”

Her heart hammered faster. “I was wondering when you’d use that against me.”

“I’m not using anything against you. Merely stating a fact. And it certainly didn’t take any convincing for me last night.”

“That’s because it was something you wanted.”

“I won’t deny it,” he said, all joviality leaving his voice. “I’ve often imagined what it would feel like to sink my fangs into your pretty neck. Among other things.”

She sucked in a breath, eyes wide when she shot him a sidelong glance.

“But I certainly didn’t believe you’d actually ever offer yourself. I’m starting to believe the rumors that you are a witch. For I felt quite enchanted and unable to do anything but take your offering.”

“Stop teasing me, Nikolai. I was only—”

He gripped her arm and stopped her in her tracks. “I am not teasing.” His jaw clenched tight. “I could not resist you last night if the world itself was on fire.”

He held her in his gaze, eyes electric with the energy rolling off of him and charging the air between them. Sienna had a sudden vision of them tumbling to the ground and finishing what they’d started. God save her, she yearned for him, like an aching agony that would not relent. Her gaze fell to his mouth where she could see the tips of his canines. For a split second, she thought he would take her in his arms again. Instead, he broke the trance and stepped swiftly along the trail.

“We must move on. We need to be in Lobdell before nightfall.”

Sienna fell in step beside him. “Who is our contact there?”

Arabelle had told her in the letter that Nikolai had memorized all of the contacts’ names and appearances. It was crucial that nothing be written down in case one of them were taken captive.

“She is the butcher’s daughter.”

“The butcher’s daughter? That’s odd. Why not the butcher?”

“He’s dead,” said Nikolai with a sidelong glance.

“Oh.”

“Ivan informed me that her father never returned from working one of the feasts at the Glass Tower.”

Hugo, the fiercest of Duchess’s brothers, crossed their path ahead, golden eyes glowing even in the morning light. He watched Nikolai keenly before vanishing again.

“That one doesn’t like me,” said Nikolai.

Sienna smiled. “None of them like you very much. But I think you’re right. Hugo likes you least of all.”

“Might there be a reason for that?”

“He and his brother, Kai, are very distrusting of strangers in our wood.”

“But I’m not a stranger.”

“Well, that may be, but you don’t belong. And you’re a vampire.”

“Am I? What a shocking revelation.”

“You’re in a mood today. And here I thought my blood might have softened your temper.”

He scoffed. “Your blood is burning through me like lava.”

Sienna tripped on a branch, but Nikolai caught her by the wrist. For a moment, they were both trapped, suspended without words and staring at one another. His physical touch was enough to send Sienna’s pulse tripping ahead double time. And by his sudden intake of breath, she thought he felt the same. There was no denying the attraction flaming between the two of them.

Sienna cautiously spoke, for she felt if she made a move either forward or backward, he would’ve snatched her close and sunk his fangs inside her throat. And heaven help her, she knew she was no longer thinking clearly

on the matter.

“Is this,” she whispered, “is this because of the blood?”

“What?” he asked, his gaze focused on her lips.

“Is this... *feeling* because you’ve tasted my blood?”

His mouth ticked up on one side. It was intended to be sexy, for he had that cocky air when he spoke, but it nearly melted Sienna on the spot.

“No, sweetheart. It is not. This is pure, burning desire,” he said boldly, without hesitation.

Slowly, she stepped back. He squeezed her wrist and held her an excruciating moment longer, then released her.

“We better keep moving,” she whispered, her mouth gone bone dry.

“That would be wise.”

She moved ahead first, with him a step behind. A rumble of distant thunder echoed ahead in the direction of Lobdell. She pulled her hood up over her head while the wind blew in a cool chill, rustling the silver-white leaves. More floated down onto the path as they walked on, rounding the bend and seeing an opening in the woods up ahead, the trail winding over a grassy hill. Her heart faltered for she knew it was the end of the Silvane Forest. A cold fear gripped her chest and tightened as she wound closer.

Duchess leapt onto the path and padded beside her, angling her hazel eyes at Sienna. Sienna put her hand on the wolf’s neck.

“I know, girl. But I must go. Arabelle needs me to do this for her.”

Duchess whined when they came to a stop at the edge of the wood. Luca, Hugo, and Kai moved forward out of the cover but not too close to Nikolai. Sienna threw her arms around Duchess’s neck and kissed her on her soft fur.

“I won’t be too long,” she whispered. “I promise.” She looked her in the eyes. “You four need to watch out for Willow and Mildred. They’ve got plenty to eat and shelter in the barn, but be sure nothing comes in to eat

them.”

Duchess licked her on the cheek. Sienna laughed, despite the overwhelming urge to cry.

Thunder rolled again, but closer.

“We’d best be getting on,” said Nikolai behind her.

With another kiss and a stroke of her pretty head, Sienna said, “Good-bye, Duchess. Good-bye, my boys,” she said to the others behind her. Then she turned abruptly and walked swiftly on, crossing out of Silvane Forest.

Her grandmother had warned her time and time again, *Do not stray from your path and do not leave these woods unless you absolutely must.*

Well, this was her path, which led her away from these woods. Even if her heart warned of some ominous danger, she would do right by Arabelle and the Black Lily.

A heavy loss swept through her as she marched away. Then a sorrowful howl filled the gray morning as Duchess cried out her good-bye. Then Luca and Hugo’s deep howls joined hers. And finally, Kai’s did as well. She pulled her hood up more to hide the tears streaming down her face. She made not a sound as they crossed the hill, but a thread of dread wound its way around her gut, and for the first time, she wondered if the Black Lily was worth this.

Chapter Eight

Though she'd tried to hide it, Nikolai knew she wept the entire march over the grassy hill and onto the main lane leading toward Lobdell. The dark gray up ahead showed that it was raining already in town.

"You know, we'd get there faster if you let me carry you."

"I don't like traveling that way," she protested, not meeting his gaze.

"Do you like being soaking wet? I can get us both out of the rain faster."

She stopped and whipped toward him. "Well, forgive me for being human. I cannot move at your speed."

"I'm well aware of your deficiencies. Which is why I offer to carry you."

"Damn you, Nikolai." She walked even faster. The wind blew off her hood, and she stopped suddenly. "Fine. Take us to the edge of town, but I will walk on my own feet once there."

Anger burned bright in her lovely green eyes where there was pain a few moments before. Mission accomplished. He'd rather her be angry at him than for her to be heartsick.

"As you wish, my lady." He swept her up, noting her gasp.

There was no mistaking the palpable desire ever-present and growing between them. He would wait as long as possible, but there would be no getting around the absolute fact that they were going to be lovers. He needed her in his bed, beneath him, to assuage this restless, burgeoning passion.

“Hold on,” he told her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, which he found strangely comforting, then he flashed down the road. He passed an ambling cart with a farmer and his load of winter squash and stopped at the blacksmith shop, the first on the lane entering town. He set her on her feet. She gripped his shoulders and steadied herself.

“Are you all right?”

She gazed up at him, and he willed himself not to pull her into his arms. The need to hold her and care for her was as strong as his need to lay her down and bed her. This woman was certainly a witch, for she beguiled him every step of the way.

“I’m fine,” she said, pulling away. But the press of her palm on her stomach told him otherwise. “Where’s the butchery?”

“Of that, I’m not sure.” He glanced around, the distinct ping of hammer and anvil at work in the smithy shop. “But this is a small town. Let’s keep moving.”

A peasant woman with a child on her hip disappeared into the bakery when she caught sight of Nikolai. It wasn’t as if he could hide who or what he was. Some vampires blended in, especially those that had been made. But he was a born vampire from a long line of blue bloods. His height, his sharp features and fair hair denoted him as one of the old ones. No one needed to see fangs in his mouth to know he was a vampire.

“Perhaps you need a black cloak as well,” said Sienna, her teeth chattering.

Always so perceptive, this woman. He smiled. “Perhaps so.”

The rain poured down, making the cold colder. Sienna shivered underneath her wet cloak. And the thought galled him to no end, especially after knowing her heart ached for her forest and her wolves. A sign up ahead, hanging outside an inn’s door, gave him an idea.

“There is no reason for us to wander around in the rain together.” He took her arm and guided her through the inn door.

“I don’t mind the rain,” she protested, her temper still up, even while her teeth chattered together.

“Right. But your lips are turning blue, so perhaps a respite might do you some good.”

She said no more as Nikolai stepped forward where a kind-faced woman stood behind a tall reception desk, greeting them with wide eyes. He’d better show his purse quickly to wipe the fear from her expression.

“Greetings. We seem to have gotten caught in a nasty storm,” he said amiably, taking Sienna’s hand and guiding her closer. She didn’t pull away, thankfully.

The woman gave him a wobbly smile. “Yes, sir. That storm’s been brewing all morning. Finally let us have it.”

“We’ve been traveling a good ways, and I saw your sign outside. I wondered if you might have a hot bath for my lady.” He pulled out a pouch of coin, sovereigns jingling.

Her smile broadened. “Why, yes, sir. We most certainly can manage that. And a good meal to go with it.”

“Perfect.”

“Would you and your wife be needing a room for the night as well?”

Sienna shot him a look. Nikolai smiled, sidling closer to her with a hand on her back. “That would be wonderful. Thank you.” He dropped a few more coins on the reception desk, then turned to Sienna, who stared up at him in bewilderment. “Now, darling. You get a warm bath. I’ll return shortly and we’ll have tea together.”

She said nothing as he stole the opportunity to sweep an innocent kiss upon her lips. But the flare of heat with that simple act sent not-so-innocent thoughts through his head.

“She’s in good hands, my lord.”

He’d not been called *my lord* for many years, not since before he’d joined the Legionnaires. As the superior species, vampires were either of noble birth and therefore lords or ladies, or they were soldiers in the Crown’s Legionnaires. Since he wasn’t in uniform, she’d assumed he was a lord, which he was. But the thought struck something dark inside him, that humans who were unfortunately born into the peasantry never had a chance of coming into their own, seen as lesser simply by their birth. In that single moment, he understood why Marius’s wife Arabelle had started the Black Lily. And for the first time, it truly hit home that there was justice in their cause.

“Are you all right?” asked Sienna beside him, her teeth still chattering together.

“Fine. I’ll be back in an hour.”

He pulled up the collar of his coat and ducked back out into the rain. Lobdell appeared to be about the size of Sylus, the village in the shadow of the Glass Tower.

Nikolai chuckled to himself as he passed the baker’s shop where the owner set out new pastries in the window. He’d teased Marius for his obsession with the human, sure it would come to nothing in the end. When in fact, it had come to everything. His marriage to Arabelle had not only changed Marius’s world but Nikolai’s as well.

Nikolai couldn’t stay behind at the Glass Tower, knowing the queen was the one behind the spreading of *sanguine furorem* and the murdering of the peasantry. The hypocrisy infuriated him. The crown set itself on high, setting laws that ensured the safety of humans, both their aristocrats and their peasants. All the while, the queen was breaking those laws for her own entertainment and sadistic pleasure. No, that didn’t seem right either, he thought as the rain pelted down. He walked on past the dressmaker’s shop,

noting the mannequin's dress, hat, and gloves before moving on. The queen yearned for something more which the blood madness gave her. Power.

In his youth, following Nikolai's own haunting sin that he kept in the deepest recesses of his memory, Nikolai had seen the horrific effects of the blood madness. It had taken hold of a young Legionnaire at a human duke's ball. He became drunk on the blood of a lady who'd offered herself in private. The vampire had continued on in his wildness, nearly slaughtering everyone in the ballroom until Nikolai and his lieutenant heard the cries from below while on duty. Nikolai was a mere soldier in the ranks then. His lieutenant had been forced to kill the vampire, who left behind a trail of devastation.

When they returned to the palace with the body of the vampire and sad news of what had occurred, the king had congratulated the lieutenant on his good work, in making the difficult decision to ensure the safety of the rest of the humans and to keep what peace they could. After all, that was their duty, to protect the vampire crown and to enforce the laws that kept the humans safe. That was what Nikolai had believed. Then his lieutenant disappeared, shipped off to the north, he was told, allowing his sergeant to move up and for Nikolai to receive his first promotion.

Nikolai chastised himself for being blind to the truth for so long. He'd seen that mad vampire who'd captured Arabelle long before the ball, doting on the queen. She'd been playing in her dungeon with her young vampires, killing to their heart's content even then, and he'd never seen it. The king must've known and simply kept her secrets, impotent against her power. Now he knew it was not King Grindal of Varis who was their original maker. But the queen. And that was more reason for him to leave his whole world at the Glass Tower behind.

He had been the queen's fool, like so many others. And his life had been a lie. While he thought himself a defender of the faithful crown, keeping

law and order among the people and the vampire royalty, he had merely been defending her right to kill at will behind closed doors. And the thought that perhaps he was the monster so many humans believed him to be was the most difficult realization of all. A painful reality he felt needed retribution. If he could atone his many sins by helping the Black Lily, then it would have to be enough.

The pungent smell of roast pig caught his attention. The butchery was near. He wiped away the regretful memories and marched on, keeping his collar around his face. Stepping into the butchery, there was no one about as he shook off the rain and combed a hand through his wet hair.

“A hat would help, you know?” came a woman’s gruff voice.

She stood in the doorway that led into a back room, wiping her hands on an apron. She was of medium build, bearing hands used to work. With his vampire sight, Nikolai could see at least three random scars, whitened with age, a hazard of working with sharp knives and hot stoves all day. She kept her brown hair pinned under a cap. And though homely, she had kind eyes. Right now, they were narrowed on him.

“Unless Lobdell has become the posh new getaway for handsome vampires, I’d say you are Nikolai.”

He laughed, for they both knew there was nothing posh about Lobdell, except perhaps that dressmaker’s shop, which he planned to visit on his way back to the inn.

“I am Nikolai,” he assented with a small bow.

“I thought you were coming with a woman. The Red Witch, they call her.”

He frowned at that, not pleased with the name given to Sienna. As for himself, he cared not at all if she were deemed a witch. But he knew the danger such a label carried with humans. Witches put fear into common folk.

“I am with Sienna, the Woman of the Wood. Yes. I left her at the inn while I came in search of you.”

“I am Deborah. Folks call me Deb.” With a nod, she waved him to follow. “Come on back.”

He did. Two brutish men were cutting up a whole roasted pig that had been cooked in an oversized oven, much like the ones he’d seen in the kitchen at the palace. They glanced his way, then set back to work, hacking into the beast with cleavers and deft precision.

Deb opened the door leading out of the butchery, the rain finally slowing down. She pointed to a barn. “That’s where we’ll meet, but I’ll need to show you where to enter.”

She led him through the barn door where stalls lined both sides. There was a cow or two, and a long pen of pigs rooting around in the hay.

“Right over here,” said Deb. She marched over to the corner where a cart sat filled with feed.

She moved the cart forward and brushed her foot over the spot, revealing a square door in the floor. “This is where we’ll meet.” She tapped a foot on the spot. “Only those who I trust will be there.”

“Thank you for taking the risk,” said Nikolai.

Now that he stood closer to her, he realized she was younger than he thought at first glance. A hard life had toughened her exterior.

Hands on hips, she stared out the barn door where the rain slowed to a sprinkle. “No reason to thank me. I have my own motives.”

“And they are?”

She fixed her gaze back on him. “My father was called to the palace for the last Blood Ball for Prince Marius. His reputation was wide for cooking the best meats in the region. He didn’t want to go, but he did.”

She swiped the back of her hand across her face with a sniffle. He wasn’t sure if it was to stop herself from crying or a nervous twitch.

“And he never returned home?” he asked quietly.

She huffed out a sigh. “He never returned home. No one knew what happened to him.”

“I am sorry for your loss. The blood madness had taken root with some of the Legionnaires. I didn’t know it at the time. Those vampires are gone now.”

“Well, not all,” she said. “The mad queen is still there.”

Nikolai assented with a nod. “Unfortunately, yes. And she builds her army, which is why it’s important to build our own.”

Deb crossed her arms and faced the open door. Nikolai stood quietly at her side, hands clasped at his back.

“And now we’ve got a vampire prince and his lieutenant on our side?” She shook her head. “If I didn’t trust Ivan and he hadn’t convinced me of the truth, I’d have thought you were just playing a part to discover the crown’s enemies.”

Nikolai understood her distrust. Her father had been killed by his own kind. Hell, he’d been killed while under Nikolai’s charge as the chief lieutenant of the Glass Tower. All those who’d died in that place were his responsibility to keep safe. And he’d failed. Grinding his teeth together, he finally managed to turn to her and answer.

“Yes. I am vampire, and I do not apologize for it. But I have always upheld the laws to keep the balance between the species. I have never taken blood without consent, and I have protected the innocent from vampires who would take by force.” The rain slowed to a stop, droplets trickling from the overhang of the barn. “Your father died under my watch. For him, and for many others, I have much to atone. I will not stand on the side of murderers, even if they are my own kind.”

She studied his face for a moment, the tightness of her own relaxing. “I see now.” She held out a hand for Nikolai to shake. He did, having never

shaken a woman's hand like a man. But Deb was different. She took over her father's business, a man's business. "I'll see you tonight then. At ten."

"Tonight," he agreed.

Deb marched back toward her butchery, but Nikolai cut through the buildings back toward the inn. He was anxious to get back to Sienna, but he had one quick stop along the way.

Chapter Nine

Sienna was in pure heaven. Sunk in the hot bath before a crackling fire, steam rising from the surface, the rain pattering softly outside, she couldn't imagine anything more divine.

Actually, she could. But she tried not to let her mind wander to the tall and deliciously handsome vampire who filled her every thought as of late. Taking a bar of soap in hand on the stand beside the tub, she started at her shoulders and arms.

There was a bed dressed in a white coverlet, a rough-hewn vanity whose mirror was tarnished, and a side table with a pitcher and ewer. It was sparse but clean. A pleasant room for a break in their journey. A pretty bed for other things.

Nikolai was kind to offer this respite. The cold had seeped through her clothes and skin, straight down to her bones. She hadn't been able to stop the shivering. But he saw to her needs. Even this morning, he'd brought her breakfast, had it waiting for her when she awoke. For a fierce former lieutenant of the Royal Guard, he was quite kind and thoughtful.

She soaped one leg and lowered it back in the water. Then the second.

That man. And those blue eyes. They weren't sky-blue, but more like the sea before a storm. And the way they changed with his mood. Deep and fathomless when he was pensive or brooding, which was most of the time. Brighter with a spark when he was laughing. Flaring with an unnatural glow

when his vampire senses heightened. Dark and utterly hypnotizing when he looked on her with desire.

She soaped her breasts and stomach under the water, imagining what it would be like to have his hands touch her so. She set the bar aside. Picturing the way he looked at her last night the moment before he fed from her, she eased back against the tub, sank deeper into the water, and let one hand drift between her legs. She remembered his lips burning on her skin, his teeth sinking into her flesh, his hard body crushing her. She stroked her cleft, letting her fingers slide through the silky folds, bringing Nikolai to mind. Cupping one aching breast and closing her eyes, she let her fantasy unfold.

She imagined what he would have done with his mouth had she been completely naked last night. A soft moan escaped her lips as she worked her fingers faster, thinking of him doing this to her. Thinking of him doing much more to her.

A sharp knock on the door jolted her out of her fantasy to a sitting position. Water sloshed over the sides.

“Sienna?” came Nikolai’s voice from the other side. “Are you all right?”

Stars above! She caught her breath, then bit her lip. He was a vampire. He could hear her heavy breathing even from the other side of that door.

“Sienna?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“Yes,” she answered softly, then cleared her throat and called out louder, “I must’ve fallen asleep.”

What a liar she was. Far from asleep.

“I have something for you. I’ll leave it at the door.” She heard what sounded like the crinkle of paper.

“I’ll be down shortly,” she called out, a little breathless. “Thank you.”

There was a pause, then he added with humor in his voice, “I’ll meet you in the parlor below when you’re done.”

Thank you? What was she thanking him for? For the parcel at the door or for providing her with the vision so she could pleasure herself? *Almost* pleasure herself, that is. She'd been alone for a long time in Silvane Forest, growing from girl to woman.

"Too long," she muttered before she dipped her head back and washed her hair with a bottle of perfumed oils left on the washing stand. Afterward, she toweled off quickly and wrapped herself in a homespun robe the innkeeper had set out for her. Unable to stand the suspense any longer, she opened the door a few inches, finding a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red ribbon. Curious, she took the package inside and sat on the bed.

Untying and pulling the ribbon free, she opened the paper to find a perfectly folded dress. A lovely dress of deep crimson with white stitching in a floral-and-vine design. The fabric was wonderfully soft to the touch. The scoop-necked bodice was trimmed in white lace, as well as the cuffs of the long sleeves. A crisscrossing pattern of gold stitching decorated the bodice down to the waist. When she lifted it up in both hands, she felt corset boning within the lining, but not as stiff as the one she usually wore. Exquisite craftsmanship.

Sienna had learned to fashion her own clothes while living in the woods, but she had not the skill of this dressmaker. Eager to try it on, she unfolded the dress completely from the wrapping and another gown fell to the floor.

No, not a gown. A new chemise. Lifting the fine fabric, she couldn't help but rove her fingertips over the iridescent white muslin. It was sheer like her own shift, but the detailing of tiny buttons from the naval to the bosom and the white sheen of the fabric told her it was worth far more than her own.

A heated blush crawled up her cheeks when she realized Nikolai had not only bought these for her but had most probably imagined her in them.

“Well, then,” she whispered to herself.

She slipped into the clean, dry shift, the material feeling like silk against her skin. Padding over to the drying rack next to the fire, she found her stockings were dry enough. Pulling open her pack sitting by the fire, she pulled out her change of clothes and undergarments, all damp from the rainwater seeping through the canvas satchel. She stretched them on the drying rack as well.

Pulling on her new gown, she strained to fasten the buttons up the back. This was a dress for a lady who would have a servant to help her, but she managed all the same. The fit was perfect and snug to her frame. She was happy to forego her regular corset since the inlaid boning and stitching in her new dress hugged her waist and hips perfectly before flaring out in thick folds. It was remarkably more comfortable. And warm. The fabric had considerable more weight than her own.

Standing before the mirror, she took some time running a comb through her hair, the waves kinking up as they dried. Her stomach rumbled. She plaited her hair into a loose braid over one shoulder and examined herself. The dress fit her to perfection, and Sienna wondered how Nikolai could’ve sized her so well.

Feeling fresh and clean, she took herself downstairs, finding the lobby empty. Soft voices from the parlor filtered out to the foyer. Sienna stepped through the door, finding the innkeeper amiably talking with Nikolai, a teapot in one hand. He sat at a small table next to the window overlooking a small square of garden, which was little more than a patch of green with an elm tree at its center, having lost nearly all of its leaves this late in the season.

When the innkeeper caught sight of Sienna, she startled and stepped a little away from Nikolai, a somewhat guilty look on her face.

“There you are, my lady. Please come and have a warm cup of tea.”

She upended the teacup that was facedown across from Nikolai and poured a steaming cup as Sienna made her way to them. He rose from his seat and watched her. She thought she was accustomed to the way Nikolai tracked her movements by now, but the heat in his gaze as he followed her from the door to his table nearly buckled her knees.

She sat across from him, her eyes on the tea. He took his seat again.

“I will bring a few refreshments in a moment,” said the innkeeper with a smile before leaving them alone, for there was no one else in the parlor.

Sienna unfolded the napkin in her lap, self-conscious at the way Nikolai was staring.

“Thank you for the dress,” she said before adding more quietly, “and the other garments.”

She didn’t miss the flare of heat in his gaze, nor did she look away, holding him a moment in electric silence before finally clearing her throat and brushing a hand over her skirt. “It is unique. I’ve never seen its like.”

“Precisely why it suits you.”

“It is quite vibrant, though,” she barreled ahead, unable to respond to his compliment.

“You belong in red,” he said with finality.

She brushed a hand over one sleeve, admiring the hue. She couldn’t help but point out the one flaw to his choice of dress. “But there is one problem with such a dress. It will draw too much attention, don’t you think?”

He scoffed, which finally drew her eyes up off the table to him.

“Sweetheart, you couldn’t be inconspicuous if you tried.”

“What does that mean?” She thought herself rather good at blending in.

His sea-blue gaze roved her face and bodice, his eyes reflecting a state of utter contentment at the moment. “You are by far the most stunning creature I have ever laid eyes on. And I have been alive quite some time in order to make such an observation.”

She froze, never expecting such words from him. He continued.

“Do you know why people address you as ‘my lady’ even though your attire isn’t always the top fashion a lady should wear?”

She shook her head. He leaned forward, forearms crossed on the table. “Because you could be wearing a rag, and you could not hide the beauty beneath. Noble and pure.”

“There are plenty of pretty peasant girls. Look at Arabelle. I could be—”

“None of them hold a candle to you,” he said abruptly. “Your alabaster skin glows and looks so soft, it begs to be touched. Your auburn hair, even coiffed in a simple braid, is fine as silk. Your carriage when you walk, when you sit so still as you are now, denotes a genteel lady of the highest ranking. And your eyes”—he shook his head, a smile quirking one side of his mouth—“you could slay many a man with one come-hither look.”

Catching her breath after such a speech, she said, “I would never tempt a man unwittingly.”

“Sweetheart, you could tempt the devil to his death if you so chose. I thought you would do so to me last night.”

Her teacup froze halfway to her lips. “I’d rather not talk of last night,” she whispered, sipping her tea.

“Why not? Was it that distasteful?”

She cleared her throat. “No. It isn’t that.”

“Having regrets feeding a monster such as me, I suppose.”

“Of course not.”

“Then what is it?”

Tucking her hands in her lap and glancing to be sure the innkeeper wasn’t within earshot, she said in a low voice, “It wasn’t proper for a lady to...lose control as I did.”

“Proper or not, last night was perfect, in my humble opinion. Well, almost.”

His rain-soaked hair was beginning to dry, a lock of blond falling forward over one eye. The smoldering look he fixed upon her and the intimacy of the parlor beckoned her to be bold. She knew that saying the words she held on the tip of her tongue would be equivalent to laying down a gauntlet before a man who thrived on challenges. But she did so anyway, banishing her grandmother's many warnings to the far corner of her mind. "Tell me how it was perfect."

His pupils dilated on the request. His mouth opened to speak, but he paused, giving her a glimpse of sharpened canines. Lord help her, but arousal coiled low in her belly. As if he sensed it, his pupils dilated further, till there was more black than blue in his ardent gaze. A predatory sharpness warned her he was ready to swallow her whole. Sienna often forgot she was dealing with a man who was not a man. A palpable energy filled the small space between them, a heady mixture of seduction and danger drawing her to him.

He leaned even closer, not a hint of a smile. "Feeling your body beneath me was the closest to heaven that I shall ever come." He spoke not in a whisper but on an intimate level, his voice rolling like the caress of dark velvet. "Your skin, your mouth, your body, your sweet, sweet moans, and your blood...I want them all. I want quite a bit more, actually. So you best prepare yourself, my lady. Since I'm already damned, I aim to have all of you. I want to see that look of ecstasy on your face over and over again when I'm buried deep inside you and you're screaming my name."

"Here we are!" said the innkeeper, bustling in from the kitchen.

Sienna couldn't even move, shaken to the core, her focus completely on Nikolai as he sat back, wiping the most sensual, dark look she'd ever seen from his face to turn an amiable expression up to the innkeeper who set a double-tiered tray of sandwiches and pastries on the table.

"I hope this will be to your liking. We will have a heartier meal prepared

tonight.”

“This is wonderful, Ms. Ascot,” he said, unfolding his napkin and placing it in his lap like a proper gentleman. Right after he’d just said the most ungentlemanly speech she’d ever heard. “Thank you.”

Sienna shook herself from her stupor and managed a tight smile. “Yes.” She smoothed her napkin in her lap. “Thank you.”

“Well, then. Let me know if I can get you anything else, Mr. and Mrs. Woods.” The innkeeper left them alone once more.

Sienna coughed softly to hide her surprise at the name he’d given and fiddled with the napkin in her lap. She tried to gather her wits, but it was like catching the wisps of a dandelion scattered to the wind.

Nikolai took a bite-sized pastry with a dollop of cream from the tray and popped it into his mouth. How he could appear so casual after such a declaration, she had no idea. Her mind, and if she confessed truly, her body were still reeling. Changing the subject was the only option to move forward.

“She knows you’re a vampire. You don’t need to pretend you’re not by eating.”

His tilted smile heated the coiling warmth in her belly. “Yes, she knows I’m a vampire. But I’d put her at ease by pretending to not be the monster I am. You, on the other hand, know otherwise.”

“I don’t believe you are a monster.”

His smile slipped. “You should be more wary, sweetheart.”

“I am. But I know you.” Her voice softened. “I trust you.”

“Mm, but you don’t really know me. You just think you do.”

“And this from a man who has announced he plans to seduce me,” she said flippantly. “You’re not doing much to gain my favor.”

He laughed, holding her gaze. “No seduction will be needed,” he said with staggering confidence. “You are already mine, sweet Sienna. The

moment my lips touched your skin, you were mine.”

“I haven’t consented to such a thing.”

He leaned back in his chair, body cocked at an angle, his sexy-as-sin half smile in place. “You will.”

“I believe you’re a bit too assured, lieutenant.” Good thing he hadn’t been witness to her escapades in the bath or the naughty thoughts of him that had spurred her on.

“Not at all. Just honest.” He tipped his teacup in her direction with a wink and gulped the rest down. “I have something more for you.”

He pulled from within his pocket a pair of well-made white leather gloves, lined for warmth.

She took them in hand and trailed her fingers over the fine stitching, softer than silk. “You needn’t buy me these. I had mittens I could’ve worn.”

“Those fingerless things I saw you wear on the first day?” He shook his head. “No, sweetheart. After watching you shiver till your lips turned blue and your teeth nearly rattled out of your head from the cold, I’d say you definitely need them. It’ll be snowing soon.”

She said nothing more, sliding one hand inside the sleek glove, smiling at his thoughtfulness. The care he took to get her dry and warm, well clothed, and fed, all of the small kindnesses he gave her since their arrival lured her even closer to him. He had tended to her needs as a good guardian would since their departure from her cottage. But he doted on her now like...well, like a lover. Or perhaps it was payment for what he thought was due.

Clearing her throat, she said, “You don’t have to give me anything for last night, you know. I offered my blood freely.”

With a glance out the window, his mood shifted from jovial to the dark mask he so often wore. “You think the dress and gloves are payment, I presume.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “What else?”

With a shake of his head, he drummed his fingers on the table, seeming about to snap a retort. Instead, he stood on a sigh.

“The sun has finally come out. Shall we take a walk through the town?” He offered his arm politely, but Sienna noted the shift in the atmosphere. From sultry to glacial in a heartbeat.

This man was an enigma. One moment he was making wicked promises and showering her in gifts with wit and charm, and the next he was all brooding scowls and clipped words. She couldn't riddle out his abrupt change of mood, but it had happened in a blink. It was certainly her fault in something she said. He kept his posture stiff and his mind a million miles away. Though she was afraid to admit it even to herself, she yearned for him to come back.

Chapter Ten

Sienna stood on a wooden bench that Deb had placed at the center of the meeting room, the smell of hay and pigs pungent in the air. Nikolai kept to the right wall where he could see people coming in and keep a watch on every person in the room. It was a smaller crowd than the one in Hiddleston. Little more than twenty. But every man and woman who signed on was a valuable asset to the Black Lily.

The lot of them were working peasants—farmers and small merchants. And standing above them with the torchlight casting a pale glow upon her fair face was the goddess herself. Beneath the folds of her cloak, he could see the crimson gown he'd bought her, her delectable curves on display. She occupied every living, breathing thought he had. For that matter, she'd found her way into his dreams as well. He had to finally admit it. She'd ensnared him, body and soul. He'd even spoken of his secret sin, which he'd told no one before but Marius.

He *was* a monster. One who'd fallen too far before, succumbing to the beast that lived within, and who'd tasted the sweet pleasure and painful regret of gorging his appetite till his host breathed her last. He knew what horrors he and his kind were capable of. Perhaps that was why he'd felt a sense of relief when Marius asked him to abandon his post at the Glass Tower and join him in their fight. His dedication as lieutenant had been first and foremost to protect the people from the likes of him and to pay penance

for what he'd done so many years ago as a lost and lusty youth. He'd been a restless soul his whole life.

And now, Sienna. She made him imagine dreams that had never once drifted into his consciousness. Quiet nights, a warm bed, a devoted lover. More.

But he knew she was too good for him. It wasn't her roots in the gentry that made her so, but her pure and innocent heart, her willingness to sacrifice all for others. He felt the abject misery radiating from her when they left Silvane Forest. And yet, she did it anyway. Even now, as she stood before the crowd, her green eyes a bit wider, her pulse tripping a little faster, she waited with her head held high to do her duty for the Black Lily. A cause she needn't have left the comfort of her cottage in the woods to join. And yet, she did.

“Oy! Shut it!” Deb's sharp voice rang out. The murmuring ceased at once. “Ye all know why you're here. The Lady o' the Wood is here to set it to ye. Do what you will.”

The Lady of the Wood. Yes, that was the proper name for her. He gave Deb a polite nod for her correction in Sienna's title as she stepped to the side and let Sienna take the reins.

Sienna roved the crowd, seemingly to look into the eyes of every one of them. She'd done the same in Hiddleston, and her charm had done its magic. There was something in her that made one want to listen. There was a fire inside her that made one want to reach out and touch, even if it burned. Nikolai would readily be consumed in the flames of Sienna. Anything to get closer to the woman.

Before she spoke, her chin notched up and her gaze narrowed. Her confidence—especially when he sensed her trepidation from where he stood in the back—staggered him.

“I bring you good tidings and bad, my friends. A gift and a warning.”

She let those words settle in. Nothing but the soft shuffling of cows and the rooting of pigs overhead could be heard. She clasped her hands in front of her and went on.

“I know the people of Lobdell have suffered at the hands of the Varis monarchy. That death has touched many lives here. Unnecessary and horrific death.” Not a sound but the guttering of torches. “The gift is the Black Lily. Whether you join her ranks or not, she *will* fight on. She will demand justice from the Glass Tower for those in chains of oppression. She will break the yoke placed upon the backs of the peasantry and bring freedom where now there is too much work for the poor and little prosperity of your own.”

Those in the crowd shuffled, nodding in agreement. Just as Harrison had called out in defiance at the Hiddleston rally, another broad-shouldered farmer spoke out above the rest.

“So you want us to die for the Black Lily and this hopeless cause? No one can defeat the army of the Glass Tower.”

Sienna didn't miss a beat. “The only one calling you to die is the queen herself.” Silence ensued. “She is the one spreading this plague of blood madness throughout the land. She is the one building her own army to keep you bound in chains. She is the one who guarantees death or an enslaved life...which is even worse, if truth be told.” She paused to scan the gathering. Squaring her shoulders, she went on. “The Black Lily offers you a chance at liberty, a chance to fight for the life you deserve and the life your children and grandchildren deserve. A life where you do not have to fear the night, but a world where you may walk upright and proud in the light of day. You may think our numbers small, but you are wrong. We grow by the day and our fighters are being trained by the former lieutenant of the Royal Legionnaires himself.”

She nodded to Nikolai in the back with an appraising smile. His heart

leapt at such a look from her. Eyes swiveled to him.

“Our leader Arabelle sends me news of their progress. Under the lieutenant’s guidance, we have an upper hand against the enemy. His skill and devotion to us may be the very thing that saves us all.”

Someone began to speak, but she raised her hand with a sharpness that matched the fierce intensity shining bright in her eyes.

“I know what you would ask,” she said. “Why would a vampire fight for us?”

Nods and murmurs of agreement buzzed through the small crowd.

“Because they are not evil incarnate as some of you may believe. I know the old tales. I’ve heard them, too. My grandmother once told me there is darkness and danger in fairytales, when one cannot tell the difference from what is real and what is not.” Her heaving bosom and her fisted hands at her side spoke of the passion welling inside of her. “I am here to tell you I have witnessed the selfless and heroic acts of both Prince Marius and Lieutenant Nikolai. They abandoned their life of luxury and power with the crown to help us. The very least we can do is join the ranks of the Black Lily and play our part.”

Her gaze found him. His muscles locked. She had no idea the effect her words had on him. Or that look of deep admiration she shined so willingly upon him. He didn’t deserve it, and yet, he savored the beauty of the moment, hiding away her perfection for the distant future when this quest was over and they parted. The vision of her standing there would warm him on many cold nights to come.

A burly, bald man called out, “I’m not a fighter. But if you need a blacksmith, I will lend a hand.”

Sienna’s smile brightened the dimly lit room. “Thank you, sir. A forger of weapons and arms is as needed as any soldier.” She nodded to him appreciatively. “I will say this and be done. You are right that there is risk in

loss of life if you join the army of the Black Lily. But it is assured that you will continue to lead a life of fear and enslavement should you do nothing. The Glass Tower grows in power, and her demand for more blood increases by the day. The royal army must be fed. And we all know, they will not be eating the slaughtered calf or roasted pig to satisfy their appetites. The choice is yours, my friends. Should you be brave enough, report to the Bull's Head in Hiddleston and sit at the booth painted with a black mark upon the table. Someone will find you and give you instructions from there. Good night."

She stepped down but was surrounded at once with a barrage of questions. The others shuffled toward the ladder leading up to the ground floor. Nikolai shoved off the wall to keep a closer eye on Sienna. She spoke to each of them with steady ease, washing away their fears and rallying them behind the cause with reassuring words and a kind smile. One by one, they disappeared from the gathering until only the blacksmith and Deb remained.

Nikolai moved closer, arms crossed.

"Yes, your family may join you as well," said Sienna, placing a gentle hand on the blacksmith's arm. "We welcome them. Just meet at the Bull's Head as I've said before. A contact will reach out when he knows it is safe."

"Thank you, milady." With a duck of the chin, the smithy sauntered off and up the ladder.

Deb stepped forward with a smile upon her face. The three of them ambled toward the exit together.

"Thank you for taking the risk and having us here," said Sienna.

Deb scoffed. "No need to thank me. The vampires made me an enemy when they took my father from me." She shot an apologetic look to Nikolai. "The vampires of the Glass Tower, that is."

Nikolai walked between them. “Yes, I understand. There is good reason why I am no longer a part of their ranks.”

Once they reached the top, Deb held out her hand for him to shake. He did.

“If more vampires were like you, there would be no need for a bloody war.”

He smiled and released her hand, uncomfortable with the compliment. “Farewell and safe travels.”

“Aye,” replied Deb. “Same to you both.”

...

Sienna took the arm Nikolai offered her as he led them through an alley onto the street, the clip-clop of his boots and the swish of her skirt a soft accompaniment. Lobdell was smaller than Sylus, but it appeared to be more sophisticated. Cobblestone streets and paved walkways instead of dirt roads. Most shops were closed now. The streets were quiet except for the pub two blocks up, spilling yellow light onto the walkway. Street lanterns marked every corner. The starry night was clear of any clouds that had hampered the day, a half moon offering a luminescent glow.

“It’s a beautiful night,” she said, as if they were simply two lovers taking a leisurely stroll together.

“It is.” He crooked his arm against his side, drawing her closer, covering her gloved hand with his own. She liked that. “You did a fine job in there. Even if you overstated on my behalf.”

She tilted her head up at him. “It wasn’t an overstatement. What I said was true. Arabelle has spoken nonstop in her letters of you and your training, the tireless hours you’ve put in, the exhausting repetition of training new recruits.”

Sienna cherished those words about the lieutenant in Arabelle’s letters.

She had imagined how he might look instructing the soldiers on the sandy shores of Cutters Cove. So grave and stern, the wind tousling his blond hair. Funny that she thought he was too serious to have such beautiful hair. Somehow, it made him even more alluring.

He clamped his jaw tight. The light of the corner lamp edging his profile in gold, his jaw a hard slant.

“Are you upset to have so many more recruits to train?” she asked, trying to find out the mystery that had cast such a gloom.

“No,” he answered definitively. “The recruits are needed. Direly. The Barrow brothers have become my sergeants at arms and can assist with training.”

“Then what has put you in such a mood? You’ve been so...angry since tea.”

He pulled her to a stop before the tavern, raucous laughter and singing spilling out of the open door. His face was fixed in darkness with his back to the bright window of the pub, silhouetting his broad shoulders and blond hair that hung loose and wild to his nape.

She could no longer make out his expression. But his hand tightened on her arm, keeping her in place as he pressed close and brushed a stray lock of her hair off of her cheek, his fingers leaving a trail of heat in their wake. They feathered down along her jaw to her chin, his thumb brushing across her parted lips. She could not move if the devil himself were after her. She was transfixed, his vampire eyes gleaming bright in the dark.

“*You*, Sienna. You make me angry...and afraid and desperate and fiercely protective and...”

He swept his thumb back a second time.

Sienna let her lips part farther, her breath coming out in white puffs. A deep growl rumbled in his chest, a beastly sound so low it trembled down her spine and settled low in her belly, evoking a breathy gasp and a tingle

between her legs.

“The things I want to do to you, sweetheart. They are *not* good. But they would feel...delicious.”

“Tell me,” she whispered.

He chuckled darkly. “You tread such a dangerous line. I am doing my best to keep our relationship professional. But it is near impossible when you say such things to me with that look on your face. If I voice my thoughts, there will be no turning back.” He brushed the pad of his thumb a third time. “Are you sure?”

She slid her tongue out and licked his thumb, holding his catlike gaze.

“I have my answer.” He lifted her bodily and blurred vampire-swift out of the light of the tavern and into the quiet shadow on the next block where the street was empty. Pinning her to the wall with his body, his hands laced with hers and held above her head, his mouth hovered a hairsbreadth away.

“I want to tear these clothes off of you and taste every inch of your skin. I want to lick you between your thighs till you slide away into oblivion. I want to drive my cock inside you and mark you so deep that you know you are mine. I want to make you come so hard that you beg me to do it again. And again. And *again*.”

Then he crushed her mouth with his own, delving his tongue inside and demanding she open for him.

She did on a frantic whimper with the images he'd conjured floating through her mind. He let one hand go to wrap her nape in a possessive grip, keeping her still, while he plundered her mouth, stroking his tongue deep, giving her a small taste of the beast he planned to unleash. She clenched her free hand in the back of his hair, pulling him closer not pushing away, yearning for more.

“Nikolai,” was all she could manage when he scraped his canines down the side of her neck without breaking the skin.

A quiet footfall sounded on the pavement close behind them. Nikolai spun to face the intruder, shielding her with his body. No. Intruders. There was more than one. Sienna caught sight of three men in the royal Legionnaire uniform, silver buttons winking by torchlight.

“Well, well. So sorry to interrupt your late-night feeding, lieutenant.”

She knew the voice at once. Sergeant Aleksander Volkov. Nikolai made no reply, watching their movements as the other two moved slowly to flank them. He shifted his body to the left, where the largest of the three vampires had moved in too close.

“Mmm, but she does look like she tastes so sweet.” Volkov raised his head, nose in the air, and inhaled a deep breath. “Bloody hell, lieutenant. Her scent. How have you not drained her dry?” he asked on a laugh. “Doesn’t she smell sweet, Boris?” he asked the gruff vampire on his right.

“Aye, sergeant.”

Nikolai was stone-still, but the tautness of his shoulders and the fists at his sides told her enough.

“Volkov. If you so much as think of her again, I’ll rip out your throat before you can blink.”

He laughed, the sound sending a sinister shiver up her spine. “Oh, I plan to do more than think about her.” His voice dropped low and menacing. “You can be sure of that.”

Then the world turned upside down. Sienna was knocked to the pavement by one of the soldier vampires, but Nikolai tore him away from her. She could make out practically nothing, only blurs of action under the moonlight. Snarls, grunts, and growls filled the night. Then a crunch and one of the soldiers lay in the street, unmoving. Nikolai stood over him, heaving deep breaths, blood dripping from his mouth.

The second soldier charged Nikolai in a blur, the one called Boris. A blade left Nikolai’s hand and landed in the man’s chest. He howled in pain

as he twisted onto the cobblestone street.

Out of nowhere, Volkov lifted Sienna with a jerk of her arm. She screamed. At the same time, a sharp burn coiled and leaped in her chest, pushing down her arms toward her hands. Then her body was tossed sideways as Nikolai and Volkov tumbled into the street. Just as quickly, the inner fire snuffed out, leaving a warm knot lodged in her chest. She clutched at the spot, while watching Nikolai and Volkov tumbling away.

The men grappled in a spinning torrent, then one of them flew in the air and hit the cobblestone a block away with a hard *thunk*. Nikolai stood victorious, though he wasted no time.

He scooped her into his arms and ground out, “Close your eyes and hold on.”

No time for questions or protests. She clung to him tightly, locking her arms around his neck, and buried her face against his chest, knowing what was about to come. He ran in vampire speed, the world blurring past until she felt the cold chill of the open air as they breezed away from Lobdell, spinning deeper into the night. Squeezing her eyes shut to keep the nausea of motion sickness at bay, she held on tight, comforted to be in his arms after the dreadful scene a moment before, the strange tingling fire still burning inside her chest. She’d felt the sensation when she’d been threatened before, though she couldn’t figure out what it meant. Even so, she knew it was nothing to fear, but rather something she needed to know and understand.

They seemed to run forever. Nikolai refused to stop, even when she whimpered in protest and begged quietly. “I don’t feel well. Can we stop?”

“Not yet,” came his grating reply, the cold night growing colder as they sped through the dark. “Not until you are safe.”

She saw the blur of trees and heard the coo of an owl once, longing for the safety of her woodland. But then they were crossing an open plain, the

world spinning. The nausea finally overwhelmed her, and she drifted into the black.

Chapter Eleven

The dark-haired human servant stoked the fire to life, adding three logs to the oversized grate, nodded to Friedrich, then swiftly left the parlor and closed the door behind him.

“Do you trust him?” asked Nikolai with a nod to the door.

“Grant? Absolutely. He won’t say a word. Not even to the other servants.”

“Good.”

Nikolai glanced once more at Sienna on the sapphire-blue chaise, still not revived from their journey. Leaning over, he lifted the downy white blanket up over her shoulder. Homing in on her pulse, he found it beating strong and steady. He’d pushed her too far, too long. The vertigo had tipped her over the edge into unconsciousness.

But there was no way in hell he could’ve stopped to offer her a respite, not until he was double the distance vampires could track. He’d cracked the neck of one of the soldiers, nearly pulling his head off with the force. Unfortunately, he had to leave Volkov and the other hulking one still alive, though both injured enough to make them crawl away and lick their wounds before they could hunt them.

How had Volkov found them? Was he leading one of the queen’s scouting parties and coincidentally landed in the town the same night they were there to recruit? Highly improbable. Or did the queen’s elixir give him other gifts

for hunting down prey? More powerful than he'd presumed.

Friedrich stepped up beside him, passing him one of two amber-filled glasses. Nikolai wasn't a heavy drinker but he needed one tonight.

"Now then," started Friedrich, cocking one leg as he lay his arm across the mantel. "Start from the beginning."

Nikolai stepped away from Sienna, needing some physical distance to focus on anything else but her.

"The attack came after the rally with the recruits."

"Did the Legionnaires see where the meeting was held?"

"No. I don't think so. There were only three of them. Perhaps broken off from their main troop as we hadn't seen any other uniforms in town, and we'd been there all day."

"Probably a scouting party." Friedrich swirled the liquor slowly in the glass. "So they found you by chance?"

"Perhaps."

"It's possible. The queen has scouting parties everywhere. My uncle has his own minions scouring Izeling here in the north."

"So King Dominik has joined forces with his mother?"

It had not escaped any of them that Marius's eldest brother and Friedrich's uncle, King Dominik, ruled this northern kingdom of Izeling with an iron fist. And he was the queen's firstborn and favorite son. Friedrich risked much to help them, traitors to the crown and allies with the Black Lily.

Friedrich chuckled darkly. "Of course he has, the brutal bastard. He's just like my father." Friedrich lifted his glass in a semi-salute with a sardonic slash of his mouth before he took a large swallow.

Nikolai needn't wonder why the duke's expression went glacial at the thought of his father. It wasn't a love match between his parents. Princess Katerina, only daughter of the imperial couple King Grindal and Queen

Morgrid, was betrothed at birth to the vainglorious Duke of Winter Hill. Marius had told Nikolai he'd never known his sister. By the time he was born, she'd been married off to the northern duke and was sequestered away like a shameful secret. Little did the royal family know that she would make a grand exit from this world, bringing her faithless husband with her. But what Katerina didn't consider was the scars she'd leave behind on her son. There was no mistaking the haunted look in his eyes now. The wounds still bled, even after all this time when the royal family pretended his mother had never existed. Perhaps that is why the duke was so eager to betray the crown. If so, they had a formidable ally in the duke. Revenge was a cold bedfellow, but it cut with the sharpest blade of all.

"I imagine you killed them all," said Friedrich as if he were discussing the price of grain or cattle.

"Only one."

Friedrich arched one dark eyebrow. "Nikolai, the Merciful? Since when did that happen?"

Nikolai finally shrugged off his coat and tossed it over the back of a mahogany chair with black velvet cushions. "If I'd had the time and Sienna wasn't with me, I would've finished the job. I managed to injure the other two."

"I'm sure that you did."

Nikolai knocked back the fiery liquor, swallowing the pleasant burn. "*Sanguine furorem* has made them strong. They must be feeding constantly to maintain such strength and speed. Volkov, the sergeant I spoke of, is a newly made vampire."

"And yet he outmatched you?"

"I wouldn't say that." A surge of satisfaction thrilled through him when Nikolai remembered dislocating both Volkov's shoulders and hearing his knee crunch before throwing him into a stone wall a block away.

“I had an opportunity to escape safely with Sienna. So I took it.” He glanced her way again. “I couldn’t risk one of them getting to her. Her safety was paramount.”

“I see.” Friedrich set his empty tumbler on the mantel and paced closer to the chaise where Sienna slept on her side, her auburn waves partially covering her face.

Instinctively, all of Nikolai’s muscles locked into place as Friedrich leaned over her. Nikolai’s fierce protectiveness of her was a primal urge, even when he knew the duke was a friend.

“Should I summon a human healer?”

“No,” snapped Nikolai. “She will be fine when she wakes.”

Friedrich’s gaze swiveled to him. “Careful, friend. I mean her no harm.”

Nikolai turned away and set his empty glass on a side table stacked with books. He sank into the wingback chair beside it with a sigh, the plush black leather squeaking as his weight settled. “I am her guardian for this mission. She is my charge.”

Friedrich ambled closer, hands in his pants pockets as he leaned against the mantel again. “I’d say she’s much more to you than that. Did you know you just growled at me?”

“What?” Nikolai hadn’t realized it at all.

Friedrich’s gaze drifted back to Sienna. “Though I can certainly see the appeal. Lovely creature. If I am allowed to say so.”

Nikolai ignored his jab. Friedrich was flirtatious and charming and bold. He couldn’t help himself. “She is...special.”

“Of that, I am sure. Marius told me.”

Unnerved that Marius should speak of her to Friedrich, he bristled at the thought. “What do you mean Marius told you? Told you what?”

Friedrich smiled, which held more pity than true warmth. “If you’ll relax and not rip my head off, I’ll tell you.”

Nikolai realized he'd gripped the arms of the leather chair, his fingers white-knuckled on the arms, his own claws itching to come out. His beast was riding him hard since the attack. Forcing himself to breathe evenly, he relaxed his shoulders and leaned back into the chair, waiting.

Wearing his usual cavalier expression, even though Nikolai had been poised to attack him a moment before, Friedrich launched ahead. "In recent correspondence, Marius told me you would be coming with Sienna, the lovely woman who lives alone in Silvane Forest." He paused and took a seat in the chair opposite Nikolai, made of the same fine black leather as the one where he sat but smaller in size. "He explained your mission and asked if I would be a safe haven should you need it."

Nikolai leaned forward again, this time out of curiosity to hear more not on an instinct to attack. Claspng his hands together with elbows on his knees, he said, "Yes. He told me you offered your home before I left Cutters Cove. We appreciate the risk you take with King Dominik so near."

Friedrich gave a nod and an easy smile. "If truth be known, I hate my Uncle Dominik. I've always hated him. Arrogant, ruthless bastard that he is. And from what Marius has told me, the crown has abandoned its own laws for selfish gain. I would never be a party to that."

"Good to hear. We need all the allies we can get," said Nikolai, still wondering if Friedrich's help had more to do with avenging his mother's life and her death. But he'd never broach such a personal topic. He turned back to what had started the conversation. "You didn't tell me what Marius said of Sienna."

Smiling as if he had a secret, Friedrich said, "He told me she was unique. That she was a friend of the enchanted Silvane Forest and all the creatures there. He said she carried some of its magic inside her."

Nikolai knew this to be true from the moment he met her months before. Her beauty had punched him in the gut, but the aura of magic that haloed

her every step had lured him like a lost wolf to its den, seeking the comfort of home. Her healing touch, her giving heart, her comforting smile, her alluring beauty all spoke of potent magic, kept locked up tight just beneath her skin. But they also spoke of the essence of Sienna. She was beautiful in every way.

“It is true,” said Nikolai. “Do you know that there are four hart wolves who protect her as if she were their own?”

“Hart wolves?” asked Friedrich in disbelief. “Those wild beasts have befriended a girl?”

Nikolai shook his head on a laugh, softening his posture and the rigid tension in his back. “I was shocked myself to see it. I’d never heard of any befriending a human. Arabelle told me that the white female she calls Duchess and her two brothers were saved as pups by Sienna’s grandmother. Hunters had killed their mother.”

“And what of the fourth?”

“That would be the she-wolf’s mate. A fierce black male. He steers clear of me. One of the brothers is a mean-looking brute, too. He keeps a keen eye on me as well.”

Friedrich leaned back and crossed an ankle over his opposite knee. “I can’t believe they haven’t torn you to pieces. They *hate* vampires. Or so the legends say.”

“Oh, they hate us, there is no doubt of that. Too many vampires have hunted their kind for sport. But they trust Sienna. And, as I am her friend, they keep their distance and let me be.”

Friedrich stared across the room toward the chaise. “You’re her friend, are you? Nothing more than that?”

Nikolai wasn’t the kind of man who shared his pleasures with others. He was never the sort of soldier to brag of his conquests at balls and parties. And Sienna was neither a simple pleasure nor a casual conquest. She was

far, far more. And he would have everyone know it.

“She is quite a bit more,” confirmed Nikolai, a surge of fresh fury pumping through his veins. “And I will defend her to the death if I must.”

Friedrich laughed. “Yes. I can see that is quite certain.”

As if she knew they spoke of her, a soft sigh drew their attention to the chaise. Sienna pushed up into a sitting position, one palm pressed to her forehead. Nikolai shot over to steady her as she wobbled in place.

“Easy,” he said softly, seated beside her, taking her hand in his with an arm around her waist.

“Where am I?” she asked, voice raspy. “How long have I been out?”

Her sleepy gaze found Friedrich standing before the chaise.

“You are in my home at Winter Hill.”

“Does your head hurt?” asked Nikolai.

“Only a little.”

“Let me get you some water.” Friedrich strode over to the sideboard and poured a glass of water, then brought it back. “Here.”

She cupped the glass and drank half of it down. Her hair had fallen loose from its braid during the mad dash across the country. The auburn waves around her face caught the firelight, shining like flames in the dark parlor. Her tousled hair and sleep-addled expression made her appear delicate and vulnerable, gripping an iron vise around his protective nature.

No. It wasn't just his nature. It was her, and he knew it. Everything about her called to him alone, demanding that he grab hold with both hands and never let go. Commanding him to understand one thing above all else. Sienna was his. Just as she owned him, body and soul. Her blood still sang a sweet serenade through his body, calling him to set the world on fire should anyone dare to harm her. There would be no respite for Volkov and his wayward comment toward her. Nikolai would shut his fucking mouth for good the next time he saw him.

“Can I get you something to eat?” asked Friedrich, casting a frown toward Nikolai.

The duke could probably hear Nikolai’s pulse race at the thought of revenge. Nikolai had to get control of himself before he spontaneously combusted. Thankfully, Sienna was human and could detect no change in him. She cupped the glass with both hands in her lap, gazing up at them.

“No. I definitely can’t eat after that journey.”

“I apologize,” said Nikolai on a deep exhale to gather some control. “I know it wasn’t pleasant for you, but I needed to get us as far away as possible. So they couldn’t track us.”

“That royal sergeant,” she started. “Volkov. Do you think he was looking for us specifically? Or do you think it coincidence?”

“Good question,” said Friedrich. “Please allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Duke Friedrich Volya of Winter Hill.” He offered a hand for her to shake with a warning look and arch of the brow at Nikolai to keep calm.

Rolling his eyes, Nikolai fell into an easy state. “This is Marius’s kin. And our ally, as you know from Arabelle’s correspondence.”

She shook his hand. “Thank you for the sanctuary.” Her gaze quickly turned to Nikolai. “Do you think we’re truly safe? I’ve heard vampires can track for far distances.”

Smiling, content now that she was awake and seemed well, Nikolai replied, “They can. But these are newly made vampires. I can sense it in their unnaturally swift heartrate. They don’t have the honed skills of an older vampire.”

“Like you,” she said, warming his heart to the core in the affectionate glance she gave him.

“Yes.” He suddenly wished Friedrich would vanish into thin air so he could lay her back on the chaise and mess her lovely hair up a bit more.

Friedrich cleared his throat, breaking the sudden trance between her and Nikolai. “So what is the plan? You had two more stops for recruiting, did you not?”

“Three, actually,” answered Sienna. “According to my letter from Arabelle.”

“Yes, but we won’t be going. We’ll be heading to Cutters Cove on the next tide.”

“No, we will not.” Sienna was fully alert now, the fiery spark back in her eyes.

Nikolai stared at her in wonder, his words sounding more stern than he intended. “Sweetheart, we cannot continue on. It’s too dangerous. We don’t know how Volkov found us and whether he doesn’t have scouts in every town from here all the way back to the Glass Tower.”

“It doesn’t matter if he does. Surely, we’ll need to be more careful, but I won’t quit the mission now.”

“You could’ve been killed.”

“And so could you,” she said with a shrug. “It makes no difference. If anything, it only reinforces the need for recruits now more than ever.”

“We’re going to Cutters Cove,” he said with finality.

“No. We are not. We are completing the mission.”

Her back was a rigid line, her chin set at the most stubborn angle. He wanted to kiss her senseless in order to soften her resolve. He could do it. Easily. Especially if he used his elixir. But then he would remove that blaze of passion from her hypnotic green eyes. The woman dulled his wits and his own common sense.

“Well,” said Friedrich as if a decision had been made when they were most certainly at an impasse. “How about you both get some sleep and we’ll discuss it in the morning? You can stay in the suite next door. No servants but Grant are allowed in this part of the castle. It was a pleasure to

finally meet you, my lady.” With a swift bow, he ducked out of the room, leaving them alone.

Sienna followed his exit, her brow raised in astonishment. “Castle?”

Chapter Twelve

Sienna lay in the dark. The fire that Nikolai had started for her before he adjourned to his connecting bedchamber had burned down to orange embers, hissing in the grate. Thin floor-to-ceiling windows with pointed arches lined the long wall of the room, moonlight spilling through.

A wall-to-wall tapestry hung opposite the bed, as wide as her entire cottage. Woven with rich colors, the tapestry depicted a lovely scene of a dark-haired woman standing on the edge of a brook. The woman was dressed entirely in the trappings of a lady, except for her bare feet where she dipped a toe in the stream. The look of surprise upon her face, her mouth slightly parted in wonder, gave the innocent portrait a sensual tone.

The ceilings were so high and her bed so large. Even though the room was furnished in lovely feminine touches and the thick brocade duvet was heavy and warm, she felt small and alone. She'd grown accustomed to Nikolai's presence on this journey. It had become her constant comfort. Though he was only next door in the adjoining bedchamber through the suite door, he felt leagues away.

The incident in Lobdell flashed back in frightening display. That horrid vampire, Volkov, didn't seem surprised to see her or Nikolai so far from the Glass Tower. Surely, he had been following them. She'd caught the glint of Volkov's fangs when he smiled, if you could call it smiling. Then the world flipped upside down. She couldn't make out who was hurting who with the

primal growls and cries and crunching of bones. And the whole time the fight took place, all she could think was, *don't hurt Nikolai*. She had feared being taken captive, but she had feared for Nikolai's safety more. The memory of that raw horror punched her in the gut.

A door creaked open, outlining the formidable figure of Nikolai in torchlight from the adjoining room. He shut the door and strode to her side, sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing only his trousers, his chest bare. He combed a hand into her hair, shaping his fingers to her skull.

"I can hear your heartbeat from next door." His rumble of a whisper softened everything inside her to jelly. "You're anxious. What is wrong?"

"You could hear me through the walls?" she asked in disbelief.

"As if you were sleeping beside me." He brushed his thumb along the apple of her cheek. "There is nothing to be afraid of here. No one will find us at Winter Hill."

"I wasn't afraid of that."

"Then what?"

Pulling her arm from beneath the covers, she placed her hand atop his on her cheek. He stilled.

"I was afraid for you tonight. When those vampires attacked. If they'd hurt you, I don't know what I would've done."

He didn't move. His thumb stopped stroking. Finally, he spoke, his voice as dark as thunder. "You need not worry for me, sweetheart. No harm will come to me. Just as no harm will come to you. I won't allow it. I'll die first."

On impulse, she turned her face into his palm and pressed a kiss at the center where the skin was softer than the callused pads. A sound that was part growl and groan rumbled from Nikolai. Then he tilted her face back toward his.

"Why are you crying?"

She hadn't even realized she was. All of her emotions from the night had rolled together—the fear, the danger, the exhaustion, the relief—and had finally welled up and spilled over.

On a sob, she said, “I don't know.”

He whipped back the covers and climbed in bed beside her. When she tried to scoot over to give him room, he gripped her waist and pulled her against his chest.

“You're overwhelmed,” he said, pressing his lips to the crown of her head. “And rightly so.”

She finally let go, the tears falling fast.

“Shhh,” he calmed her, trailing a hand up and down her spine as she lay on her side facing him. “It's all right now.”

The heat of his body was an iron brand, with nothing but her shift between them. Slowly, her sobs subsided, but her body still shook. She lay quiet against him, her emotions shifting from fear and despair to something else entirely, but just as raw and desperate.

Continuing his soothing path down her back, he whispered against her temple. “Are you cold?”

“No.”

“You're still trembling.”

“Yes.”

He rolled up so that she was partially beneath him, his otherworldly eyes shining in the dark. “Tell me why.” The roughness of his voice was a hard command.

“You know why,” she said, unable to say it aloud.

He rolled above her, then softly speared his hand into her hair and loosened the strands across the pillow, his gaze following the movement. Then he brushed the tips of his fingers over her lips, applying slight pressure till she opened her mouth. He leaned forward and sucked her lower

lip into his mouth, nicking with a sharp pinprick of one fang. Only a drop of elixir, but it spread liquid euphoria through her blood, dulling her anxiety. He licked over the spot with his tongue slowly, so slowly, then lifted away and stared down, a fierce expression marring his face.

“Tell me why,” he repeated, more growl than words.

She feathered her hands up his chest, the rock-solid muscle tight and flexed. “I want you, Nikolai,” she confessed into the dark. “I tremble because I’m terrified of how you make me feel, of how you make me yearn, of how badly I want to know what it would be like to have you inside me.”

He swept away another errant tear that slipped down her cheek. “No more tears.” He shifted on top of her, the weight a delicious relief. “Tonight, you will think of nothing and feel nothing but the pleasure I give you. Do you understand?”

She nodded woodenly.

When he leaned down for what she’d been yearning for since their first kiss, she blurted out, “I am still a virgin.”

He stopped, hovering so close. “Do you tell me that because you want me to stop? Or because you’re nervous at having no experience?”

Breathless from anticipation, she admitted, “The latter.”

“Good.” He pressed his mouth to hers, lining the seam of her lips with his tongue, then said, “Tonight is about your pleasure, sweetheart. And yours alone. I would not take you when you are so overwhelmed by what happened at Lobdell.” He pressed a brief kiss to her lips, then pulled away again. A tease that made her whimper. “I am glad you are a virgin. Because when I do take you, there will be no question in that brilliant brain of yours that you”—he flattened his palm just above her breasts, fingers splayed wide—“belong to me.”

Slanting his mouth over hers, he licked inside with a sensual stroke. He skimmed one hand down her side, grazing her hip, then under her thigh.

With a firm grip, he crooked her leg and seated himself between. Pushing up on his arms, he broke the kiss, his rippled abs flexing in the moonlight when he straightened his arms and rocked his hard shaft against her sex. She hitched in a breath, latched both hands onto his tight biceps, and squeezed.

“Nikolai.”

He rolled his spine and gave her the same beautiful friction. She crooked her other leg, opening wider for him. His eyes glinted silver. She tried to pull him down, wanting his lips on hers, but he didn't budge. He remained above, grinding his hard body against her core. Closing her eyes tight, she begged.

“Please, Nikolai.”

Finally he lowered his torso and nuzzled her neck with a sharp nip of fangs, just enough to break the skin and give her a teasing taste of elixir. He laved his tongue over the shallow puncture, then skated his mouth lower.

Breasts heaving, the transparent shift nothing more than a thin veil, he opened his mouth on her nipple and sucked hard through the fabric. Sienna cried out, arching her spine and pressing closer, her hands scraping down his back. He flicked wickedly with his tongue, her nipple pressing against the wet fabric.

“More, Nikolai.”

Then he was on his knees, towering above her, her knees crooked and spread wide. He hiked the hem of her muslin up, the fabric gathering beneath her breasts and set to placing open-mouthed kisses, hot and wet, from her ribcage down across her belly to her pelvic bone where Sienna gasped. Her hips thrust up in reaction to his rough nips on her hip. Then he lowered to her thigh and nuzzled the sensitive flesh on the inside. Sienna squirmed as his lips and warm breath grazed her inner thigh and the hyper-sensitive cleft above, his touch sending waves of trembling need between

her legs. She could hardly bear it, his warm mouth so close to her sex, even as she yearned for him with maddening need to kiss her *there*.

He looped an arm under and around her thigh, clenching his fingers into her flesh and keeping her still. She stared down, unable to remove her gaze from his hungry expression.

“Do you need to feed?” she asked, knowing there was an artery in the thigh. Perhaps his urge was too strong to resist. “It’s okay if you do.”

The look he gave her was so primal, she could see his lineage, his vampire bloodline shining bright and primitive on his face. A shiver shot through her, that instinctive part of herself warning her she was in the presence of a fierce predator, that she should tread carefully lest she fall victim to the beast with his claws and teeth so close.

“Oh yes, sweetheart,” he said, holding her gaze. “I intend to feed right here.” He dipped his head low and licked his tongue between the folds of her sex in one long stroke.

“Ah!” She cried out, clenching her fists into the sheets, spots hazing her vision when he did it again. “Oh my God.”

He stroked a finger up and down the swollen nub between her cleft, her body wet from want of him. “I’ve been called a lot of things, sweetheart. But never that.”

He slid a long finger inside of her. Her brain hazed, unable to hold onto a coherent thought. His fingers did wonderful, wicked things that coiled her body into a tight ball. She rocked up, pressing his finger deeper, then he slid a second one inside, pumping in slow, shallow strokes. The sensation so foreign, so lovely, so intimate.

“That’s it, my sweet.” He thrust a little faster. She met his tempo, rocking her hips, chasing the mounting tension that rolled like an ocean wave gaining speed. He laved his tongue between her folds, his groan humming against her sensitive bud.

She threaded one hand into his hair, moaning as she pushed her pelvis up and pressed down on his head, shameless wanton that she was, grinding her sex against his mouth. He chuckled. The slick sounds of his mouth and his fingers working her higher and higher. She cupped her breasts and squeezed as she arched her back. He growled from below.

“Come for me,” he commanded, then opened his mouth over her nub at the apex and flicked rapidly with his tongue, his lips clamping down.

Sienna screamed, every muscle from her neck to her toes flexing and freezing at once. Her inner walls clamped around his fingers, pulsing as fast as her racing heartbeat. For a moment, she could do nothing but stare at the vaulted ceiling, sucking in deep breaths.

She didn't know. Stars above, she didn't know it could feel like this. The attentions she'd given herself had *never* felt that good. In her dreams, it had never felt that good. But then, it wasn't him in the flesh. Not like now.

Nikolai removed his fingers, then placed a gentler open-mouthed kiss on her sex, licking slowly with the flat of his tongue. Sienna whimpered and scooted up the bed, far too sensitive there now.

He gazed up and grinned, licking his bottom lip before he sucked the two fingers he'd had inside of her with a long slide from his mouth. “I could taste you forever.”

“My heart would give out in a day,” she panted, incredulous he would do and say something so naughty. “Perhaps in an hour.”

He chuckled and launched himself up and over her. “I like seeing that flush in your cheeks.” He nipped her lips. “And hearing that smile in your voice.”

She wondered how he could see anything, but then again, he was vampire. “Well, I like breathing.” She panted heavily still. “So give me a moment to catch my breath.”

He settled beside her, pulled the covers over them, and wrapped a strong

arm around her waist, pulling her over till her head rested on his chest. “Take all the time you need.”

His voice was light and airy, unlike his usual brooding self.

She tilted her head toward him. “You’re happy with yourself, aren’t you?”

“Quite.”

“I’ve never experienced something like that before.” She had no experience with men, but she thought she knew enough from watching farm animals. Apparently not.

“I am certainly glad to hear that,” he said only slightly more serious. “If another man tried to do that to you, I’d have to rip out his tongue.”

“You’re very territorial.”

“Very. Glad you’ve noted.”

Strange how that act of intimacy had washed away the angst and tension from before. Then she realized that was exactly what he was trying to do. He’d wanted her pleasure alone, he’d said. He’d certainly gotten it.

“Is it always like that?” she asked, almost too shy, but enjoying the intimacy that had grown between them in the dark.

“No.” He flatted his palm, fingers spread, over her abdomen under the covers. “It will be better next time.”

“Better?”

He laughed and lowered his head, sweeping his lips across hers. Not a kiss, but a reminder that they’d knocked down a wall between them and there was no rebuilding it. Then he whispered, “Wait till you see what it feels like when I’m buried deep inside you.”

He rolled her onto her side, so she faced the wall of windows, a hand squeezing her hip. She’d forgotten about the calm moonlight cascading through the glass. The quiet moment before he stepped into the room was millions of leagues away. Yes, she’d thought of him many times. Too many

to count if truth be told. But imagination was entirely different from reality.

“Sleep,” he commanded, as if he could hear her thoughts spinning. “I want you to rest.”

He pressed his chest to her back, banding an arm at her waist, and pulled her tight, molding his body to the back of hers. Kissing her on the temple, he lay his head on her pillow. His hard manhood pressed against the small of her back. She wondered how on earth he could sleep while still aroused.

“Shut your beautiful brain off and go to sleep, Sienna.”

She smiled into the dark. She loved his endearments for her. But her name sounded most divine of all on his lips. With a sigh, she snuggled deeper into his arms and fell asleep. As he commanded.

Chapter Thirteen

Standing at the picture window overlooking the gardens and the rolling hills beyond, his hands clasped at his back, Nikolai watched the snow, anxious that it would be too cold for Sienna to travel. The world was a gray pall, reflecting his mood. After last night, his resolve to get her on a ship as soon as possible had settled like a rock in his stomach. They hadn't resolved the matter of whether they were fleeing directly to Cutters Cove or finishing the mission they'd started. But Nikolai's instincts told him to quit now and take her as far away as he could.

Who was he kidding? His entire being—body and soul—urged him to abscond with his beauty and hide her away from the rest of the world so there was only him and her. An irrational impulse, he knew. But since last night when he'd finally admitted to himself that she had burrowed herself deep inside of him and that he was no longer open to the idea of letting her go, he'd been devising plans for their future. Laughable now that he thought of it. The loner who never took a woman longer than a week, lest she fall unfortunately in love with him, was now contemplating the idea of forever.

Of course, forever would be until the end of her natural life. She was mortal, he was not. He could have Marius make her vampire...but only if she chose. Hell, he could have Friedrich do it right here before they left Winter Hill. He had the power as well as Marius. But deep down, he knew her answer would be no. Arabelle had told him of her grandmother's love

for a vampire as well as her opinion that they were the cursed race. Sienna obviously loved her grandmother and trusted her. Making her a vampire wasn't an option.

There was that other matter to contend with as well. He would never hurt her. He knew that now. Not physically anyway. But if she ever found out what kind of a monster he once was, the sin that still blackened his soul, she might look on him with shame and horror. That was something he couldn't bear. He pushed the thought aside, unable to face the devastation that would cause. He was too far gone to turn back now.

His mind drifted back to the night before. Her easy surrender and yearning need for him had nearly broken his control, pushing him to stake his claim with quick force. That was the old demon rising its ugly head, gripping the reins hard and lashing at Nikolai to take what was his with violent speed. Feeling the beast riding him hard was what kept Nikolai from sliding between her legs and pounding home.

The anxious beat of her heart was what had summoned him from his own bed. His need to comfort her was the driving force calling him to her bedroom. When he saw her lying there, soft and pliant and lush in the transparent muslin he'd bought her, his first instinct was to tear the damned thing from her body and take her. That was the moment he froze, realizing it wasn't simply her beauty or the heady scent of wild lavender in the woods she carried under her skin that he wanted.

It was her. All of her.

Her fear of what had happened that day and her need for comfort had beaten his own beast back into its cave. He was determined to give her what she needed and ignore his own desires. For now. Of course, that had left him with the most painfully stiff cock he'd ever had. Still there this morning, he rolled out of the warm cocoon of her bed, groaning at leaving her lush body alone. But a man had only so much willpower. Even a

vampire such as him.

He wanted her. Desperately. Painfully. But he needed her to understand what it meant before he made her his. He needed her to get used to the idea before it happened. For when he drove deep inside her body, he'd never let another man touch her. Never. He parried and fenced with the devil living inside him for far too long to believe otherwise. Once he'd crossed that threshold with her, there would be no turning back. She wasn't simply any woman. She was Sienna.

For a maid who had lived alone for many years, Sienna was a confident woman. She was open to his attentions. Quite open. He wasn't sure if that came from years of loneliness and womanly curiosity or if it was because of him. If her sensuality had nothing to do with him specifically, then he would be forced to leave her before they'd crossed a bridge too far. If she was simply coming into her own womanhood and exploring her sexuality, then he must let her go. Even if it shattered him into a million pieces.

He'd like nothing more than to be her casual lover. But there would never be anything casual between them. She'd buried her claws deep, and his need for her was a terrifying reality that had shaken him to his core. He knew himself well enough to know once he'd crossed that bridge with her, he was done for.

"Good morning." Friedrich stepped into the parlor behind him.

"Morning." Nikolai pulled himself from the window.

"Sleep well?" Friedrich wore a wicked smile like the fiend that he was.

"Not especially." He had rested easily next to her, but sleep eluded him. Wonder why.

"That's too bad." Friedrich chuckled and ambled toward his desk, surrounded by bookshelves on every wall. "I've been told those bedrooms are very comfortable."

"Yes. Well, there were other reasons for my discomfort," he said on a

sigh.

“I imagine that there were.”

Nikolai aimed a death glare at the duke, for there was innuendo in every word he said.

With another fiendish smile, he waved him over. “Oh, come, lieutenant. Wipe off the scowl. I have something of importance to show you.”

Nikolai joined Friedrich at his desk, where he pulled out a map from a locked drawer and sprawled it across the cherrywood top. It was a map of the northern provinces, Winter Hill at its center. Along the southern border of the map, there were a few villages circled in red ink.

“What are these?” Nikolai pointed.

“I have my own scouts out there seeking information.”

“Legionnaires?”

“No.” Friedrich’s charming countenance had slipped, his brow pinched into a frown. “I don’t keep Legionnaires. I have a personal guard.”

Surprised, knowing Friedrich had always arrived at the Glass Tower with his own escort of Legionnaires, he asked, “Since when did this happen?”

The duke stared at him pointedly. “Since Marius fled the Glass Tower and reported to me that his mother, our queen, had fallen into the dark of *sanguine furorem*. Besides, my uncle had set his own spies amongst my soldiers.”

Nikolai scoffed. “Not surprising. I’ve been thinking on the queen.”

“And?”

“I don’t believe she had ever fallen. She was the first of us, the one who slayed her twin brother for the crown. I believe she’s always been a host for the blood madness.”

“If that’s true, then she’s been hiding her secret for thousands of years. Why is it only a few months ago that she’s gotten sloppy enough to get caught?”

Nikolai clenched his jaw, swallowing his pride before he answered. “Unfortunately, there have been signs for some time. When I first joined the Legionnaires, I witnessed an attack of the blood madness at a ball. That was long ago. I’ve also heard reports over the years that one of our soldiers had lost control and drained his bleeder dry. But each time I looked into the account, there either was no body to support the rumor or my interrogation came up empty.”

“Didn’t you suspect so many rumors as being suspicious?”

“That’s just it.” Nikolai settled into a black leather chair opposite the desk behind which Friedrich stood. “It was never close together. It happened perhaps two or three times per decade. So it always appeared as a singular incident.”

“Oh,” said Friedrich, a dawning expression raising his brow. “I always forget you’re over a century old.” Friedrich was only half his age. “So what caused you all to finally catch on?”

Nikolai heaved out a sigh. “That’s the hard part of it all. It was Arabelle who brought it to our attention.”

Friedrich grinned. “That’s right. Marius told me as much after he’d absconded with his new bride. Marius has his hands full with that one.”

“You have no idea.”

“I think I have a little. I met her at his Blood Ball, the very night she attempted to assassinate him.”

“Yes.” Nikolai stiffened at the reminder of his lapse in judgment that night, allowing her to get so close with a blade tipped in gold. “I was there as well.” If she’d hit her mark, his heart, she would’ve succeeded in killing the prince. Fortunately, fate intervened.

“She reminds me of someone else I know.”

“Oh?” Nikolai was curious. “Who’s that?”

“The damn schoolteacher in Terrington.” His brows pinched together.

“Damn schoolteacher? Seems she’s gotten under your skin, Your Grace.”

His mouth ticked up on one side. “Perhaps. I caught her snooping around my castle, seeking information about me and the Black Lily from her friend Sylvia, who is one of my servants.”

Somewhat alarmed, Nikolai asked, “Who is she working for? Your uncle?”

“Of that, I don’t know. But I plan to find out.”

Nikolai settled back again, relieved that the duke was apparently as adept at deception as any spy in the ranks of the Royal Legionnaires. He was a good ally to have in the Black Lily.

“Interesting.” Friedrich rubbed his chin, staring at the map.

“What’s that?”

“What if the reason the bodies have escalated is nothing more than timing?”

“How so?”

Friedrich rested a hand loosely on one hip. “You say the queen had gotten sloppy, and that’s why she finally got caught. What if it isn’t that at all? What if she’s just gotten more comfortable?”

Nikolai leaned forward, hands clasped together. “What do you mean?”

“The timing all coincided with Marius’s one hundredth birthday, the day he was to marry his princess and seal the final alliance of the Varis line.”

“Yes. But he didn’t marry her as you recall. And what of it? What would his marrying Princess Vilhelmina have to do with the queen and the blood madness?”

“It’s not the marriage, exactly, but what a pure lineage marriage would produce.” He sat in his chair and met Nikolai’s gaze across the desk with excitement shining bright in his dark blue eyes. “An heir. A strong Varis heir would give her the confidence to let her guard down. If she knew her legacy was sealed with a strong heir to continue the line for future

generations, an heir she might even be able to manipulate if raised under her wing, then she could try again to bring back the old darkness, ruling with an iron fist. Disregarding the well-being of her subjects.”

“I think I know why,” came Sienna’s soft voice at the open door.

They both turned. Sienna stood, fully dressed, her hair pulled back. She would’ve looked refreshed if it weren’t for the sickening pallor whitening her cheeks and lips.

“Sienna.” Nikolai went to her and guided her into the room. “Come and sit.” He brought her to one of the chairs before the desk, then took a seat beside her. Friedrich sat as well, leaning to the side, his arm casually draped, though there was nothing casual about his grave expression.

“Now, what is it?” Nikolai kept her hand in his, gently stroking her knuckles with his thumb. “What is it you know?”

She almost smiled, though sorrow was etched on her brow. “You may not believe me, but I think I’ve had a premonition.”

Nikolai exchanged a troubled glance with Friedrich, then encouraged her. “Tell us. What do you mean?”

Swallowing hard and sitting up straighter, she said, “My grandmother used to tell me an old fairytale. A dark fairytale.” She licked her lips as if her mouth had gone dry. “Very dark. She said that the tale came to her in dreams. And when she died, the tale came to mine. Well, it was a nightmare, really. I’d forgotten about it. Until last night...” Her gaze swiveled from Friedrich to Nikolai, who squeezed her hand gently. “I dreamed it again. But this time, I recognized the faces of those who had been faceless all the times before. And now I know, it’s not just a story. It’s the future.”

“Tell us, my lady,” said Friedrich.

She nodded, but instead of speaking, she stood and walked to the window beside Friedrich’s desk, overlooking the vast snow-covered hills behind the

castle. She appeared to be remembering or perhaps drawing up courage, then finally she cleared her throat softly.

“Once, there was a dark queen who ruled on high. Beautiful and immortal, she reigned with absolute power.”

Sienna paused. Nikolai noted her tangling her fingers together in agitation. He wanted to comfort her but sensed she wanted to get through this on her own. They all knew who the dark queen was. She went on.

“The queen had everything. Healthy heirs. Loyal Legionnaires. Beauty. Wealth. And an endless supply of bleeders at her beck and call. For this queen was vampire—powerful beyond compare. And yet, her spirit was restless. She wanted more. She longed for a world where laws could not impede her wicked desires, for a dominion of darkness, black like her heart and soul.

“So she went into the enchanted forest, towering with black trees and silver leaves, seeking counsel from the hartstone—the place of magic that had transformed her body into an ageless immortal. She wandered in and out of the woods for a century, begging the hartstone to show itself. Until finally, one day, the hartstone did. Though the stone of making only revealed itself to those it chose, it was drawn to beings infused with magic of their own. And the dark queen was filled with potent sorcery.

“The queen confessed her evil desire for eternal dominion over a dark world and asked if her deepest wish was possible. In response, the hartstone revealed a vision on its mirrored surface. It blurred, depicting a faceless queen on her throne and four sons at her side. The scene blurred into another, the view from behind of a dark-haired son and fair-haired bride at their candle-lit wedding. The scene faded into another of the fair-haired bride, drenched in sweat and blood as she gave birth to a healthy son. The scene faded one last time, where the father handed his child to the queen.”

Sienna turned from the window, her green eyes glittering unnaturally

bright, her voice shaking as she finished the tale. “There, with her newborn grandson in hand, by the light of the full moon, she sank her fangs into his small throat and drank his lifeblood until the child’s screams echoed off the stone walls no more.” A tear slipped down Sienna’s cheek.

“As the hartstone went cold and black, the queen knew her course and the path she must walk. For she felt the message clear to the marrow of her bones. That in the hour when she would steal her royal grandson’s innocent soul on the night of his birth, she would relinquish the last shred of her humanity to the beast within, and darkness would fall over the land, holding dominion over all mankind and immortals. For eternity.”

Nikolai rose and rounded the desk, gripping her by the shoulders and pulling her close. For a moment, none of them said a word for there was an energy in the air, sparking the room with the scent of magic. None of them could deny the fact that this was no tale.

“This is a prophecy,” said Friedrich, voicing what was on their minds.

Nikolai urged her to take a seat again, handing her a handkerchief. “A possible prophecy. Nothing is ever set in stone.”

“True,” said Friedrich, leaning forward. “My uncle only has one daughter, Lucille. Queen Lana has had two stillborn sons prior to her. But she is pregnant again and nearing her day of delivery.”

“I’ve never met Queen Lana,” said Nikolai. “Is she blonde?”

Friedrich nodded. But Sienna sat forward, tightening the handkerchief in her fist.

“No. I don’t believe it’s her. Last night, in the dream, I think I recognized the mother giving birth.” She closed her eyes as if remembering, then opened them with a look of pain. “I believe it was Mina.”

Nikolai blanched. His voice was a cold whip. “Did the queen honestly believe Marius would’ve handed over his newborn son for her to murder?”

“But Marius didn’t marry Mina,” offered Sienna. “She’s safe from the

queen now.”

“Unless it was Queen Lana in the premonition and she gives birth to a healthy son.”

Friedrich opened his mouth to say something, but the door opened. Grant stepped in carrying a silver tray with a bone-white teapot and a plate of biscuits, fruit, and cheese.

“Ah. Thank you, Grant.”

Grant set the tray on the table next to the blue chaise where Nikolai laid Sienna last night. He didn’t wear the livery of a servant, but the casual clothes of a field hand. He eyed the group with an intelligent gaze, nodded to Friedrich, then sauntered out.

When he’d left the room, the duke sauntered to the tray, poured a cup of tea, and delivered it to Sienna. The delivery of tea somehow broke through the ominous veil spun by her tale. She had wiped her eyes and breathed easier now, seeming to have come out of the oppressive cloud of her dream. And yet, they couldn’t ignore the fact that the queen’s ultimate goal was to reign in a world much darker than it was now.

“He doesn’t behave like normal servants,” Nikolai remarked offhandedly.

“No,” he admitted. “He’s not. But don’t worry, friend. Grant keeps my secrets. No one will know that you are here.”

Nikolai thought to ask more, but it was obvious Friedrich had secrets of his own he wasn’t willing to share. And if the duke trusted the man, then so would he.

Sienna turned her attention to him as he poured another cup of tea and handed it to Nikolai. “But won’t your cook wonder where he’s taking tea and breakfast?”

“Not at all,” he said, handing her a plate of food, his charming smile in place. “Cook will only think I’ve kept a lady friend overnight. Common enough occurrence.”

Sienna smiled, then moved her gaze toward the map spread atop the duke's desk. "What is this?"

Friedrich resumed his place behind the desk. "I was showing Nikolai my map here earlier."

She took a sip and set her teacup on the outer edge of the desk, seeming to have recovered from the dark foretelling a few moments before. "And why are these circled in red?" she asked, homing in on the unusual markings right away.

Nikolai edged forward at her side, brushing his fingers against the back of her hand at her side, seeking to comfort her. She flinched in surprise, then let her fingers brush his before she tangled them together, barely casting him a sidelong glance, then focused on the map again. Tension, sharp and bright, charged the air.

Friedrich cleared his throat, eyeing both of them with an arched brow. "All of these villages along the southern border of the northern kingdom have vanished."

That brought Nikolai back to the earlier conversation. "Vanished? How do you mean?"

"I mean, gone. The entire village is completely gone. Not a single soul left, dead or alive. Well, except for livestock."

"But how?" asked Sienna.

"The how I'm not sure of, but I'm investigating. Or at least, I was."

Nikolai shifted partly behind Sienna in a protective stance. The mere mention of danger rose his hackles and an instinctive nature to keep her close. "How do you mean?"

Friedrich combed a hand through his hair, tousling his brown locks, disheveling his controlled demeanor. "My uncle."

Something burned in Nikolai's gut. "King Dominik."

"Yes."

The Varis Empire was divided into four kingdoms ruled by three kings and one steward—King Stephanus in the eastern kingdom of Korinth, King Agnar in the western kingdom of Pyros, Steward Thorwald in the southern kingdom of Arkadia, merely keeping the place of Marius who was supposed to have married the Arkadian Princess Vilhelmina and take his rightful place but did not, and finally, King Dominik, the ruthless ruler of the northern kingdom, Izeling.

Friedrich continued. “My uncle has visited Winter Hill more often than he ever has before. Always some excuse like resting his horses on his journey here or there. But truly, I believe he’s spying on me.”

“Why would you say that?” asked Sienna.

“I’d say firstly because I relinquished my Legionnaires, who were most probably all under his employ.”

“Getting rid of them may have solidified your guilt in his eyes,” Nikolai noted.

“Not necessarily. He knows Marius and I were close growing up. But he also knows I am my own man and wouldn’t appreciate nursemaids watching my every move, then reporting back to him. Which is precisely what they were doing.”

“Did they have anything to report?”

“Besides the fact that I like to feed twice a week and my lovely hosts tend to sleep over, no, there was nothing to report.” Friedrich turned a sheepish grin to Sienna. “Pardon my frankness. Purely consensual, of course.”

Sienna nodded with a tentative smile. “Of course.”

“And what of your courier bringing correspondence to and from Cutters Cove?” asked Nikolai. “Also, I forgot to personally thank you for your gift of the ship and the goods in Hiddleston.”

“The least I could do,” he said with a nod. “And my courier comes and goes only by night and through a secret passage in and out of Winter Hill.

The Legionnaires never knew of it. That is how we'll get you two out of here as well."

Sienna glanced at the map, then back up at Friedrich. "If the Legionnaires are gone, and you say you trust your personal guard, then why all the secrecy?"

"Because anyone can be bought. A servant in the kitchen, a scullery maid, a night guard. I pay them all well, but my uncle has unlimited resources. He could offer a lifetime's coin and jewels in exchange for information of my betrayal."

Nikolai tensed, knowing what that betrayal, if discovered, would cost him. "I am sorry that we came here. I didn't realize you were already under such scrutiny. I wouldn't wish any trouble on you because of us."

Friedrich waved a hand. "Please. I am glad you came. It is safer in here than it is out there." He folded up the map carefully and locked it back in his drawer. "And I do not wish the queen discovering your betrayal, Nikolai. Not for anything."

Sienna sat up straighter, her back stiff. "Why do you say that? What would she do?"

The soft edge to Friedrich's expression hardened as he leaned over the desk on the knuckles of both fists. When he answered, he leveled his gaze on Nikolai. "She is cruel to those who betray her."

"What has she done?" asked Nikolai.

"That is what I wanted to tell you before Grant came in." He heaved a sigh. "When Marius fled with his peasant bride, Princess Vilhelmina was still within the grounds of the Glass Tower."

"Yes, I know." Nikolai leaned forward. "When I abandoned my post to follow Marius, she was preparing to return to her home Briar Rose in Arkadia. Did she not return?"

"Oh, she most certainly returned. But words were exchanged between the

princess and the queen before she departed. The queen discovered that it was the princess who had encouraged Marius to follow his heart rather than go through with their arranged marriage.”

“Bloody hell,” murmured Nikolai.

“And with the foretelling,” added Sienna, “the queen would be furious at losing her chance of Mina marrying Marius and having his son.”

“Precisely.”

Sienna sat on the edge of her cushion. “But what happened to Mina?” she asked in desperation. “When the princess was in our care in my cottage, she and I became friends. Please tell me,” she pleaded urgently. “The queen didn’t hurt her, did she?”

Friedrich’s relaxed demeanor hardened, his dark blue eyes taking on a glacial hue. “She was condemned to a bloodless sleep.”

“What?” asked Nikolai in shock, his expression hardening.

“What is that?” asked Sienna. “What is a bloodless sleep?”

Friedrich exchanged a look with Nikolai, then the latter turned to Sienna to explain. “The bloodless sleep is an old practice. A cruel one. It is used on vampire criminals. Of the worst kind.”

“But what crime has the princess committed?” asked Sienna in disbelief.

“Treason,” replied Friedrich. “The queen determined her actions were an outright break with her betrothal and a betrayal of the crown. Queen Morgrid had her own royal Legionnaires escort the princess back to Briar Rose. There, under orders, they murdered her lady-in-waiting right before her eyes.”

Sienna gasped and whispered the woman’s name. “Kathleen. She was her host. And her friend,” added Sienna. “Mina drank only from her.”

“I know,” said Friedrich.

“What did they do to Mina? This bloodless sleep?”

Friedrich tapped his index finger on the desk, his signet ring winking in

the morning light, before telling the rest in one long breath. “The Royal Legionnaires locked Mina in her tower and starved her until she collapsed. Under the queen’s orders, they now feed her one drop of blood per week. Enough to keep her alive, but also trapped in the darkness of a hungry sleep.”

“Torture,” bit out Nikolai. “Brutal torture.”

“Yes,” agreed Friedrich. “So keep ahead of the queen, my friend. She is certainly bringing back the old ways, trying to reinstate the tyranny she once ruled. Whether she truly is chasing this dream Sienna told us, she is definitely taking steps to control with dark forces.”

“Indeed.” His sharp gaze landed on her. “Do you see now why we must flee to Cutters Cove?”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s too risky to take you to Dale’s Peak, Sienna.” He said her name with bite and steel. And finality.

She gave him a sad sort of smile, tilting her head submissively. Yet her words were not the admission of surrender he longed to hear. “Nikolai, we need to finish what we started. At the very least, we need to meet our contact at Dale’s Peak where recruits are likely to be large in number.” She placed a hand atop his on his lap. “We must try for the sake of the Black Lily.”

He jolted to a stand, biting back a reply, then returned to the window, hands at his back.

“Don’t you understand?” she implored. “Revolutions aren’t won without danger. And death. We are *all* risking our lives. Why shouldn’t I?”

He spun. “Because I—” Snapping his mouth shut and clenching his jaw, he whirled back to face the window. Tension rippled off his stone-like frame.

Friedrich rounded his desk and ambled toward the door. “I’ll leave you

two to decide.” He stopped with his hand on the knob. “I don’t want to interfere in your mission, but she is right, Nikolai. War is coming. And we need good men on our side.”

• • •

Sienna could feel Nikolai’s anger like a biting chill in the air. He made no move from the window when the duke shut the door behind him. His stance and posture blocked her out, as cold as the snowy landscape beyond. She couldn’t stand to see him suffer, especially when it was because of her.

Approaching lightly, she grazed a hand from his taut shoulder down his arm. “Nikolai?”

He flinched but didn’t move, continuing to stare at the vast snowy hills rolling away.

Inhaling a deep breath, she positioned herself in front of him. He’d left little room between himself and the casement, so she was forced to squeeze in close and grip his shoulders. With her body so near his, their chests touching, he finally broke his distant glare out the window and lowered his gaze to hers.

“I don’t want you to be angry, but you must understand the importance of our mission.”

“It will matter little if we die in the fulfilling of it,” he snapped, his hands still clasped at his back.

She brushed a hand down his chest. “I am surprised you are afraid of such a thing as death.” Lifting her wandering hand, she brushed her fingertips along his granite jaw, trying to soothe him.

He caught her hand and leaned into her palm, closing his eyes briefly before giving her the full force of his supernatural gaze—intense, lethal, and razor-sharp. “I am not afraid of death.” He pressed a kiss into her palm, the slow, sensual act weakening her knees. “I am afraid of losing you.”

The stark admission of his feelings knocked the breath out of her. But then he made it worse by crowding her farther back against the window ledge, her bottom resting on top. He braced his legs on either side of hers and cupped her face with both hands.

“I’d rather take you away to some safe place and hide from the world so there is no one but you and me. I’d rather let the world bleed than put you in danger’s path one more day.”

Somehow she managed a small smile, even as he hovered his tempting mouth so close. “When this is all over, we can return to my cottage in Silvane Forest. I’ve done a fine job of hiding from the world there. And I never knew loneliness until—” She faltered, gathering strength to say what she longed to say.

He grazed his lips across hers, like the brush of silk. “Until what? Tell me, my sweet.”

She clenched her fists in his shirt and finally admitted aloud, “Until you.” Refusing to take the cowardly way out, she raised her gaze and met his fierceness, head on. “Ever since we first met and you went away with Marius and Arabelle, I have longed for you. Daily. Nightly. Desperately. I want nothing more than to have you near me.”

His brow bunched into a frown. “You never said a word of this before.”

“How could I? You have always been flirtatious. But so are many men I encounter at the market. I thought you might be indifferent.”

He scoffed. “*Indifferent?*”

In a punishing kiss, he swept in, brutal and hard, his tongue tasting and devouring, evoking a soft moan from her throat. After a long, bruising kiss that set her body on fire, he pulled back and pressed his forehead to hers.

“I can’t take chances with your life, Sienna. It would cut me too deep if anything should happen to you.”

“It is my decision. We return to Dale’s Peak tonight.”

“Damn you, woman,” he ground out, breath coming fast. “Why won’t you listen? You could be killed. So could I.”

“Then we die for a good cause. Look at Mina. She already suffers for her part in helping us.”

“Yes. Precisely. Look what the queen did to her.”

“Even more reason to do all we can to arm ourselves so we can fight.” She slid a hand over his nape, the muscles in his neck still tense. “And here I thought you were fearless?” she teased.

“I was fearless when it was only my life at stake. Now I have so much more to lose.” He slanted his mouth over hers more gently, lining her lips with his tongue, then supping at her mouth with wet, warm kisses as if she were the most delicious of delicacies. “I wish I could kiss some sense into your pretty head.” He nipped again. “But I will surrender to your wishes. I’ll take you to Dale’s Peak.”

She darted her tongue along her lip where he’d nipped her. He hadn’t broken the skin and, heaven help her, she wished he had.

His eyes dilated, following the flick of her tongue.

She let her hands wander down his chest and abdomen, wishing to feel the hard body beneath with no barriers. “We have many hours before nightfall.” She lifted a hand and traced a fingertip along his parted lips, catching sight of his sharpened fangs. “Take me to bed, Nikolai. Make me yours.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nikolai would never forget this moment. A gray pall covered the sky, casting a soft light through the window panes. The quiet drift of snow floated to the earth. Two five-tiered candelabras flickered on either side of the vast bed, dusting the room in gold. Sienna undressed with her back to him, letting her dress pool on the floor.

Brave. So brave. He could hear her heart pounding as swift as a hare in a trap, and though she could not turn herself to face him, wrapped in nothing but her sheer chemise, she dared to look over her shoulder, letting him know what she wanted with a glance.

He was well and mightily caught. After her bold words in the parlor, she'd taken his hand and led him back to her bedchamber. Leaving him to stand in a stupor, he watched her light the candles, then quietly remove her clothes as if she were simply preparing for bed.

Except it wasn't time for bed. It was still early morning, the rose of day unable to peek through the clouds, as if the snowfall would keep their secret. There were no words for what he felt at this moment, standing on the precipice of fate, preparing to grab what fortune offered with both hands. And heart and soul.

He couldn't even count the number of women he'd bedded over the last century. He'd never thought of the action as anything more than a physical release to calm the beast within. He couldn't even remember the last

woman he'd taken without feeding on her first.

And here was the greatest complication of them all. Sienna. Standing demurely in her bare feet and her chemise, gazing at him with desire and wonder and a little trepidation. She was right to feel fear. Once they'd crossed this threshold, she'd be forced to take him, beast and all. Her easy willingness to give him what he wanted, what she wanted, paralyzed him to the spot.

His knuckles cracked when he balled his hands into fists. He forced his shoulders to relax, rolling one then the other to loosen them, then ambled closer, focusing on steady, even breaths.

"Look out the window, Sienna." The beast rode his vocal cords.

She did, taking a step closer to the world of white.

He shucked off his boots, his scabbard and knife, and his shirt, then strode up behind her. After pulling out the green ribbon holding her braid in place, he combed his fingers through her hair. He could spend an entire day feeling the silky strands fall through his fingers. That was when he knew he was truly lost. He swept her auburn tresses over one shoulder.

"What do you see out there?" he whispered close to her ear, sliding his hands along her waist.

"Snow. Hills."

"What else?" He wet his lips and brushed them down her slender neck.

She tilted her head farther for him. "Clouds."

"What else?" He trailed his tongue along the inside seam of her shift, down her shoulder along the back of her neck. He paused to move her heavy locks to the other side, then continued his exploration with his tongue, the heavy scent of lavender and musky woods filling his nostrils, drawing out his canines.

Her breath hitched. "Trees in the distance...covered in snow."

He cupped both her full breasts, rolling her nipples between thumb and

forefinger through the fabric, pressing his hard cock to the small of her back. “What else, Sienna?”

“I...I don't know,” she said on a breathy gasp. “I don't care.”

“That's right.” He pulled the ribbon loose at the bodice between her breasts, then curled his fingers around both straps and yanked the shift roughly off her shoulders, letting it pool on the floor. She gasped but didn't move. “Because there is nothing else. No one else,” he grated low and deep. “There is only us.”

He palmed one breast, lightly tweaking the taut nub and gliding his other hand between her legs, stroking her slick readiness.

She whimpered when the press of his cock stretching against his leather pants brushed her bare bottom. She was so wonderfully exposed. So completely open to him.

His blood burned through his veins, the urge to bite and sate his hunger in every possible way an aching torment. His fangs extended too far for him even to close his lips together.

She rocked her hips in small thrusts, as if she were trying to hold back, but she wanted to let go. He stroked a finger inside her, and she gasped.

“That's it, sweetheart. Let the world disappear.”

She dropped her head back to his chest, her body becoming more pliant in his arms. He relished the feel of her soft body opening to him.

“I want you to put your hands on the window ledge and bend over,” he commanded, slowly easing his hands away and clasping her waist so she didn't fall when her knees wobbled.

“What?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Her voice was husky, and the look of a woman ripe for her lover nearly knocked the wind out of his chest.

With a deep breath in, he repeated with a nod toward the window. “Put your hands on the ledge and bend over.”

She still didn't move, seeming to try and process what he wanted. "I don't think that's the best position for someone who has never—"

"Shh." He took her wrists in a firm but gentle grip and planted her hands on the windowsill, sliding his hands up her arms. "Do you trust me, sweetheart?" he whispered in her ear.

"Yes," came her swift reply.

Flattening a palm between her shoulder blades he eased her down and slid his hand to the small of her back, her auburn hair falling over one pale shoulder.

"Bloody hell," he growled. "You're so beautiful."

Then he was on his knees with his mouth on her sex, sinking his tongue inside her. She screamed. Her legs flexed and straightened. He held them wide and licked her senseless, glorying in the soft whimpers filling the chamber as he readied her to take all of him. He rolled his tongue and suckled her tight bud. She moaned, arching her spine to give him more.

"That's my sweetheart." He flicked his tongue back and forth, relishing her soft mewling sounds. "Give me what I want." He opened his mouth wide and sucked hard, laving with his tongue till she bucked and cried out with her climax.

Before she could even come down, he swept her up and into his arms, carried her to the bed, and laid her on her back. Too much in a hurry to get his straining cock inside her, he stripped his pants and edged his knees onto the bed between her thighs. Her gaze, half lidded, sultry and hungry for more, watched him grip his full cock in hand. She scooted back and widened her legs.

"You shouldn't look at me that way," he said, leaning on one arm and slicking the head of his cock in her wet folds.

Her eyes rolled back, then she looked up and licked her sumptuous lips, gripping his bare shoulders bunched with tension.

“What way is that?”

“Like you want this inside you more than anything in the world.” He rocked forward a little, giving her an inch of him.

She let her mouth fall open on a gasp. “But what if it’s true? What if I do want you more than anything?”

“Fucking hell, woman.” He slid in another inch and locked his muscles tight when her eyes widened in pain.

The beast inside of him roared in triumph, banging on its cage, trying to claw its way out so it could show her who she belonged to. Sweat broke out all over his body as he reined it in, holding back the monster that hid from the world. Especially from her.

“You can drink from me...” she offered, baring her neck. “If you want to.”

God, how he wanted to. He knew she wanted the elixir to dull the pain. That was to be expected. But he would have none of that their first time, nothing to cloud her vision or put a haze between them.

“Not until I make you mine. I’ll have your mind clear and lucid. It will hurt, but—”

“Enough,” she commanded, rolling her hips up. “Take me, Nikolai.”

He pushed in another inch. Her mouth formed the perfect *O* as she scraped her fingernails down his chest to his abdomen. He could’ve broken through with his fingers last night and made this intrusion less painful, but the beast and the vampire wanted to take her virginity with his cock, piercing and marking her in the most primal way possible.

“Look at me, Sienna.”

She did, her eyes dilated and dazed, her mouth open and panting, her body open and waiting for him.

He kissed her deep, till she was matching him with desperate strokes of the tongue. Then he pushed home, burying himself deep, her body tight and

slick around him. He swallowed her cry as she dug her fingernails into his shoulders. The prickling pain only made him harder. Thick and throbbing. But he held still, letting her body adjust to his.

He pressed his sweat-slick chest to hers, savoring the feel of her full breasts against him. “Use your claws, sweetheart,” he said, pulling out gently and thrusting slow on a languid glide. “Use whatever you need.”

He pulled out and pumped deep, circling his pelvis when he was flush against her, his thick girth stretching her. The scent of her virginal blood filled his nostrils, marking him in a way that shattered him. A primal need surged within his breast, so powerful it rocked through his body just as he rocked inside of hers—to protect, to keep, to cherish, to worship this woman at all costs. His own mortality suddenly seemed to be tied to her. If anything should happen to this precious, beautiful woman, it would surely kill him.

“Kiss me, Nikolai,” she begged.

He needed to be closer. Banding his arms around her waist, he squeezed her close and rocked up, sitting back on his knees. He loosened his hold and she sank down onto his rigid cock, her breath slipping out on a whimper. Threading his fingers through her hair, he cupped the back of her skull and devoured her lips. In their eagerness, she flicked her tongue over a fang, pricking it deep. On a long moan, she stroked her tongue into his mouth, letting him suck the sweetness of her inside of him. As it slid down his throat, knowing she’d gotten a drop of his elixir, she pumped her hips up and down, trying to meet his tempo.

“Fuck, woman. You’re going to kill me,” he declared between panting breaths.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, gaining a better hold as she rolled her spine in the perfect rhythm as he hammered up inside of her. Her eyes were nearly black, dilated pupils covering all the green, her mouth open in

sensual need. She was perfect. He gripped her ass and shifted her higher so he could skate his tongue down to a taut, pink nipple.

“Nikolai!” she cried out, rocking her hips faster in frantic, desperate need.

He trailed to the other side and circled the nub with his tongue, then nibbled. “Scream my name again, sweetheart. I want to come so hard inside of you, so deep, neither of us will be the same.”

She grazed her fingers up his jaw and dipped two fingers inside his mouth, pricking one on a sharpened fang. “Suck,” she whispered breathlessly.

He did as she commanded, sucking inside him the sweet nectar of Sienna. Her mouth fell open, her head dropped back and she screamed his name, her sex pulsing as she squeezed her thighs together.

On a deep, rumbling growl, he thrust up hard, hammering deep and grinding as he came with such force, the room hazed and his vision edged with black. Pulling her tight, he let the sensation ripple outward, the power of the moment palpable and terrifying.

Sienna pushed back and gazed down, her auburn hair in messy tumbles around her fair shoulders. She traced her pricked finger along his lips, lining them with her blood. He licked her sweet offering, unable to fathom someone as giving as Sienna, someone who offered him so much of herself.

“Why don’t you feed?” she asked.

He tilted her forward to lay back on the bed and eased his cock out of her slowly. She winced with a hiss.

“I will not take anything else from you, sweetheart.” He pulled the covers back from underneath her, then lay beside her. “You’ve given too much.”

“No.” She rolled to her side to face him, nuzzling closer when he pulled the coverlet up to her shoulders. “You’ve given me more—” A tear slipped down her cheek, striking Nikolai to the heart.

“What’s wrong?” He cupped her cheek, sweeping his thumb across.

“Does it hurt that badly?” He cursed himself. His pride be damned, he should’ve given her a full dose of the elixir. But he wanted her fully attuned to him, not his potent potion that could fog her senses.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Then what? Tell me.”

She hesitated.

He threaded his fingers into her hair, cupping the back of her head. “Tell me, Sienna, or I shall go mad.”

She dropped her gaze to the base of his neck where her delicate fingers explored. “I just never thought I’d have anything like this. That I’d ever be with someone like you when I left the world behind to live in the woods.”

“Someone like me?”

Her eyelashes fluttered, then she looked up, her exploring fingers sliding up along his jaw and into his hair. “Strong. Brave. Fearless. But also thoughtful. Giving. Gentle.”

Nikolai barked out a laugh, unable to believe her description of him.

“What?” she asked when his chest still shook with laughter.

“Sweetheart, I’m not sure who you’ve been with, but I do not deserve all of those lovely attributes.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Strong, yes. I’m vampire. Brave, well, perhaps it has come with age. But the rest?” He wrapped a heavy hand over her hip beneath the covers, squeezing possessively. “I’m afraid those are not me. You’re conjuring up fantasies.”

She sobered. “The man who brought his partner food in the early morning hours was thoughtful. The man who rented a room in the freezing rain so that his partner could warm herself in comfort was kind. The man who bought her new, dry clothes and who thought of her shaking fingers enough to buy her gloves, knowing what she owned already wasn’t nearly enough

to stave off the cold, that man was giving.” She traced his broad shoulders with the lightest touch, branding him with her gentle caress. “The man who took me in his arms and thought of my needs before his own, that man was giving. And the one who fought three vampires without a care for his own life, but managed to defeat them all to save me, that man was fearless.”

In a swift move, he rolled her under him, both forearms planted above her shoulders, his hands cupping her beautiful face. “You place me too high, sweet Sienna. I am not a thoughtful, giving man. I’m selfish and bad-tempered and prideful most of the time.” And a monster on occasion.

It was her turn to laugh. “We all have our faults. But I see who you really are.”

Her words pierced his heart. “I am not fearless.”

She brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen into his eyes. “What are you afraid of?”

“Losing you,” he answered, the confession churning his stomach into knots.

She simply smiled and lifted up to press a soft kiss to his lips, a frown pinching her brow as she lay her head back on the pillow. Nikolai realized the discomfort she must be in. He shot out of the bed and padded across the room to a vanity where a pitcher of water and ewer sat. He poured the water into the bowl and soaked the rag that had been left for washing. Warming it between his hands, he walked back. Sienna watched him intently, a smirk tilting her pretty face, a look he hadn’t seen before.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just enjoying the scenery.”

He chuckled, pulling back the covers. “Are you now?”

“It’s quite lovely.” Her eyes roved down his naked body.

“I hope to offer the view to you as often as possible,” he said, gently wiping and pressing the rag between her legs.

She bit her lip as he finished his ministrations, then folded the rag and set it aside. She scooted over to let him back under the coverlet. As soon as he was situated, she cuddled up close with her head upon his chest. Nikolai chuckled.

“What is it?” she asked, exhaling a sweet sigh.

“I’ve never done this before.”

She popped up, her eyes wide in shock. “What? You mean...”

He pulled her back where she was, warm and soft and perfect in his arms. “I mean...nestled with a woman in bed. After. Or at any time for that matter.”

She giggled. “Well, I’ve never snuggled with a man in bed. So we’re even.”

“Bloody hell, woman. Don’t put that image in my head. I want to lacerate the poor sot who doesn’t even exist.”

“Well, you mentioned other women,” she noted with a sharp edge.

“Look at me, Sienna.”

She raised her chin, bending her head back, her body still molded to his.

“There is no other woman. There never will be another. There is *only* you.”

Her moss-green eyes softened as she brushed a lock of his hair back with her fingers, then lay her head on his chest. As he combed a hand through her silky strands, falling like tendrils of fire across the pastel blue coverlet, he heard her whisper back, “Only you.”

Those two small words echoed through his mind, pulsing bright and strong, then wound around his heart, constricting so tight, he thought his chest would split open.

How had it come to this? How had he opened that door and let her into his heart? She was a mortal, flesh and blood, and yet she held him captive like no one in his entire life. Not even his darling father, when he was still

alive, could wield the kind of power this auburn-haired beauty did. The crux of it all was she truly had no idea. And perhaps that was for the best.

He'd kept that dark monster from crawling out of his cave for an entire century. The beast that crept in the shadows of his soul, longing for the moment to rise and show the world what wrath and bloody ruin truly looked like. The one who'd branded him a murderer as a young vampire. He could never let that animal loose again. Especially not now, not with the soft and delicate angel clinging to him for protection, smelling of sweet lavender and the deep woods where no one went. The woman whose quiet vow of *only you* had tilted his world and slammed home the reality that he could never be good enough but he'd damn well spend her lifetime trying.

No. He would keep his foul secret and go with it to his grave, if he ever should meet a mortal fate. He could never tell her the truth, lest those trusting green eyes widen in horror and turn away from him in shame. That, he could not bear. Death would be better.

"Go to sleep," she murmured against his chest, jarring him back to the well-lit chamber. "We have a long journey tonight. Rest with me."

He kissed the crown of her head, inhaling her sweetness, then obeyed her will, falling into the most sound sleep he'd had in over a century.

Chapter Fifteen

Sienna pulled the second glove tight as they continued to wait for the duke's man to return. The duke paced in front of the popping fire. Nikolai stood stone-like near the door, fully dressed and ready to depart, but without the thick winter attire she wore. She still wondered at how vampires could withstand such cold without hat or gloves, but then immortality had its rewards.

Immortality. Her heart clenched. She was beginning to understand her grandmother's sorrow. To love a vampire was to love someone you could not keep. Was it love? She felt as if she'd been running in the woods and tripped on an unseen root only to fall over a cliff that seemed to have no end. There was no way to stop herself. She glanced at him to find his gaze fixed on her as if he could divine her thoughts. One look, that was all it took for her pulse to trip faster.

The experience of being in bed with him, or actually even out of bed with him, was beyond what she'd imagined. His rough commands weakened her knees and melted her body till all she could do was obey and hang on. Then his tenderness afterward melted her heart, no matter that he couldn't see how wonderful he truly was.

What a fool she was. She'd thought she could give her body and somehow keep him away from her heart. But the way he made love to her with such fierce intensity, the way he'd looked at her when he drove inside

her, it was too much, his power over her too great. With every thrust inside of her, every worshipping kiss on her skin, every quiet murmur in her ears, he pounded on the feeble wall she'd built around that soft organ that pumped lifeblood through her body. The moment she orgasmed and cried out his name, the wall crumbled well and good. And now she faced the heartache of letting him go when their mission was over. But she wouldn't take it back. Not for the wide world. The door opened. All three of them snapped their attention to Grant as he entered. "It is clear, my lord."

"Well done," said the duke. "Time to go, my friends."

Sienna flipped up the hood of her cloak and followed Grant into the darkened corridor outside the duke's private parlor.

The Duke of Winter Hill was not at all what she had expected. Well, perhaps his appearance was what she expected in a vampire duke. Shiny brown hair to his shoulders that looked silky to the touch. Sharp, regal lines of cheeks and nose; broad, intelligent brow; and fine, square jaw. He stood evenly in height with Nikolai, but his carriage was different. Whereas Nikolai seemed always on alert, even when he was in a relaxed posture which wasn't often, the duke had a casual swagger to all of his movements. Not a care in the world. And yet the keen intelligence in his gaze warned that he noticed everything.

All of these traits were expected of royalty in the Varis line, but it was his demeanor and attitude that was unexpected. Yes, she knew that he was their ally long before they'd come to Winter Hill. But he was more than an ally, allowing them to quietly hide in his castle. He was actively making plans against the crown. And he trusted his human servant, Grant, to keep his secrets. Not many vampires, especially royalty, kept close company with humans who weren't their bleeders.

Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor. The duke paused outside a great door that must lead into another part of the castle.

“The house servants are all abed for the night, so our coast is clear. But that doesn’t mean one of them isn’t wandering about.”

With that he opened the door, and they crossed into a huge ballroom. The chamber was dark but for the moonlight gleaming through tall floor to ceiling windows along the far wall. When Sienna tripped over the lip of a carpet she couldn’t see, Nikolai grabbed her arm to keep her upright. She smiled her gratitude rather than say a word. His otherworldly eyes glowed in the dark as he laced his fingers with her gloved hand to keep her close.

They crossed the wide chamber, two man-sized fireplaces on either end. Though both grates were cold and unused, she could imagine how they would fill this large chamber with warmth and light for a ball. Once they reached the far corner, Grant opened one of two tall double doors with some kind of lovely iron scrollwork embedded there. He peeked on the other side first, then turned and stepped aside for them to walk through.

They followed the duke into another long hall, this one bordering an exterior wall, for there were the same tall, thin windows with pointed arches lining the length of it. They walked briskly, their boots echoing on the stone floor. The moonlight created a patchwork through the casements. Sienna marveled that if they weren’t running for their lives, she would be able to appreciate the beauty of this place. The unique architecture and unexpected artistry here reflected its owner.

Right as they came to the end of the corridor where a wooden door led somewhere else, the door began to open slowly. Grant waved them to the wall behind the door. Nikolai lifted Sienna off the ground and pulled her against him. The duke ducked flush against the wall as well.

“Sylvia,” said Grant, “what are you doing here this time of night?” He gripped the edge of the door with one hand, blocking the woman on the other side from crossing into the hallway. The yellow glow of a candle shone on Grant’s face.

A soft voice replied, "I was looking for you. Why did you not come to my bed?"

Grant's voice dropped low and seductive, as he lifted a hand and placed it somewhere they could not see. "I will be there soon enough, darling. The duke asked me to run an errand for him."

"What sort of errand?" she asked, her question coming out breathy from whatever Grant was doing with his hand not gripping the door.

"That's not your concern."

Sienna heard the rustle of the woman's skirt, then she whimpered.

"Now get back into my bed. I'll be along and take care of you shortly."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

The glow of the candle disappeared as he stood there and watched her go. He closed the door and turned to the duke.

"Give her a moment to get back to my chamber."

"Sylvia?" asked the duke, referring to the secret they'd all become privy to just now.

Grant seemed wholly unaffected about them witnessing his run-in with his lover. He simply shrugged and said, "She's pretty. And energetic."

"She's barely eighteen," retorted the duke.

Grant scoffed with a shake of the head. "She doesn't act like it. Not with that enthusiasm for—"

"Wait," said Nikolai. "Isn't Sylvia the name of the one who is friends with the nosy schoolteacher?"

"That she is," replied Grant.

"And you decided it wasn't important to let me know you're tugging a possible spy among my servants?" asked Friedrich.

"What better way to get close to a spy?" Grant replied with a mischievous smile.

"Enough," said Nikolai, noting once more that this servant didn't behave

like a servant. “We need to move on.”

“Right,” replied Grant, opening the door and scouting for any other stragglers in the hallway.

When he deemed it safe, he waved them forward, and they continued on down a narrow spiral staircase. Nikolai kept hold of her hand, moving ahead of her. They came out on a small landing. One way led down another narrow corridor with several doors.

Grant mouthed *servants’ quarters*, then he pointed in the opposite direction. The duke had already stepped ahead, leading them down a short hallway into a vast kitchen. Rounding a large butcher block table past a huge cast-iron stove, the likes of which Sienna had never seen, he led them down a dead-end hallway with several pantries. The duke stopped at the last door and ushered them inside.

Grant turned, shut the door, and slid a heavy bolt home, locking them in the pitch dark. Nikolai grabbed hold of her waist, suddenly on alert. A match sparked as Grant lit a torch he had apparently stashed off to the side.

The duke stepped toward Nikolai with a hand raised. “Relax, Nikolai. The counter-latch doesn’t engage until this room is bolted shut.”

“Come again,” he said, his voice even, though his hands still gripped her in a tight vise.

Grant rolled his eyes on a sigh, another tell that this man wasn’t a mere servant. “The lock spins a set of cogs embedded in the wall that run along there”—he pointed along the shelving and stopped on a narrow shelf loaded with sacks of flour and dry goods—“and sets the lock free there.” He lit a handheld candle with his torch.

“Where?” asked Sienna, still confused.

The duke turned a charming smile on her that had surely lured many women to his bed, then gripped the edge of the shelf and pulled, sliding it open on a hinge to reveal an iron door behind it. With the turn of another

latch, metallic clicks rolling one, two, three, four, five, then a *pop* and the door opened inward. The duke pulled it as wide as it would go, a gust of winter wind sweeping in and guttering the candle. Sienna sucked in a quick breath.

“After you, my lady,” said the duke with a polite bow.

Grant handed her the candle and she moved forward into the tunnel. There was no light at all, but the biting air told her that it would open up to the outside. The candlelight threw long shadows along the cavernous wall, the stone uneven but smooth. Nikolai kept close to her back, giving her confidence to move swiftly through the dark until they rounded a small bend where she could see gray light up ahead. As they drew closer, the opening revealed itself as a very narrow crag where she had to turn sideways to squeeze through. Directly on the other side stood a thick grove of evergreens, casting ghostlike silhouettes against the moonlit sky.

The others followed quickly behind her. Grant stepped ahead and waved for them to follow. “This way.”

“Your candle, my lady,” said the duke, holding out a hand.

“Oh.” She blew it out, for there was no need under such a bright night.

He placed the candlestick near the passage entrance and the three set off after Grant who had snuffed his torch. Winding through the thick trees, Sienna asked, “Are these evergreens native to this area? They grow so thick here.”

“Yes and no, my lady,” answered the duke. “They are native, certainly. We have patches of them all through these northern hills. But my grandfather had these purposefully planted ages ago to hide our little family secret.”

“So it was your grandfather who built the passage?”

“To be sure.”

“Was there a specific reason or was he simply a cautious man?”

“My grandfather?” The duke laughed. “He was a vicious, cruel man. Not unlike my uncle, I regret. There was a human uprising during his time. They stormed the castle. After the rebellion, he had this passage built, so there was always an escape route should he need it.”

Sienna glanced at the duke whose gaze was dead ahead, his expression distant. “And what happened to the rebellion? Were the humans able to get their demands met?”

“Oh no.” His voice lost some of the lightness that seemed to thread his every sentence. “He slaughtered them all.”

Nikolai pressed a hand to the small of her back, bringing her within the crook of his arm. “I’m not sure if horses are needed,” he said. “I’d rather be on foot.”

“What?” Puzzled, her mind reeling from the fact the duke’s grandfather had been a monster of a man, she glanced up at Nikolai in surprise at his odd comment. “What horses?”

They rounded another evergreen into a clearing just as a horse whickered where Grant stood holding the bridle. Of course Nikolai could hear and smell them long before she could.

“I think you need them. These are two of my fastest racers.”

Sienna stepped up to the one where Grant held the bridle, a beautiful pale blond from mane to tail, the tufts of hair above their hooves and their height giving their breed away. She noted the full black, his coat glistening blue under the moonlight tethered to a nearby tree. “These are Arkadians, aren’t they?”

“They certainly are,” said the duke, his words inflected with pride. He moved to the head of the blond where Sienna stroked her silky muzzle. “This is Astrophel, my shining star. Aren’t you, my beautiful girl?” He stroked her neck and she nuzzled his chest in return.

“Oh my. Your Grace, we cannot take these horses.” She let Astrophel

snuff her hand as she brushed another under her downy soft mane, falling in love by the second. “They are too precious.”

He laughed, his breath coming out in a white huff. “Nikolai wants to refuse because he trusts his own feet more than my fastest Arkadians. And you want to refuse because they are too fine and valuable. Heed me well, the both of you. You need them. First, understand that you will both tire too soon crossing the north on foot to Dale’s Peak. And Nikolai, you know as well as I that you can’t move at the speed you normally would when you brought Sienna here. Her equilibrium cannot handle it. You’d need a day to recover if you returned the same way you came here. My horses will get you to Dale’s Peak within two days. They are strong and fast. And do not worry, my lady, about the expense. These beauties are on loan only. Whenever you’ve arrived to Hiddleston safely, send word and Grant will come and fetch them.”

Sienna beamed up at Nikolai. “That settles it then. I’ll ride Astrophel.”

Nikolai’s scowl fell. He shook his head with a chuckle. “Seems I’ve been overruled.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll get used to that with this one,” said the duke on a wink.

Sienna didn’t mind his innuendo, because the only woman who could persuade Nikolai of anything would be the woman who held his heart. She hoped that the duke was right as Grant helped her into the saddle. She hid her wince, sitting down gently after the day’s events.

“And this is Ramiel, my thunder god.” The duke unhitched the bridle and walked the giant black over to Nikolai.

Nikolai stared straight into the beast’s eyes, its giant head a foot higher than his own. The two seemed to be communicating telepathically. Ramiel neighed and tossed his great head, his mane flying up. Nikolai didn’t budge. After another tense moment, Ramiel lowered his head almost in a reverent

bow. Nikolai scratched his muzzle and whispered something low in his ears. The black whickered softly as if he understood. Then Nikolai launched himself into the saddle.

Nikolai nudged Ramiel forward and reached down, holding out a hand to Friedrich. “Thank you, brother. For all you’ve done.” There was deep sincerity underlying his words.

Friedrich gripped his forearm in a hand-clasp Sienna had seen other soldiers do. “You are more than welcome. I imagine we’ll be needing each other quite often in the coming days.”

Nikolai sat straight in the saddle. “All you need do is ask. I’m in your debt.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Sienna echoed the sentiment.

“Please call me Friedrich, my lady. And take good care of yourself.” He graced her with one of those brilliant smiles. And while they didn’t have the effect of one of Nikolai’s, her stomach fluttered all the same like a mandatory response when the duke turned his charm on a lady.

“I will,” she promised with a returning smile, then hitched Astrophel alongside Nikolai.

Grant stepped forward and pointed to the east. “Right through there, you’ll find a crossroads. Take the eastern path, which is the peasants’ road to the village of Murdoc. It’s craggy and bumpy as hell, but it is the safest for you two. No peasants will be wheeling carts to Winter Hill after last night’s snow, but it is easily traversed on horseback. The other roads are for human and vampire aristocracy and soldiers.”

“Thank you, Grant.” Nikolai gave a nod. “You’d best get back to Sylvia now, lest she haunt the halls in search of you.”

He chuckled as Nikolai nudged Ramiel forward. Sienna followed alongside, smiling when she heard Friedrich say, “I believe that’s the first joke I’ve ever heard the man say.”

Nikolai didn't even look her way, so they moved on in silence with only the sound of their horses' hooves crunching in the snow. They found the crossroads easily enough and turned east as Grant had said. The road was more narrow than the wide, smooth roads the aristocracy would travel in their large, posh carriages.

Astrophel tripped on a rock hidden under the snow but caught her footing quickly enough. Still, the sudden shift caused Sienna to suck in a painful breath.

"Are you all right?" asked Nikolai, nudging Ramiel closer.

"I'm fine." She waved him off. "Really."

Nikolai veered Ramiel in front of her, bringing Astrophel to a stop. After unsaddling, he rounded to her side and pulled her down to him, setting her gently on her feet.

"What are you doing? Why are we stopping?"

"Because you are *not* fine. You're a poor liar. Riding a horse is the last damn thing you should be doing right now."

A flush of heat crawled up her neck, remembering why she was so sore. Recognizing the flare of anger riding his vocal cords, she put a reassuring hand on his arm.

"Nikolai, this is natural. It will heal and go away."

"Not soon enough. We have a hard, two-day ride. Give me your hand."

She did. He took her by the hand, palm skyward, and rolled her sleeve up a few inches above the line of her glove.

"What are you doing?" she asked, heart kicking faster.

"I'm going to give you enough elixir to numb the pain."

She tried to pull away, but he held her in an iron grip. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" he asked, scowl noticeably deep, even in the soft light under the starry sky.

She laughed, but it was tinged with anxiety not mirth. “You apparently don’t know the true effect of your elixir. Now is not the time to have me... in that state.”

She tugged. He held his grip and eased closer, backing her against Astrophel who whickered but didn’t move.

“If I thought you’d consent, I would turn back and let Friedrich give you his blood and have it healed instantly. But we both know what would happen then.”

The duke was descended of the Varis bloodline and held the power to change a human into an immortal. “I’d become vampire.”

“Yes. And since that is certainly not your wish, I must relieve your pain in the only other way I know how or I will go utterly mad knowing it was I who caused it.”

She had no reply, simply stared up at him with his earnest expression. “If I say yes, then you must drink.”

“I don’t need to feed.”

“Nikolai, you’ve been pale as a sheet since I woke up. You have circles forming under your eyes, and I know it’s from the exertion of the journey to Winter Hill. To bring me to safety. That is the only way I will agree.”

His eyes slid closed, and he raised her wrist to his nose, nuzzling along the sensitive skin. “You undo me, woman.” He opened his eyes, shining with a preternatural glow, his sharpened canines extending. “Over and over again, you undo me.”

He sank his fangs into the tender flesh for a brief few seconds, releasing his elixir. Then he set to sucking from the punctures, his mouth warm, his lips firm. Then his potion hit her like a hot blast, the seductive nectar that was Nikolai—a burning concoction of raw need and sensual ecstasy laced with his dominance and power.

She moaned, gripping her free hand into his hair, wishing she didn’t have

on these damned gloves. Or these damned clothes for that matter. He finished drinking and lapped his tongue three times across the wound, then rolled the sleeve back into place.

“Nikolai, please,” she begged, clenching both hands into his jacket and pulling him toward her.

He didn’t resist but lowered his head and met her feverish kiss with his own. “Bloody hell,” he whispered, wrapping her nape and gripping her waist under the cloak.

Sienna stroked her tongue inside, meeting his aggression. Her own sensuality rose above the fog of desperation. She grabbed his hand at her waist, pulled up her skirt, and guided him between her legs.

The thunderous growl that rumbled in his chest raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She bit his lip to press him on. Banding one arm around her waist beneath the cloak, he caged her close. His fingers set to work, sliding into her folds and stroking her sex, already slick with need. She moaned and rocked against him. The pain and soreness had evaporated the moment his fangs had punctured her skin.

“I want you inside me,” she said in a quick breath before nipping his lip again between her teeth.

He glanced sideways. “No. It’s too dangerous,” was his defiant and very dominant reply. “You’ll come on my fingers. Right here.” Then he maneuvered a second finger, stroking the bud of her sex with his thumb. She widened her legs for him, dropped her head back, and soaked up the heady feeling of Nikolai giving her pleasure, unable to match the quick rhythm with her hips. Staring skyward at the stars, she let the erotic sensation wrap her into a tight ball and explode apart.

“Oh, *Nikolai*,” she cried, trying to keep from screaming to the heavens, her mewling moans a constant roll as the climax rippled through her.

He brushed her arched neck with his mouth, nipping softly. “That’s it,

sweetheart.” He cupped her sex with the warmth of his hand and massaged gently while she came down, her panting breaths puffing out in little white clouds. She still had a firm grip on his coat. He eased her skirts back into place, keeping her steady with his hands wrapping her waist.

With a tender kiss to her lips then one cheek, the other, her nose, then her forehead, he asked, “Better?”

She laughed into his chest where she’d lain her cheek. “Much.”

“Well then.” Without warning, he lifted her up and set her in the saddle. “Pull your hood back up. It will keep your body heat from escaping through your head.”

She swung her leg back over to sit astride Astrophel, noting that her body was still warm on the inside, a steady buzz thrumming through her veins. Indeed, there was no pain anymore.

Pulling her hood back up, she fell back in line alongside Nikolai. He kept his eyes forward, except an occasional scan of the woods on either side of them. Still flying from the euphoria of what had happened a moment before, Sienna could do nothing but stare at him, trying to bite back the giddy, infantile smile that kept creeping up.

He must’ve sensed her, for he finally looked her way. His brooding features slipped into an expression of pure contentment. “I like that look on you.”

“I hope you’ll provide me the opportunity to look at you this way many times more.”

“I most certainly plan to.”

“And to think that I—” She bit her lip. Heavens! His elixir not only loosened her limbs but also her tongue.

He cleared his throat, sidling Ramiel closer. “To think that you what?”

She dared a sidelong glance, then shook her head. His devilish smile made her swoon all over again.

“Oh no. I can see that blush in your cheeks. I’ll bet that pretty pink is flushing your neck all the way down.”

“Nikolai.”

“That means this is something good. You’ll tell me, or I’ll stop this horse and wrestle it out of you. To think that you...?” He waved his hand for her to complete the sentence.

She inhaled a deep breath and let it out on an exasperated sigh. “I used to dream about you. All right?” Though there was nothing ahead but the snowy path under the moonlight and a never-ending line of evergreens, she pretended to be intensely focused.

He didn’t respond at first, then finally, “What kind of dreams?”

She arched a brow at him. “What kind of dreams do you think?”

“I don’t know what sort of dreams a lady has about a vampire. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“The kind of dreams a lady should not have...about a vampire or any other man.”

“Ah.”

She chanced another glance his way to find him grinning like a fiend. “Oh, stop it. Now that you know I’ve been...thinking about you for some time. You must divulge to me a secret.”

“What kind of secret?” he asked, his voice grave and cautious.

“When were you first attracted to me?”

“Woman, I wanted to tumble you to the ground and take you the second I saw you.”

Her belly flip-flopped at the intensity in his words. “And when was that?”

He continued, his voice taking a dreamlike quality as he remembered. “You were riding Duchess through the rain in the dark into Sylum. The night-watch and I saw you from a distance, barreling into town with that fierce look of determination, the rain soaking you through. I drank in the

sight of you. I thought how remarkable you were rushing into a circle of vampire Legionnaires at night when there was talk of the blood madness, straight into danger, your head high, without a fear at all. Your white hart wolf wouldn't come all the way to us so you stopped, slipped off her back and marched right up in our circle with your chin up in defiance. I couldn't keep my eyes off you."

Sienna swallowed hard at that confession. "I wasn't fearless. I was scared to death. But I had to help Arabelle and Marius."

"All the more reason to admire you for it."

They continued on, Sienna's memory wandering back to that time many months ago. Her fateful encounter with Arabelle that night in Silvane Forest had changed her life forever. And though her path had been treacherous ever since, she wouldn't change one moment. Especially not now with the man at her side. But her heart ached for those who'd come to peril, reminding her why her mission was so important.

"Poor Kathleen." She finally broke the silence. "Mina's lady-in-waiting was more than her servant. She was Mina's blood host and dear friend." Sienna shook her head as if trying to wipe away the image the duke had put in her mind. "I can't imagine being murdered in cold blood that way. And poor Mina having to watch it."

"That queen is a cruel bitch. And to put Mina in a bloodless sleep. Pure evil."

"What is a bloodless sleep like for a vampire? You said to the duke it's an old practice. What did you mean?"

Steering Ramiel closer so that they rode mere inches from each other, he spoke in a melancholy tone. "It was long before my lifetime. But my father, he was alive during the Thorn Wars. Do you know of them?"

"Yes. Grandmother used to tell me all kinds of stories. Fairytales, legends, even stories of times gone by."

“Mm. Do you know the Tale of Breeton’s Bluff?” he asked, tightening his fist around his reins.

“Oh yes! Grandmother told me that one often.”

“I’d like to hear her version of the story. In brief, if you will.”

Sienna paused, letting her mind wander back. She could see her grandmother, a fiery redhead like herself, though her hair was streaked with gray and had turned almost white in the end. They’d sit by the fire together after a good dinner, and Sienna would listen. This tale had always been one of Sienna’s favorites. Perhaps, it should’ve been a warning that she’d fall for her own vampire one day.

“Well, I remember it was about a heroic vampire general named Soren who stood up against a pack of rogue vampires terrorizing the villages. Soren and his Legionnaires tracked them to the town of Breeton’s Bluff and defeated them, saving everyone. The lord’s daughter who lived in the mansion overlooking Breeton’s Bluff watched from on high and fell in love with the vampire general. The story ends with Soren sweeping her off her feet and carrying her away to marry her where they lived happily ever after.”

Nikolai heaved out a sigh. “That’s what I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

A twig snapped in the dark off to Sienna’s right. She jumped and scanned the woods, unable to make out what was walking close beside them.

“It’s all right,” assured Nikolai. “It’s just a deer. I can see him.” Then he veered back to their conversation. “General Soren was infected with *sanguine furorem*. The blood madness. *He* was the one who had gone rogue, ordering those men who had remained loyal to him to take whatever they wanted from the humans. So they went on a killing spree. When they got to Breeton’s Bluff, the royal Legionnaires killed most of his men and the rest surrendered. But the general had spotted the mansion on high. The

lord's daughter did indeed watch what was happening below. She was carried away by General Soren as the tale claims and was forced to marry him. He thought to tie himself to the daughter of an important human would save his life. Her father was the king's most loyal human ambassador in the eastern provinces."

Sienna's stomach twisted into a knot, the fairytale unraveling into a warped reality. "So what happened to the daughter? To General Soren?"

"He held her captive in his fort, taking his husbandly privileges. My father says it was known he was trying to sire a child on her to save himself from imminent death. He'd gone utterly mad, the disease addling his mind. He was lucid enough apparently to never drink too long from his wife. He needed her alive."

"My God. What a nightmare for her." Sienna shivered. "Did she become with child?"

"Yes. She did indeed. When the soldiers finally arrived, she was full with child. General Soren demanded they could not kill him as he was the child's father."

"Why would that make a difference?" asked Sienna, confused.

"Vampire children are rare," he said, his gaze shifting from the road to her, seeming to gauge her response. "Many vampires are incapable of having children at all. So when it happens, it is a precious gift. Even a half breed."

"I see." Sienna had a feeling the way he said this had a deeper purpose than the telling of the story. "But it could not save him from his crimes, I'm sure. What did the Legionnaires do?"

"They took him prisoner back to the Glass Tower where the king agreed he would not die. Instead, he and the rest of his rebellious army were sentenced to a bloodless sleep in the dungeons. My father said it was the worst kind of torture. Those that had lived through it and had awoken when

their sentence was finished claimed they could hear everything that happened around them. But they could not move or speak or even open their eyes. It's a form of induced paralysis for a vampire. They could last years, decades, even longer in such a state."

"And what happened to General Soren? Did he ever awaken? How long was his sentence?"

"Father said he died, for he was never heard of again." Nikolai glanced her way with a sad smile. "You see, we immortals are mortal after all."

"I know," she said with a reassuring smile. "But Nikolai, think of poor Mina. Paralyzed and captive in her own home. We must tell Arabelle."

"I spoke with Friedrich. He's already sent a courier with the news to her and Marius."

"Good."

"We'd best pick up the pace while we have the advantage of night," he said with a subtle click of his tongue and kick of his heel.

Sienna loosened her reins, and Astrophel quickened her step, falling into a steady gallop alongside Ramiel. The four of them headed swiftly on down the path.

The wind gusted through the trees. The leaves rustled, and a layer of snow drifted in a swirl across the road, sparkling like faerie dust. The night was silent and lovely. The world seemed at peace. But Sienna felt the coming storm, whirling in her breast and building for the dark days ahead. For now, she would try to savor this time with Nikolai. Heaven only knew what fate had in store for them around the bend.

Chapter Sixteen

The hare roasting on the spit was nearly done by Nikolai's sense of smell. The sky teetered between day and night, a pale glow softening the eastern edge. Sienna had sat quietly, saying little since they'd stopped to rest. She nibbled absently on the bread he'd found packed in her saddlebag with a dazed expression fixed on the fire.

He took the tin plate he'd also found in the saddlebag and pulled some of the meat off the bone and passed it to her before resuming his position with his back to the tree, arms crossed, facing the trail in the near distance.

"That doesn't burn your fingers?" she asked, then blew on the rabbit meat, still steaming.

"No."

"Why doesn't a vampire feel hot and cold?"

"How do you mean?"

"You never wear gloves or seem affected by the extreme cold as I am. And you put your fingers over that red-hot fire. I can't even touch the rabbit right now, it's so hot."

"We feel hot and cold. Just not like humans. Or I should say, it doesn't hurt as much."

"Seems odd to me."

She finally fingered a bite of food into her mouth, and for some reason, that relaxed some of the tension stiffening Nikolai's shoulders.

“How so?”

She took a second to swallow. “Well, most of your senses are heightened, right? Sight, sound, smell. What of the others?”

She had his attention then. “*All* of our senses are heightened, including touch and taste.”

She gulped, drawing his gaze to her slender throat. The prick of his fangs reminded him how wonderful she tasted.

“I see,” she said, setting her near-empty plate to the side and wiping her hands on a handkerchief. “Then why don’t you feel the cold and heat as humans do?”

He shrugged. “To be honest, I’m not sure. It’s always been so for vampires. I’d say it’s part of our genes’ resistance to mortality. But how it happens? I don’t know. We feel cold. And heat. But our skin is simply more...durable, I suppose is the best word.”

“Hmm.” She stood and brushed the crumbs from her skirt. “We’d best be getting on to Dale’s Peak. How much farther do you think?”

She ambled over to where Astrophel and Ramiel were munching on a bag of oats he’d set on the ground for them to share. This, too, had been stored in his saddlebag. Friedrich, or perhaps Grant, had thought of everything.

“Are you worried about returning to Dale’s Peak?” he asked, stomping out the small fire with his boot.

He wrapped a portion of the rabbit in a kerchief of his own, knowing they’d need to make one more stop before they reached the town. He threw the rest away in the woods for the beasts of the wild.

“No.” She stroked Astrophel’s neck while the horse continued to munch on the oats. “As I said before, my mother and her new husband moved away years ago.”

“But the memories are still there.” He stashed the bit of rabbit in his saddlebag for her later and cinched it tight, then moved around Astrophel to

her.

“Yes. But they don’t haunt me as I suppose they should.”

“How do you mean?” He gripped the horn of Astrophel’s saddle and angled toward Sienna.

She stroked underneath Astrophel’s pale blond mane, then glanced up at him. “I suppose there’s something wrong with me, but I never fit in at the home of my birth. I was raised by a strict nurse who never showed affection.” She continued to stroke Astrophel. “I only ever saw my mother for formal occasions or when she demanded I sit with her at tea to receive suitors. You know, I don’t recall us ever even touching one another?” She frowned up at him, seeming to recall the shock of it. “Not once.”

Nikolai tried to imagine this beautiful young girl raised in such cold isolation. Never receiving a gentle embrace at the end of the day. His own mother had been a nurturing woman. His memories were vivid—the gentle sweep of her hand across his brow, combing back an unruly lock of hair, the melody of her voice when she sang a lullaby. Her death in childbirth with his stillborn sister was keenly felt by him and his father. But they clung to one another in their grief, forging a tight father-and-son bond. He wondered what his father would think of his red-haired beauty. Actually, he knew quite well what he would think of her, the old bastard.

“What of your father?”

Sienna gave a sad little laugh. “My father was kind to me. But he died when I was young, leaving me in my mother’s care. And she was more interested in the alliance a good match would bring her. I was certainly her greatest disappointment when I fled to live with Grandmother.”

Nikolai’s jaw tightened at the mention of her being sold off into marriage. He finally hit the reason for her absconding from wealth and luxury to confinement in the dark woods of Silvane Forest. A subject she seemed to tiptoe around.

“And so you did not favor the match your mother had made for you.” A statement. Not a question. He wouldn’t let her wiggle out of this before he had answers. Not this time.

Her hand stilled for a brief moment, then she began combing her fingers through Astrophel’s mane, her long, delicate fingers untangling the mass. “No,” she said quietly. “I was not in favor.”

“What was this man like?”

“Rich. Handsome. Sophisticated. And arrogant. Cold. Brutal.”

Nikolai stopped her hand by taking it in his own, gently rubbing his thumb along her knuckles. She watched the gesture rather than meet his gaze.

“Did he ever hurt you?” His question was soft, but the timbre of his voice rolled with menace.

“No.” An immediate reply. And an honest one from what he could sense of her steady heartbeat. “I saw how he treated his servants. Once, on one of our weekly visits, there were Legionnaires staying in his home. I heard him speaking to them in the corridor as I waited in the parlor. The Legionnaires complained that they were thirsty. For blood. He told them to take two of the maids and do as they pleased.” She paused and cast him a pitiable look. “You see, it’s not just the vampires that the working class must fear. He is one of many humans loyal to the crown. Anyway, I couldn’t help those poor maids, even if I had married him. The only thing I could think to do was... run.”

“And so you did run. Into the woods where your grandmother lived.”

“Yes,” she answered with pride and a tilted smile. “I could never abide cruelty. The nurse always said I was too sensitive and should know my station. And that I gave too much time to the feeble animals in the barnyard than I did my lessons. She scolded me once for giving cream every morning to a stray kitten in the yard, saying I was being wasteful giving good cream

to a creature on the verge of death. That the sickly kitten was too far gone and couldn't be saved."

"And did the kitten live?"

"No," she replied, voice wavering. "She was too small and too sick like she'd said. But I nursed the little gray creature for two weeks, hoping for the best."

Nikolai imagined little Sienna sitting in the barnyard and feeding the kitten, offering it compassion when no one else would. He lifted her hand, pressing his lips to the underside of her fingers, then clasped her hand against his chest. "It is in your nature to help those who cannot help themselves. That is not cruel. That is the greatest kindness."

"Even when the poor creature has no chance of life?"

"Especially then. You gave that creature two weeks of compassion and care. That is mercy." He brushed a loose curl of hair at her temple, then wrapped his fingers around the nape of her neck, drawing her close. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. Yes, your outward beauty is a bright beacon all men covet and most assuredly many less confident women despise. But they are all fools." He trailed his hand, flattening his palm over her heart. "For it is the beauty that lies in here that would be the envy of the world. If they could see what I see."

She pressed both her hands over his, her bosom rising and falling on a deep breath, her green eyes bright with tears, and a sweet smile she seemed to hold only for him. "I have no words for that, Nikolai," she said on a little laugh. "I always thought myself wicked for my selfish love of animals over mankind. Over my mother and my nurse. Animals weren't cruel or heartless like the humans I'd known. I always thought, maybe I am the witch they proclaim me to be."

He smiled, leaning down to sweep his lips across hers. "You have certainly bewitched me." He pried her lips open gently, just enough to

stroke his tongue against hers and taste the sweet divinity that was Sienna. He broke the kiss and pressed his lips to her palm before stepping away on a heavy sigh. No time for indulgence now.

“Get your gloves on, sweetheart, and saddle up. I want to get Dale’s Peak behind us.”

After a moment’s pause, she snapped to and reached for Astrophel’s reins. “And what then?”

“You know what then.” He wrapped up what was left of the oats, stashed them away, and buckled the saddlebag. After launching himself into the saddle, he arched a brow at her. “Cutters Cove.”

She shook her head and saddled up astride, then pulled on her gloves she’d tucked under the saddle by the horn. “Nikolai, I’ve told you. Once this is over, I’m returning to my cottage in Silvane Forest. My heart aches that I’ve been gone this long.”

“Well, then let’s skip Dale’s Peak and head straight there.” He clicked to Ramiel and veered through the trees toward the path. “A good month’s rest for the two of us in your cottage before we sail for Cutters Cove would do us both some good.”

“Ha! First of all, we’re not skipping Dale’s Peak. We need the recruits. And I doubt seriously the two of us would do much resting holed up in my cottage for a month. You are a devil, lieutenant.”

He captured her gaze, knowing full well the smoldering look he gave her was what put the sudden blush in her cheeks. “You have no idea, my sweet. But I plan to show you.”

...

It was mid-morning when they reached the Bluestone Mountain Range. Snow-capped peaks in the far distance guided them toward their destination. Winding through the foothills, Nikolai stopped at a gurgling

brook and let Ramiel drink. Sienna stopped beside him and did the same. He caught her staring at the mountainous horizon.

“Is it beginning to feel familiar?”

“Yes.” She flashed him a smile, once more reminding him how weak he was where this woman was concerned. “Though my home is now in Silvane Forest, I have missed these lovely mountains. I always did love them.”

Nikolai nudged Ramiel forward. He took the lead across the shallow brook, wanting to be sure there were no loose rocks that might make Astrophel stumble. The icy water sloshed, a drop hitting his hand.

Sienna squealed. He whirled around in his saddle to find her grinning and sitting with her knees drawn up. “It’s cold,” she laughed. “Some splashed my leg.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, he clicked to Ramiel to climb up the small embankment. He did with ease. As did Astrophel. The path forked, one road leading down through the trees, the other crossed an open prairie.

“Both of these roads lead to Dale’s Peak. We’ll take the northerly route to use the cover of trees. It’s a bit rockier but we—”

He stopped on an instant. That smell. And there was the faint sound that often accompanied such an odor.

“What is it, Nikolai?”

He jerked his head to the left, the direction of the northerly path through the woods. He narrowed his gaze over the treetops, finding the plumes of smoke he sought.

“You’re scaring me. What do you see?”

Ramiel whinnied, as if he too could hear and smell death nearby.

“Come. Swiftly,” he ordered and heeled Ramiel into a gallop down the lane.

At the first break in the tree line, he pulled his steed to a halt. He pointed into the trees and glanced to be sure she was right behind him. She was.

Venturing off track, he led Ramiel down an incline into a small gully, protected on both sides with dense brush, even in the dead of winter when leaves were scarce. He leapt from his mount and tethered Ramiel to the nearest elm.

He pulled Sienna down and set her roughly on her feet. “I need you to stay here and stay quiet.”

“What!” She grabbed hold of his forearms, his hands still gripping her waist. “You’re not leaving me here.”

“Not for long. I need to go and see what this is.”

“What *what* is? I don’t see or hear anything at all.”

“It’s too far away for you to. I won’t be long.”

“*No.*” She clung to his arms. “Please. Take me with you.”

He gripped her by the upper arms, reading the fear and tension in the strained lines around her eyes and mouth. “It could be too dangerous.”

“It could be too dangerous to leave me here alone. Let me go with you.”

She had a point. He glanced around. Though he didn’t want her to see what he knew he would find, she would be safer by his side, not alone here in the woods.

“All right. Hold on tight.” He lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. “Whatever you do and whatever we see, don’t make a sound. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and nuzzled her head into the crook of his shoulder, certainly closing her eyes as she hated to travel this way.

“Here we go.”

He stared ahead through the woods and sped away—climbing the hill on the other side of the gully, speeding in between and around trees at breakneck speed, leaping a chasm that opened up in the valley floor and coming out to a rocky outcropping where an icy gale whipped up the

mountainside.

He lowered her to the craggy ledge, and he too flattened himself onto his belly. “Slide up beside me,” he whispered.

Bombarded now with the pungent smell that had caught him miles away, he cringed beneath the weight of so much blood. He pressed a finger to his lips to signal Sienna to stay quiet. She nodded, then he inched upward on his forearms, until he could look out and see the valley below. Sienna did the same, not making a sound as he’d warned her. Peeking just above the outcropping, his fears were realized. Sienna clamped her hand over her own mouth.

The village of Kellswater was under siege...by Royal Legionnaires. The distinct silver and blue uniforms of Glass Tower blurred this way and that as soldiers captured another human and dragged them to a line of waiting carts with bars—prison carts. One vampire had a small boy by the arm who kicked and flailed, his screams mixing with that of all the others as he was tossed into a caged cart with other cowering children. It took two vampires to drag a brute of a man toward another cart where human men stood inside, yelling to loved ones on the other side. One man outstretched his arm to the neighboring cart where a woman stretched out her own arm, their fingers just touching.

A high-pitched squeal split the cacophony of savagery but did not stop the tumult from continuing. A young girl, certainly not more than sixteen years, bolted from a small hut, her tunic torn from one shoulder, a trail of blood dripping down her neck. A brawny vampire who’d just caged another child flashed across the space and grabbed her around the waist with one arm. A second Legionnaire, tall and blond, sauntered out of the hut casually in his sleeveless undershirt, his soldier’s jacket removed. The two laughed as they met in front of the hut, the larger one still holding the girl who kicked and screamed, her dark hair wild and loose around her shoulders.

A middle-aged man charged toward them with a harvesting scythe raised, screaming like a madman. The blond vampire sped forward and slashed the man's throat as he tossed him to the ground. Picking up the scythe, he then sliced the man's head off. The girl reached out and screamed, the word "Papa!" clear and sharp as it echoed up out of the valley.

The blond vampire who had killed the man, now moving with purpose, took the girl from the other man's arms, tossed her over his shoulder and returned to the hut, her screams reverberating up the canyon wall. The brawny vampire moved on to help another Legionnaire wrangle a feisty adolescent and shoved him in the cage with the men.

Nikolai wrapped a protective arm around Sienna for he could feel the fear and anxiety radiating off of her ten-fold. A bright flash caught his attention to the left. He scanned up the small rise above the village, his heart pounding hard. There, atop a snow-white horse sat Queen Morgrid, donning a royal blue riding gown and silver armor, winking in the sunlight. And at her side was not the king but her son, King Dominik of Izeling. Even from here, Nikolai could see the arrogant tilt of his square jaw and a crooked smile on his face as he watched the scene below. If they should catch the two of them there, they'd—

Dread sank like a stone in his chest, imagining what they would do. Specifically to Sienna. Without warning, he clamped his hand over Sienna's mouth and flashed in vampire speed out of sight, pausing only for a moment at the bottom of the craggy mountainside to shift her into his arms carefully. She wept and wrapped her arms tight around his neck. He pressed her head to his chest.

"Shhh."

Then he sped lightning-fast back through the woods, not pausing for a second. The sounds and smells of the horror in Kellswater would drown out their scent even if someone should catch it for a second on the wind, but he

would take no chances. Not with her. They'd take the open path across the plains and get to Dale's Peak as swiftly as possible. For there was no doubt now the Black Lily would need the recruits.

Queen Morgrid was building her army, one village at a time. Nikolai needn't wonder about her purpose. She was turning the men into vampire warriors, using the women as bleeders and toys for her soldiers, and harvesting the children for when they were old enough to join the ranks.

The war had just taken a very sinister turn. He had been taught to fight with honor and to respect his opponent. It was the way of the Legionnaire. But the queen was making a mockery of them all, spiraling out of control to win back her power with might and cruelty and bloody vengeance against the people she claimed to protect. No more pretending she longed for a strong monarchy. She sought tyrannical rule with an iron fist and rivers of blood.

The only ones capable of defeating her now was the Black Lily.

Chapter Seventeen

Sienna hadn't spoken at all since they'd mounted their horses and bolted across the plains toward Dale's Peak. Though traveling in the open, it was the wiser call. They'd made good time, stopping only long enough for the horses to rest and feed. He'd tried to offer her the leftover rabbit or a crust of bread, but she'd refused anything to eat.

Her eyes had taken on that forlorn look of one who'd seen the true darkness of the world—man's cruelty toward his fellow man. And he couldn't blame her. He'd seen this kind of bloody horror himself in decades past. Not on the scale of Kellswater, but never had it been perpetrated by the very ones who were supposed to be protecting the people. The betrayal of his own kind against humanity twisted his gut and was also responsible for the look of hopelessness in Sienna's eyes.

The church tower of Dale's Peak came into view as they wound higher into the foothills of the Bluestone Mountains. They slowed their horses to a trot.

"Who's our contact?" asked Sienna, her voice rusty from lack of use and most certainly from the tears she'd shed throughout the day.

He'd wanted to console her, but there was no time and little he could say. She needed to release her emotions and come to terms with what they'd seen on her own. At least until he could find a private moment alone with her.

“Her name is Sarah Winchester,” he answered as they leveled out on the even slope where Dale’s Peak sat. “A widow who runs a boarding house on the south side. We should be able to find it easily from this direction, once we board the horses.”

Sienna gave a stiff nod. The energy of a busy, populated town filled the air as they drew closer, and the pointed rooftops of well-crafted buildings came into view. The sun had already slipped beyond the horizon, coloring the sky lavender and the landscape in dusty pink. It would have been a beautiful sight on any other day. But not with the stink of death and the screams of innocents echoing in one’s mind.

A farmer hauling his empty cart back out of the town tipped his hat to them as they passed. Nikolai motioned for Sienna to stay close. They’d put many miles between them and Kellswater, but he was still on high alert. Now that he understood the queen’s game and the reason for the vanishing villages on Friedrich’s map, he knew they were safe enough for the time being. Her Legionnaires would be busy carting those poor people wherever she was holding them prisoner and making the men into vampires. She’d apparently enlisted her son Dominik to assist in the dirty job.

Nikolai couldn’t imagine that the prison where they were building this army was at the Glass Tower, for Riker would’ve seen them. He must get this information to Arabelle and Marius as soon as possible. And to Friedrich.

They wound into town, clip-clopping over cobblestone as a few people bustled here and there, paying no heed to the two new strangers. The advantage of visiting a larger town was that there were always strangers. And few people took notice of them. A sturdy painted sign read HANOVER STABLES to the right. He pointed for Sienna. “There.”

She nodded and took the lead, turning Astrophel into the stable yard off the cobblestone street and onto the hay-strewn dirt. Sienna stopped at the

mouth of the stables and hopped down, petting Astrophel along her muzzle and crooning soft words to her. Nikolai dismounted and wound the reins over a hitching post outside the stables. He was about to call out when a short, stout man with dirt smudged on his pants and shirt who had a clean, kind face stepped out of the entrance of the stables.

“Mornin’,” he said with a nod, wiping his hands on a rag.

“Good morning,” said Nikolai. “We were hoping you might have room to board our horses for the night.”

The man whistled, eyeing Ramiel and Astrophel and taking a step closer. “Now these two are beauties. I haven’t seen Arkadians in a few years.” He stepped forward and ran a hand along Ramiel’s neck with a rough pat. He whickered and tossed his head, but then seemed to accept the man’s affection as quickly as he’d rejected his presence. “Rarely do see them this far north.”

“Aye. We’re on our way to visit friends, but won’t be long.”

The sharp-eyed man raised his brow. “Not much to go on to if you’re passing through Dale’s Peak.”

Nikolai didn’t reply. When the stableman realized he wasn’t going to get any further explanation, he stepped up to Nikolai, who was a full foot taller than him, and offered his hand. “Don’t mind me. The name’s Bart Hanover. I don’t need to know where you’re going or where you’ve been. I can tell by the looks of these animals that you’re good people.”

“Oh really?” He shook his hand. “And how is that?”

“Fine clean coats from regular grooming, well muscled from being well fed, horseshoes well shod.”

Nikolai arched a brow. “I’ve seen many a cruel man treat his horses with the utmost care.”

“Aye. ’Tis true. But then the animals are skittish and distrusting.” He stepped toward the head of Astrophel, finally drawing Sienna’s attention.

She'd been wrapped in her own world until the stableman stepped forward. "Oh, now isn't she a pretty girl?" he said, patting Astrophel on her crown above her eyes.

Sienna smiled for the first time since the incident this morning. "She is, isn't she?"

"Aye. She seems to love her owner, too."

Sienna didn't correct him, but simply stroked Astrophel's muzzle. Astrophel's eyes drooped and blinked heavily at their attention.

"All right then," said Bart, turning to Nikolai. "The cost is three sovereigns per horse per night. That includes a warm paddock, fresh hay and water, and one bucket of oats. Now if they stay past noon tomorrow, that'll be another sovereign a piece for the use of the paddock through the day. And another six for both of them for lodging by nightfall." He unwound Ramiel's reins. "And whose name should I put these under in the register?"

Nikolai pulled his bag of coin from the saddlebag. Rather than handing over six sovereigns, he withdrew a few for himself and tucked them in his pocket, then handed over the rest in the pouch, knowing good and well such an amount was more than extravagant. The stableman peered inside and stared.

"That should take care of us for tonight as well as boarding without a name, should it not?"

Bart looked up with a smile. "This will do fine, Mr. Smith." He stuffed the bag of coin inside his loose pants pocket, then took hold of the reins.

"Could you direct us to the Winchester Boarding House?" asked Nikolai, moving alongside Sienna.

"Oh, aye. Sarah's place is less than a block that way and across the street. Green shutters and a green door. Can't miss it." He ambled into the barn, murmuring softly to Ramiel and Astrophel, who followed him obediently.

Nikolai crooked his arm for Sienna. “I believe they’re in good hands.”

She forced a smile, but it made her look sadder than wearing none at all. He laid his hand over her gloved one at his elbow.

“Let’s get you to the widow’s place. There you can rest till our recruit meeting.”

She said nothing and so he led her swiftly up the paved street. At dusk, there were more than a few people milling about in town, but none of them took notice of two strangers. In a town this size and as the hub of so many smaller villages, there would be a constant flow of unfamiliar faces. Still, he wanted to get off the streets in case there were any Legionnaires about.

Nikolai spotted the widow’s boarding house at once. Where most buildings were constructed in the gray stone so easily found in this region and were left in their natural state, the widow had painted her stone bright white with wooden shutters on the first and second story windows painted a gleaming meadow-green like the front door. Above the door hung a brass plate inscribed in a swirling script, WINCHESTER BOARDING HOUSE.

Nikolai guided Sienna up the front steps with a hand on her back. He shut the door, jingling the bell hanging above it, and closed off the noisy street. They stood in the entry and surveyed the well-kept house. Clean wooden floors, white lace curtains in the windows surrounding a long table that seated ten, a staircase with a red-and-gold carpet lining the stairs leading to the second floor.

Light footsteps from a room beyond the dining area drew closer. A petite woman—primly dressed in a blue frock and white apron—walked in, examining them both in one quick perusal, then plastered her professional smile in place.

“Good afternoon. Are you looking for a room for the night?”

“We are,” said Nikolai.

Sienna sagged like a wilted flower next to him from the travel, but more

from the horror they'd witnessed in Kellswater.

"Right this way, please." She ushered them back into the foyer near the door where a roll-top desk sat near the entry. She lifted a bound book and opened it. "I'll just need you to sign the registry, please."

"Pardon," said Nikolai. "But we are friends of your friends in Hiddleston."

She paused, resting the registry book flat to her bosom, arms crossed. She stared keenly at Sienna, whose head was turned to the room.

"Will you remove your hood, my lady?" asked the widow.

Sienna finally seemed to recall where she was. She pulled down the hood, revealing her fiery auburn hair, loose and wild from the day's journey. The widow smiled and tucked the registry back in a drawer of the desk.

"Mr. Black said not to expect you for another week. Follow me, please."

Mr. Black had been the code name for all contacts to use to keep the operation as covert as possible. Of course, Deb in Lobdell hadn't bothered. But the widow was obviously a by-the-book lady. Rather than lead them up the stairs as he'd expected, she walked around the staircase. Nikolai took Sienna by the hand. She accepted his guidance, though she seemed so far away. The widow continued on through a prim and comfortable parlor, across a gold carpet, and through another door that led down a narrow hallway. She finally stopped at the end of the short corridor and opened the door with an ornate key.

The three of them stepped through to a room facing the back alley, not the front of town. One bed was covered in the widow's signature green and gold, as well as the carpet near the fireplace. A rocking chair sat next to a side table and porcelain lamp with a lacy white shade. She handed Nikolai the key.

"This will do quite well for you, I believe. You are on the first floor and may leave without anyone's notice if need be." She nodded toward the

window, then stepped closer and whispered the rest. “I have tenants in the upstairs rooms and this will keep prying eyes from your notice. I would make contact with Reginald if I were you. We weren’t expecting you so soon.”

Nikolai wouldn’t explain they were so early because they had to bypass the two villages between Lobdell and Dale’s Peak. No need to alarm anyone else conspiring with the Black Lily.

“Reginald?” asked Sienna dazedly. “I thought *she* was our contact?” She directed her question at Nikolai.

“I am,” the widow answered for herself. “But I cannot accommodate so many for the *gathering*.” She glanced around, though there was no one to hear them in this part of the house. “There are many here in Dale’s Peak who are sympathetic to the cause. Mark my words on that score.” She turned for the door and paused at the exit. “When dinner is ready, I’ll bring a plate to you, my dear. You look worn out from your journey.”

She shut the door behind her. Sienna removed her cloak and dropped it onto the rocking chair, the red swathe of fabric on the inside flaring bright. Then she walked over, sank onto the bed, and began removing one of her boots.

Nikolai guided her by the shoulders to lie down. “Let me do that.”

She submitted without protest, allowing him to remove her boots and stockings. He lifted the folded white blanket on the end of the bed and draped it up to her shoulders. She’d turned on her side, looking like a child with both hands tucked under one cheek. Nikolai sat on the edge and combed her loose locks away from her face, wishing he could take away the terrors of Kellswater.

“I am sorry, my sweet,” he said, brushing the backs of his fingers along her soft cheek. “I wish you hadn’t seen that.”

“I don’t. I need to see what we’re fighting for, don’t I?” Her chin

quivered. “But those children. Those families.” She squeezed her eyes shut, a tear slipping over the bridge of her nose to the pillow.

“I know, my love,” he whispered. His pulse leapt at the slip of tongue. He did indeed mean the words with his whole heart. *My love.*

Her eyes popped open. He continued in his soft timbre. “The queen is immersed in darkness, living only for power and blood. But she will pay for her evil.” He wrapped his fingers loosely around her neck, brushing a thumb along her jaw.

Sienna wrapped her hand over his. Having removed her gloves when they walked in the room, he gloried in the feel of her bare skin on his. When she caressed him, it was the closest to divinity he’d ever known. Immortality shrank before the touch of heaven that was Sienna.

“Get some rest,” he urged.

Tilting her chin up with his forefinger, he leaned forward and grazed a soft kiss to her lips, lingering without demanding more, simply letting his lips lay atop hers in a promise of strength and protection.

“I won’t be long.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He smiled, his heart aching to take away all of her pain. “And when I do return, I will replace this pain on your heart with pleasure.”

She shivered and laced her fingers with his, then pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

The look in her eyes could’ve slain many a man from sheer desire. But she didn’t look at any man that way. Only him.

He checked to be sure the window was bolted. “Lock the door when I leave.”

“I will,” she said, offering him the first smile he’d seen since before Kellswater.

With that, he was out the door. He waited in the corridor until he heard

the metallic click of the bolt locking into place, then he set out to find Reginald. After tonight, he'd take her swiftly back to Hiddleston then on to Cutters Cove where she'd be safely away from the queen and her men.

A tingle of dread shot down his spine, remembering Queen Morgrid atop her war horse in full armament, watching and gloating over the slaughter and enslavement of Kellswater like the queen of the damned. Nikolai felt the pricking need twisting in his gut to get Sienna far, far away.

Chapter Eighteen

A soft rapping at the door roused Sienna. She'd drifted off in the rocking chair, which she'd moved near the fireplace. Placing the blanket across the bed, she tiptoed to the door and listened.

“My lady, are you awake?”

Sienna released a sigh of relief. Only Ms. Winchester. She opened the door to find her carrying a wooden tray with a pretty pot of tea, a porcelain tea cup with roses painted around the rim, a tall glass of water, and a plate with cubed beef, carrots, and potatoes in a gravy aside a pile of greens. Sienna's mouth watered, even though she hadn't thought about food all day. If anything could tempt her appetite, it was Ms. Winchester's delicious dinner on her tray.

Sienna opened the door wide for her to come in.

“Good thing you're wary,” she said, carrying the tray to the foot of the bed. “Ah, you've already made a fire. I wasn't sure there was enough kindling in the box.”

“Thank you,” said Sienna. “I managed well enough.”

“Very good. Have a seat then. Back in your chair. I like that you were enjoying the warm fire. Looks like more snow soon, so enjoy it while you can.”

Sienna sat, and the widow whipped open a napkin and lay it across her lap, then brought her the tray, which balanced easily enough. Ms.

Winchester poured a hot cup of tea, then set the teapot on the side table with the lamp.

“There now.” She stepped back and stood straight with one hand gripping the wrist of the other before her. “Go on. Taste it and let me know if it’s any good.”

Sienna forked a bite of the beef, the flavors salty and savory, the meat perfectly tender. “Mmmm. That is truly delicious.”

Ms. Winchester beamed a bright smile. “Good.”

She busied herself refolding the blanket that had been draped loosely over the bed and squared it neatly back in place. Then she lifted Sienna’s cloak that had fallen in a heap on the floor.

“Oh, what a lovely cloak.” She turned it right side in with the rich crimson material on the outside and held it up to view it more fully. “You wore it with the black exterior when you came in. Why would you ever hide this beautiful material?”

“I think you can guess, Ms. Winchester.” Sienna spooned a mouthful of the greens, the butter-and-herb flavor melting on her tongue. “We’re doing our best not to attract attention.”

The widow hung the cloak carefully on a hook near the door. “I see. But such a shame to hide its beauty.”

Sienna sipped her water. “I had to, I’m afraid. The soldiers from where I live know me by that cloak. Have you seen any Legionnaires recently?”

“Not recently, no. We had some pass through about a week ago. Drank too much down at Reginald’s tavern, got into a brawl with some locals, then disappeared before dawn. It upset Reginald something fierce.”

Sienna frowned. “I take it they damaged some of his property?”

“I don’t think so.” She pulled a rag from her apron pocket and wiped the length of the mantel. “Now that I think of it, they didn’t damage anything at all. But they roughed up some of his customers. Seemed to put him in a foul

mood that's lasted all week."

"You see Reginald regularly then?" Sienna poked into territory she shouldn't, but something told her the way the widow spoke his name that they were intimate friends.

The widow glanced back in surprise, then schooled her expression. "Yes. Reginald is a bachelor and rarely cooks a decent meal for himself. He comes down and pays for a hearty meal from time to time."

"I see." Sienna guessed that the bar owner probably visited her for more than a hearty meal.

"Well, then, I best stop bothering you." Sienna had definitely unsettled her. "I'll be back up for the tray and dishes in a bit. You just rest awhile." Without a backward glance, she swished out the door.

Sienna finished what she could. The widow was a hearty cook indeed. After setting the tray aside, she bolted the lock again and settled back by the fire, her legs tucked under her chin, ruminating over the day. The warmth of the room and the fullness of her belly made her drowsy, but the chilling memory of Kellswater wouldn't let her settle.

The screaming women, the crying children, the men bellowing in rage, fighting to the death for their loved ones. If terror ever took on a form, it was the image of the father running to protect his daughter, then being gutted and decapitated right in front of her, just before the blood-maddened vampire scooped her up to take her back into the hut. He didn't put her in the cages with the other women. He wanted her to himself, right then and there.

Sienna wondered if he let her live, if he could restrain himself from drinking her to death. Or if she was left to bleed out after being brutalized by such a monster. Sienna was surprised how little Nikolai spoke of the event. Even when neither of them wanted to recall what they'd seen, she thought he might explain to her, tell her more what makes men—no,

vampires—go completely savage.

But then, what was there to explain? She'd witnessed *sanguine furorem* raging through Kellswater, not men. The blood madness was a cold evil. And there the queen and her son, King Dominik, who had sat on high, like glorious conquerors, proud of their triumph.

“Bastards,” she whispered.

A soft rap at the door jerked her back to the present. The widow was back for the tray. “Coming, Ms. Winchester.”

The second her hand landed on the silver knob, a floorboard creaked in the hallway as if someone heavy shifted their weight. Adrenaline rushed through her body, igniting like wildfire.

“Ms. Winchester?”

A second's pause. “Run, my lady! Run!” Then a piercing, gurgling scream.

Sienna launched herself across the room and unhinged the window, glancing back to see the entire doorframe splintering inward. The window came free. She threw the pane upward. The heaving crack of the door falling. She had one leg over the sill and her torso out into the cold night air. A strong arm wrapped her waist, a hand gripped her hair close to the scalp and jerked her downward, then she was pulled back through the window.

She clawed and fought, grazing the face of her attacker, then was thrown violently to the floor. Landing on her stomach, she looked through the open door now hanging by one hinge, past the feet of four men standing inside the entrance where Ms. Winchester was crumpled in a heap, her sightless eyes gazing at nothing, her throat torn out.

“Pretty little red witch is *all* alone,” came the sickening, familiar voice of the man above and behind her.

She looked over her shoulder, panic flooding her with a glacial chill. Lieutenant Volkov stood, legs planted wide, one hand on his hip, the other

rubbing the scratch on his face she'd given him.

“My kitty cat’s a little wild, boys.”

The men chuckled darkly. Sienna swallowed the bile crawling up her throat.

Volkov turned a fevered look of lust down at her, sinister grin spreading wide. “No worries.” He leaned over to take hold of her. “Taming them is the part I love most.”

Chapter Nineteen

Nikolai sat in the corner booth closest to the bar, the raucous noise of men enjoying their ale after a hard day's work growing louder. He stared at the barkeep, a young man who'd told him that Reginald wasn't in yet. So Nikolai waited. But a warning was rattling his bones. The evening rush was building, and this kid behind the bar couldn't manage this many customers on his own. Reginald would know that.

Enough. He didn't like it. He slipped out of the booth and skirted through the crowd for the door, ignoring any sideways looks from the workers. Vampires weren't welcome in most places, but even less so in Dale's Peak. It had always been more hostile toward his kind. The main reason he needed Sienna for the recruiting. She had a way with people. She could convince a starving man to give up his last crust of bread with a few words and a smile.

Back out into the blustery night, he pulled his collar up. Not so much to block out the cold, but to hide his face. Something wasn't right, and he didn't want too many locals getting a good look at him. The street was busy, for there was more than one tavern open along this strip. He skirted along the buildings, avoiding the street lanterns posted every four buildings. Dale's Peak was a thriving town, a place of sophistication and modernity, bustling with people.

Nikolai could hardly imagine Sienna growing up in such a place. No

wonder she left. She didn't belong in this busy, overpopulated city, hosting parties and doing a husband's bidding. The very idea smacked him hard as a sacrilege against her nature. Sienna belonged in the woods where she could gather her herbs and plants, brew her healing potions and salves, and live amongst the animals she loved so well.

He smiled at his own idiocy. Never more had he understood how much she truly belonged in Silvane Forest until he was walking the streets of her native home of Dale's Peak.

"Pardon me," he said after bumping into a gentleman in an evening coat, stepping up to a posh restaurant with his lady on his arm.

He moved on, again with Sienna on his mind. Truth be told, she never left his mind. In the few moments they'd been separated on this journey, he couldn't stop thinking about her. She'd become so much to him, he could hardly function. The simple act of accidentally bumping into the man he'd just passed was a sign he was distracted. He was a man of precision and efficiency. But Sienna had thrown him off his game.

He moved swiftly, eager to get back to her. With the cover of night, humans wouldn't even detect his movement. They'd think his passing only a chilly wind in the night air. He stopped on the doorstep of the Winchester Boarding House. Once inside, his senses prickled, gooseflesh raising on his skin. He could not hear Ms. Winchester in the kitchen. The candle that was burning on the desktop was now snuffed out. No lanterns were lit at the front foyer. It was not so late that no one should be moving in the house.

Quietly and quickly, he strode down the hall and through the parlor, stopping just before the parlor door. He detected several heartbeats in this part of the house when he should only detect one. They were strong and steady. Above the rest was a sound he knew well, the swift thump-thump like a lark's wings, the very distinct sound of Sienna's heartbeat when she was afraid. Then the sickly rich smell of blood poured into his nostrils. Lots

of blood.

No matter if there were two men or ten in that room, he'd kill them all. He'd done it before. It was nothing new for him to be outnumbered and come out the victor. Rage lit like flames through his veins, urging him to act now. Lightning-swift, he barreled down the hall, noting Ms. Winchester's body on the floor in a puddle of crimson a split second before he leaped over her body into the bedroom.

He'd barely registered the vampires in the room when a stinging burn hit his face and body like a brick wall, bringing him to his knees on the instant. Two brawny vampires held a net of gold over him. He'd literally run straight into the trap, never considering they'd have a weapon that humans had used against vampires in long years past. He gripped the netting to try and push it off his face, only to feel the powerful burn cutting into his hands and fingers. He barely registered the muffled cry of Sienna before he fell on his side, the net searing his left cheek where it stretched taut across his cheekbone. Within seconds, the two vampires with gloved hands had cinched him inside like a hunted animal.

A man laughed. Nikolai peered through the netting up at Volkov, standing next to Sienna, bound and gagged in a chair.

"We were getting worried, lieutenant," said Volkov, trailing his fingers through Sienna's hair. "Oh wait. But you're not a lieutenant anymore, are you? You're a traitor. And you know what happens to them, don't you?"

The look of palpable fear in Sienna's eyes gutted him, for it wasn't for herself she seemed to fear, but for him.

"Volkov," he growled, even as smoke rose from the burns on the exposed skin of his hands, neck, and face, the hiss and smell of his burning flesh rising. "If you let me go now, I will spare your life."

"Let you go?" he laughed.

The other four vampires laughed with him, one of them the brutish, bald

one he'd fought in Lobdell. Boris. Nikolai determined then and there that he'd kill them all, rip their heads right from their bodies.

"I don't think so, traitor."

"I will gut you like the fucking pig you are if you touch her."

"Big words for a man on his way to the royal dungeons. It will be difficult for you to gut me when you're in a bloodless sleep."

Sienna whimpered, her teary gaze on Nikolai. Volkov's fingers stopped lightly petting Sienna, then he clenched a fist in her hair and jerked backward, forcing her to look up at him. She made not a sound. Volkov stared down at her, his words like ice through Nikolai's veins. "Oh, I plan on doing more than that." He stroked a finger down her exposed neck to the hollow between her collarbones. "She's so juicy, Nikolai. No wonder you kept her well hidden."

"I will fucking *kill* you," Nikolai grated low and deep, his inner beast lashing to get out. He struggled in the netting. The brutish one kicked Nikolai in the face so hard his vision hazed. Sienna's muffled scream wrenched his stomach into a knot. One of the other vampires pressed the toe of his boot on Nikolai's head, keeping him immobile, cheek to the floor.

"How the fuck did you find us?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he laughed. "You'll know soon enough. As soon as you get back to the Glass Tower."

Nikolai didn't have a second to consider what that meant before he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. The steady, long strides of two men echoed down the hall before they entered. From his sideways posture on the floor, Nikolai could see Sienna's expression shift from fear to surprise to anger.

"You've made a bit of a mess, Volkov," said the man standing just behind Nikolai where he couldn't see him, the distinct tone of arrogance and wealth lingering in his voice. The tight netting restrained him in a way he

could no longer move, besides the fact the bastard behind him still had his foot on his head.

“We’ll clean it up, Lord Barker,” Volkov assured him, obviously referring to the dead widow’s body in the hallway, his hand still in Sienna’s hair. “Is she the one you spoke of?”

The man out of Nikolai’s sight kept silent for a long minute. Sienna stared at the man Nikolai couldn’t see, her posture straight even as she trembled, her eyes blazing with fury.

“Yes. That is her.”

“Good,” said Volkov, finally releasing her hair and clapping his hands together. “Very well, then. You know your job. I suggest you get what you need done and be ready for dawn.”

“Why so soon?”

“Because the queen commands it. And trust me. She will reward you handsomely for your loyalty to the crown.”

A slight pause. “Very well. I’ll report to your quarters at dawn to retrieve her.”

The man and his partner, whoever they were, left the room, their footsteps dying quickly away.

“You three take care of him.” Volkov lifted his chin toward Nikolai. “And take care of the old woman’s body.” He leaned over and hefted Sienna out of the chair, tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of flour. “Boris and I will take care of her. I’m hungry.”

“Volkov!” screamed Nikolai in a desperate rage.

Volkov stared down, grinning, his canines extending long and sharp. “Farewell, *lieutenant*,” he said mockingly. “Enjoy your bloodless sleep.” He clamped an arm around the back of Sienna’s thighs, holding her tight, then lifted her red cape over the crook of his free arm. “I plan to enjoy my prize after the effort you put me through.”

He flashed away in a blur, his haunting laugh searing up Nikolai's spine like a trail of molten fire. Volkov had the blood madness, and he had his sweet Sienna in his clutches. The fear of losing her, of the pain and harm that a monster like that could inflict upon her, ripped a harrowing yell from his throat.

“Shut up, filthy traitor,” said the vampire who'd finally taken his foot off his head.

His boot was the last thing Nikolai saw.

Chapter Twenty

Sienna had fainted from the blinding speed when Volkov whisked her away, just as she had in Nikolai's arms. Only it was worse, because she was carried upside down like a piece of meat. Perhaps that is all she would become when the monster returned.

She awoke in a spacious, well-furnished room. Certainly the house of an affluent person. A warm fire crackled in the grate of a white marble fireplace. A black vanity with swirling silver filigree, too gaudy for her taste, sat in one corner with a white-cushioned stool. Two silver candelabras stood on the black mantel and a third on a square dining table set with crystal and silverware, but no food, on a scarlet tablecloth. Her red cloak hung on a coat hook on the wall.

She lay atop a large bed covered in a thick black coverlet. When she moved her bare feet, a chain jangled where her right leg was cuffed and linked to the wrought-iron footboard. Standing, she lifted a glass of water sitting on the bedside table and sniffed it. No scent of any kind. She scoffed to herself. If they wanted to poison or harm her, she could do nothing to stop them. She took a few sips to quench her thirst, then stood and walked to the one window in the chamber, dragging her chain behind her.

Snow fell steadily outside onto a torchlit courtyard with brick walls too high to see over. She remembered the last time she stood before a window watching the snow fall at the duke's castle. Her heart clenched at the

thought of Nikolai, subdued and helpless in that gold net. They planned to send him to the Glass Tower and induce him into a bloodless sleep. She bit her lip and wrapped her arms around herself. They did not say death, so there was still a chance of saving him. If she could save herself first.

The door clicked open behind her. She swiveled, swallowing the rising panic with her chin held high as Volkov entered. She was in the presence of a predator, a wolf in gentleman's clothing, and she knew it. Time to prepare for whatever battle was in store. Back straight and arms at her sides, she looked at him dead on.

"I am pleased you are recovered." He waltzed over, hands at his back in a nonthreatening posture. Wearing black leather pants and a loose silk shirt fitted with a black short-coat, he no longer looked as threatening as he did in his Legionnaire uniform. But that hardly put her at ease.

"Why do you no longer wear the Legionnaire uniform? Are you in hiding?"

He sauntered closer. She took a step back. He stopped a few feet away, facing the window. "It is important to blend in when there are eyes everywhere on the lookout for enemies of the Black Lily." His icy gaze swiveled to her. "Do you not agree?"

Best not to answer that. "Where are we?"

He ambled back to the table and pulled out a chair. "Have a seat...Lady Sienna."

No point in resisting. The only way to get some answers and perhaps delay whatever plans he had for her was to submit. She joined him and took a seat in the chair he offered. Standing behind her, he unfolded the napkin set atop the bone-white china and spread it across her lap while leaning over her shoulder. She flinched when his breath brushed her neck and she heard him inhale a deep breath. But he did not touch her. He took his seat opposite her, leaning back in the chair, and crossed an ankle over his knee.

“You are in my home away from home.”

“And where might that be?” Far enough north for snow to blanket the ground.

“That is irrelevant. Why don’t you ask me questions that have some import?”

“What do you plan to do with me?”

His wide mouth slid into a sickening smile. She held his gaze, somehow without curling her lip in disgust.

“First, I plan to feed you.”

“And then what?”

The door clicked open. A maid in black and white livery entered with a silver platter of food and a decanter of red wine. The maid was young and pretty, bruises visible on her neck around puncture wounds. Bite marks. Sienna couldn’t help but stare. It was rare to see a bleeder with visible bite marks, unless a vampire was staking his claim and letting others know she was his host. When she set the platter down, hands shaking, Sienna noted another bruise on her wrist. This wasn’t a claiming but abuse.

The servant looked on Sienna with pity in her eyes, dark circles marring her complexion. Whether she was Volkov’s bleeder or she was for his men or all of them together, the fact that they hadn’t even sealed the wound to let her heal properly was disgraceful. Nikolai had taken extra care with her when he had fed from her.

Nikolai.

A painful tightening squeezed her chest. She sucked in a breath and watched as the maid lifted the silver dome at the center of the platter to reveal a plate of beef and vegetables in a thick sauce. The maid spooned some onto her plate under the watchful eye of Volkov. He smiled, seeming to enjoy her discomfort as she set the serving spoon down with a clank.

“My guest will have some wine as well, Miranda.”

The poor girl flinched and poured Sienna's glass to the brim, then set the wine down.

"That will be all, Miranda."

She dipped a quick curtsy and fled the room. By now, Sienna's temper burned bright, seeing that she wasn't the only one held prisoner here. And the effects of this repugnant man's imprisonment had shaken that poor girl to the core.

"Eat, Lady Sienna. You will need your strength." He tapped his fingers rhythmically where his hand rested on the table.

She took a sip of wine, knowing she could not stomach a bite. Even the wine seemed to stick to the lump in her throat.

"Why is Lord Barker retrieving me at dawn?"

"Ah. Finally. A real question. It's my understanding that the two of you have some history together, do you not?"

"We do." She set the crystal wineglass back on the table, tucking her hands in her lap.

"It just so happens that Lord Barker is now in service to the queen. And he has agreed to conduct a favor."

"And that favor is?"

He smiled. "I don't want to spoil the surprise. But until then, I have the great pleasure of your company." He shifted himself in his pants in a more than conspicuous manner. "Tell me, why did you run so far away from the likes of Lord Barker? He's a wealthy man, a leading member of Dale's Peak. You could've been the highest lady in all the province."

Sienna recalled the simmering hatred brewing in the eyes of her former betrothed only hours before. His loathing for her had not diminished over the many years since she'd left him for the wilds of Silvane Forest. It wasn't surprising that he'd nurture his contempt for her, but it had never mattered since she'd never thought to see him again.

“Wealth matters little to me, sergeant,” Sienna finally replied.

The demon chuckled. “So I’ve heard. You live almost like a pauper in your little cottage in the woods, from what I understand. With your wolves to keep you company.” He made a show of licking his tongue over a sharpened fang. “And it’s lieutenant now. I’ve been promoted.”

He said the last with meaning as if to taunt her, but she wasn’t quite catching why. Despite her utter helplessness to escape this creature, her anger rose like a flame licking up her body. She couldn’t even disguise her disgust anymore, letting him see the rage she tried to keep in check.

He leaned forward, both elbows on the table, gazing intently at her, an expression of awe mixed with desire lining his face. His blue pupils were slowly darkening to black.

“There is a fiery light in your eyes, my lady. I want to swallow it whole and feel it burn down deep inside.”

A deep growl rumbled in his chest, but Sienna couldn’t hold her tongue. There was little she could do to stop him from doing whatever he wanted. She would keep her dignity the best she could, for she could feel the shifting energy in the air.

“I’ll bet Nikolai enjoyed all of your wares, didn’t he? And I’ll bet you gave it all to him willingly. *Eagerly*. Didn’t you?” He sat back and laughed. “Now, that got your pulse pounding. I can feel it in the air, vibrating on my tongue, tempting me to taste my prize.”

“You will have nothing of me,” she said, voice strong but trembling. “You can do as you like, but nothing you say or do will change who I am. Or the love I bear him.”

“Love? Now that *is* fascinating. That anyone could love the former lieutenant, a monster in his own day from what I understand, is quite a shock.”

Yes. She did love him, no matter how she tried not to. And she could

deny it no longer. If only she'd told him before this.

"You are the *monster*," she spat, ignoring his slander against Nikolai.

"Perhaps." He grinned like a fiend, long canines a fierce contrast against his red lips. "I would love to hear your thoughts on the matter by morning."

"What are you waiting for, you repulsive beast?" She curled her hands into fists, her nails digging into the fleshy part of her palms. "Are you just going to gloat over me or—"

The door opened suddenly. The bald vampire named Boris entered with a quick bow of the head to Volkov. He took his stance at attention just inside the door facing them.

"Finally!" Volkov lurched to his feet and prowled around the table, black gaze raking Sienna from top to bottom. "I couldn't wait much longer."

"Sorry, lieutenant," came Boris's gruff reply.

"No matter. There's still plenty of the night left. Isn't there, my lady?" He gripped her wrist and yanked her to her feet.

Without a second thought, she grabbed the wineglass and smashed the top on the silver candelabra, shattering the lip. With a swift swipe toward his face, she got a good cut right near his eye before he was able to grab her swinging arm.

"Oh yes, my wild one. Let's see what you've got, eh?"

He squeezed the wrist holding the glass so tight, and she was forced to drop the broken stem where it shattered on the stone floor. With a sudden move, he lifted her by the waist and tossed her on the bed, her chain rattling and the cuff cutting into her ankle. She twisted onto her stomach and lunged for the candelabra sitting on the far bedside table. She would use any means possible to do as much damage to him as she could.

He grabbed her skirt and jerked back, dragging her down the bed, then straddled the tops of her thighs.

"I love it when they fight," he mumbled, his breath coming fast. "Boris!"

Give me your knife.”

“What!” screamed Sienna, struggling to get away, but it was no use.

“Hold still, my little red witch.” He gripped her by the back of the throat, pinning her, cheek down to the mattress. “We wouldn’t want to cut your pretty skin. I don’t want a drop to go to waste.”

The blunt end of the cold blade pressed to the top of her spine. Fear kept her frozen in place as he tore through her gown—the beautiful dress Nikolai had bought for her—ripping it open down the back one inch at a time.

“Oh yes. Delicious,” he hissed on a demented chuckle. He tore the thin fabric of her chemise at the right shoulder, touching her where she knew her strawberry birthmark was. “You’re not going to believe this, Boris.” Boris said nothing. “This little gem is going to make Lord Barker so happy. For his superstitious lot.” He leaned down and hissed in her ear with a chuckle, “You’ve got the devil’s mark, don’t you, witch?”

Sitting up, he tore the chemise open. She felt the haunting kiss of cool air on her back, buttocks, and legs as he exposed her completely. He lay on top of her, panting against her neck where he swept her hair away. She sank her nails into the coverlet, preparing for his bite, a familiar fire burning low in her gut.

“My pretty witch is quiet and submissive now, isn’t she?” He trailed his tongue up her neck and groaned. “I think you want it.”

“You are a disgusting piece of filth,” she whispered, barely able to breathe under his weight. “And I hope Nikolai smiles when he kills you.”

He fisted her hair and wrenched her head back, stinging her scalp. “Let’s get all thoughts of your precious Nikolai out of the picture, shall we?”

On a vicious growl, he descended and sank his fangs deep into the base of her neck. Sienna hitched in a terrifying breath and clenched her fists in the covers as searing pain shot down her spine.

“Ah!” she cried out, clawing to get away.

He moaned and sucked hard, drawing her blood so fast, the pain intensified. Then his elixir went to work.

Raw, cold, paralyzing fear flooded her veins. The kind tinged with darkness that left her hollow and hopeless, wishing for anything to fill the void. Even death.

He ground against her with his pelvis, pressing her into the mattress, moaning as he sucked with fierce intensity, seemingly aroused by his own brutality. Tears spilled down her cheeks, the sharp pain and rabid fear ripping through her body and soul. He jerked away and lifted off her with a cackle, releasing his grip in her hair.

“Fuck!” He flipped her body by the waist. She rolled like a lifeless doll onto her back, unable to move at all.

Straddling above her on his knees, her blood trickling down his chin, Volkov licked out with his tongue, his eyes dilated full black, only a rim of silvery-blue shining with unnatural luster. The blood madness.

Shaking his head, he said, “Good thing you came, Boris. Because I want to suck every fucking drop from her.” He pulled off her ripped gown. Her arms slipped out of the sleeves with ease then fell back at her sides, too numb to defend herself. He tossed the garment on the floor, leaving her in the ragged chemise. “Bloody hell, you taste good.” He fell back on top of her and pressed his mouth to hers, smearing her own blood onto her lips and sweeping in with his tongue, the salty tang of him making her nauseous. He pulled back, nicking her lip with a fang. Like a lover.

“Go ahead and scream.” He bent and pricked her neck lightly, then suctioned for a moment before lifting over her, bracing with his arms straight. “You can’t, can you? They never can once I’ve gotten my fangs into them.” He combed a hand through her hair, fanning it out alongside her head before meeting her gaze, the darkness there showing her what a monster truly looked like. “I may be forbidden to suck you dry. The queen

has plans for you, you see. But I'll come close, little red." He let his hand roam down her throat to her breast where he squeezed none too gently. She remained impassively frozen—able to feel every sensation yet could move nothing. "And in these next few hours, you'll learn a new master."

He descended, piercing the flesh just above her breast which he'd plumped with a tight squeeze, shooting spine-numbing pain through her back. She closed her eyes, a tear slipping out the side and into her hair as she repeated over and over again the mantra that would keep her whole, if she survived.

Nikolai, Nikolai, Nikolai...

A spark lit inside her chest when she thought of him—fierce and strong—the small flame swirling in a circle as her fear burned into anger, building into a tempest of rage.

"So good," he said on a moan as he lifted up onto all fours and stared down at her. He chuckled. "What? It doesn't feel good? No worries. I'll make it feel good before it's all over. Once I'm full of your blood, we'll move on to your body." He trailed his tongue along his blood-reddened lips. "Fuck, if you don't taste like heaven. No wonder the former lieutenant was guarding you so well. Keeping you all to himself." He trailed a finger down her throat to the hollow between her collarbones then down between her breasts as if exploring his lover. But she wasn't his lover. He chuckled. "You know what's funny? I have the lieutenant's old job over all the royal Legionnaires. And here I am, enjoying his woman."

The swirling flame in her chest blossomed, sending tendrils throughout her body, reaching through her arms and legs. At first, Sienna thought it an effect of his poisonous elixir, but this internal flame didn't constrict her with fear. Rather the opposite. It felt like a whisper on the wind in Silvane Forest, fanning the wildfire with her growing fury.

"The lieutenant is a traitor, darling. Just like you. Roaming the country to

find sad little peasants to join your sad little cause.”

His hand roamed down over her ribcage, sliding lower.

“There is only one penalty for traitors to the Varis Crown. And that is death. But the queen has grander plans for you. She must make an example of you for all the people to see.”

He gripped the hem of her chemise where it had hiked to her knee and jerked it up to her waist. He rose up on his knees, gazing his fill.

“But until dawn, you are mine. My only restrictions are I cannot kill you. And so I won’t.” He lowered again to all fours and walked lower down her body, holding her gaze. “But I will slake my thirst.” He lifted her leg with a hand at the crook of her knee, then grazed his nose down her inner thigh, inhaling deep. “Oh yes,” he said on a groan. “I need a bit more of this honey-blood.”

Sienna cringed and closed her eyes, her mind awash with the friendly flames licking inside her body. He clenched a hold on her leg and bit into the fleshy part of her inner thigh with a reverberating growl, sucking deep. His slurping moans rolled into one another.

Sienna pushed outward the fire burning in her gut, letting her rage reverberate through her body, rushing through her blood. Volkov suddenly gagged and pulled away, choking on her blood, which dribbled from his mouth. He screamed and rolled onto the bed.

“Volkov! What happened?” Boris was at his side, pulling him up by the shoulders.

“It burns!” Volkov cried out, gripping and clawing at his throat. “It *burns*...water.”

Boris let him go and poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the table, but Volkov crumbled to the floor in agony. Another vampire jerked the door open and scanned the room to find Volkov on the floor.

“Help me!” commanded Boris. “Let’s get him to his room.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.” They each took one side and lifted him to his feet. “He just started screaming that it burns.”

As they dragged him from the room, Volkov jerked his head in her direction with a wicked glare. “You *bitch*. What did you do to me?” His voice sounded hoarse and dry.

“You wanted to swallow my fire,” she said, still immobile on the bed. “And so you have.”

“You’ll pay, witch.”

They pulled him into the corridor and slammed the door shut, bolting it locked from the outside. Sienna stared at the arched ceiling. The flames within dimmed. She ached from his bites and the toxic elixir he’d poured inside of her. Her body was weak from his poison and his pain, but her spirit was strong.

She didn’t know or understand where the flames came from, though their heat felt like the bright sun shining through the black oaks of her forest. Her entire body tingled with the hint of magic.

“Thank you,” she whispered though she wasn’t sure to whom.

As the minutes ticked by into hours, she repeated the mantra to strengthen her spirit for the punishment—whatever it might be—which would come at dawn.

Nikolai, Nikolai, Nikolai...

Chapter Twenty-One

The one thing Nikolai didn't account for was vampires using gold against vampires. It was the weapon the humans in the Black Lily had amassed to fight their immortal enemy. Why it shocked him that the queen would create her own weapons using the one element that weakened vampires should be no surprise.

He couldn't think what might be happening to Sienna at this very moment. The horror would send him over the edge into madness if he let it take hold. Right now, he needed to figure a way free. But nothing would come to him. He'd been tossed in the back of this carriage, built like the slave-carts they'd seen in Kellswater but fortified with iron walls, not wood, from top to bottom.

He was still wrapped in the gold netting on the floor, the wagon rocking along at a steady pace. He'd managed to push the net away from his face to keep it from burning his skin though both hands bore crisscross hatching burn marks. He'd tried to find a weak link in the chain, but it was no use. They'd prepared for him, knowing his strength. And they were taking no chances, keeping him in the gold net till they reached the Glass Tower.

Sienna appeared in his mind—bound, gagged, and helpless. He yanked on the netting and pushed with his legs, only managing to burn his exposed hands and face again. He bellowed a fierce, harrowing yell.

He heard three hissing sounds on the wind and three *thunks*, then the

wagon jolted to a stop. Confused that no one spoke a word, for he could still hear clearly even in this box of iron, he watched the door as footsteps approached. A jangling of the chain holding the door locked, then it flew open. For a moment, he couldn't make out the figure standing there with the first gray light of dawn throwing the person into shadow.

“Well, now, vampire. Seems we came along at just the right time.”

Nikolai's pulse leapt with joy. He sat up to get a better look. “Deb? Is that you?”

“Aye. Roscoe! Help us here.”

One of the men Nikolai met at the rally in Lobdell appeared, reached in, and hauled him to the edge, the gold netting still searing his skin. He and Deb went to work and found the lock tying the netting together.

“There were keys on that big one,” said Deb. “Fetch them.”

Roscoe disappeared.

“Where's Lady Sienna?” asked Deb, peering into the back of the cart.

“In Dale's Peak. Queen Morgrid's Legionnaires have her captive. I need to get there before—” He froze, ice racing through his blood at the sound of the morning lark chirping sweetly in the boughs above them. “Please get me out quickly. They plan to hand her over at dawn to some lord in the city. I must get to her.”

“Hurry, Roscoe!”

He bounded back with two other men who looked familiar from Lobdell's gathering. “Here they are,” he said out of breath, tossing the keys to Deb.

She tried one, and it didn't fit. She went on to the next.

“How did you find me? How did you know I was imprisoned?”

She scoffed. “We didn't. The night of the rally, there were reports of Legionnaires in the town attacking someone on the street. We didn't find them. Most of the recruits went on to report to Hiddleston, but I and a few others decided to stay behind and find the Legionnaires scouting our

territory and attacking our people.”

“That was me and Sienna they attacked in Lobdell. We fled to safety, but she wanted to rally for recruits one more time at Dale’s Peak.”

“And they trapped you there,” she stated not as a question, figuring the rest out for herself.

“Yes.”

She tried the fifth key, which snicked in the lock and turned with two clicks. The lock fell open. She and Roscoe removed the netting, releasing Nikolai for the first time since he’d been captured and bound in the widow’s house.

“Thank the stars,” he murmured and leapt to his feet, sweeping the area with his senses. No one else was in the near vicinity. He noticed the vampire guards in charge of getting him to the Glass Tower were crumpled on the ground with arrows sticking out of their chests.

“Gold-tipped?” he asked.

“Aye. Though we weren’t sure when it would come, we’ve been preparing for this war for a long time.”

The snow was thinner here. They’d traveled far in little time. The Legionnaires didn’t need to take back roads and trails as he and Sienna had done, allowing the Legionnaires to move more quickly.

“Thank you.” His voice cracked as he pulled a surprised Deb into a rough embrace.

“Aye. No need.” She pushed away with a slap on his shoulder. “Now, go get your girl.”

With a tight nod, he aimed north and ran.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Miranda finished wiping Sienna's last bite mark on her thigh with a wet rag. Sienna sucked in a hiss but still could hardly move on her own. Miranda dipped the rag in the water swirling red with Sienna's blood, then set the bowl aside.

"Let me help you sit up," she said, her pitying gaze flicking to Sienna then away as she pulled her into a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

Sienna's ankle chain rattled as she settled her bare feet on the floor. The aftereffects of Volkov's elixir left her somber, and the loss of blood left her fragile. Her body and spirit sagged under the weight of his attack and the unknown that was yet to come.

"Do you know what their plans are for me?" whispered Sienna, her voice broken.

"No, my lady," said the maid, walking over to retrieve the thin white slip she'd brought in with her. "Come. Stand if you can."

Miranda hauled her up gently to a standing position.

Sienna's knees threatened to buckle, but she kept herself steady.

Miranda removed the torn and bloodied chemise from Sienna's body, then slipped on the sleeveless, gauzy nightgown which dropped to her calves. It fitted snug at the torso, somewhat more substantial than a shift, but not by much. Her arms were bare, and the bodice scooped low on her back and breasts, tied with a white satin bow at the center of her bosom.

“What happened to Volkov?” she asked.

The maid’s lips pressed into a thin line. She feared betraying her master.

“Did he die?” Sienna asked, hoping the fire she’d given him would do him in.

Miranda shook her head. “No. But he is very sick.”

The lock on the door sounded. Miranda hopped away and stood next to Sienna with her head bowed. In stepped a parade of Legionnaires in arms who lined the far wall followed by well-dressed gentlemen with their winter coats and top hats still on their heads. They brought with them the winter chill. Then Sienna’s gaze landed on the tallest of them at the center, wearing a white silk vest and silver cuff links that twinkled in the dim torchlight.

“Lord Barker.”

Her formerly betrothed had not changed very much. The wrinkles around his mouth had deepened and the cruelty in his eyes was sharper. But other than that, he was the same man she had left behind for a solitary life outside society so many years ago.

“Lady Sienna.” He dipped his head in a slight bow as if they were meeting at a ball or in a parlor. His gaze roved over her body down to her bare feet then back up again, stopping at the bite mark on her breast before he met her eyes. “I am here on official business for the town of Dale’s Peak. As the senior lord of the town, I am acting on behalf of the bailiff to bring you forward for crimes committed.”

Sienna huffed out a small laugh. “And what crimes have I committed, seeing as I haven’t been in Dale’s Peak for over five years now?”

He puffed up his chest and sauntered closer. “Witchcraft.”

“Witchcraft? You must be joking.”

“I am not.” He pulled from under his coat a scroll of parchment tied with a black ribbon. “Bentley.”

A scrawny man in gentleman’s attire stepped forward, took the scroll,

opened it, and read aloud. While he did so, Lord Barker walked a slow circle around Sienna.

“The province of Dale’s Peak does hereby accuse and convict Lady Sienna, formerly of Worley House, of practicing witchcraft abroad. From her home in Silvane Forest, which is dubbed a residence solely for paranormal creatures, she has practiced numerous nefarious spells upon the locals of Sylus. Many of her spells ended in mutilation and bloody death for her victims which have been found within the bordering forest of her home, Larkin Wood.”

“*Lies,*” said Sienna. They were trying to pin the victims of *sanguine furorem* on her.

Lord Barker touched her right shoulder. She flinched away. Then he circled back around as Bentley returned to finish reading the decree. “Upon witnessed accounts corroborated by the good people of Sylus, Lady Sienna is hereby sentenced to death by order of Queen Morgrid of the Glass Tower.”

Bentley finished by flourishing the scroll toward Sienna so that she could see the queen’s signature and the crown’s seal in a scripted *V*. He then marched back behind Lord Barker who edged toward her in an intimate way.

Lord Barker fingered the silk bow above her cleavage and said, “You could’ve avoided all of this had you simply married me when you had the chance. Even now, I could still save you.” His dark eyes flicked to hers, his forefinger trailing a line along her breast just above the cut of the fabric. “I would not marry you now. You’re too soiled for that. But perhaps if you were my mistress, I could keep you alive. Protect you.”

“And who would protect me from you?” she asked with a sneer. Sienna batted his hand away and injected as much venom as she could into her voice. “I would rather burn at the stake than lie with a cruel, loathsome man

like you.”

His mouth slanted into a brutal smile. “Then so you shall.” He took a large step back and pronounced, “Escort Lady Sienna to the carriage.”

“Pardon, sir,” said Miranda, dipping a curtsy with concern on her brow. “But it’s cold. Please, sir. She can’t go out in nothing but that.”

Lord Baker paused and glanced around the room. “Fetch that red cloak. Scarlet fits the witch well. She won’t be cold for long anyway.”

He stormed out, the gentlemen following in his wake. Two vampires gripped her arm while a third unshackled her ankle. Miranda popped over and draped the cloak around her shoulders, clasping it at the neck, then lifted the hood over her.

“I’m sorry,” whispered the girl.

Sienna smiled at the poor maid who felt pity for her when she was the one who was a prisoner of this vampire mansion, used repeatedly as a bleeder and a slave.

“Thank you, Miranda. Good-bye.”

The Legionnaires jerked on her arms and ushered her roughly into the hallway and down a dark corridor. It opened up into a foyer with a crystal chandelier casting prisms on the walls by dawn’s light seeping through the window. They shoved her out the door into the bitter cold, her feet scraping on the stone as she stumbled. Two black carriages awaited them at the foot of the steps. The Legionnaires pushed her in the second one. Lord Barker and his men loaded in the first.

Upon entering the dim cabin of the carriage, she realized that Volkov’s partner Boris sat on one side. She took the seat opposite him. He simply glared at her in silence. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, her one source of comfort. The windows were curtained so there was no place to look except at the beast sitting across the short aisle.

“Did Volkov die?”

The vampire, his appearance more feral than the other Legionnaires, muttered hoarsely. “Oh, he’ll be all right, witch. He’s a might upset knowing you’re going to your death.” The creature leaned forward, black eyes glinting like a demon’s. “He wanted the pleasure of watching you burn. Now that pleasure falls only to me.”

Sienna turned away and closed her eyes. The vampire laughed low in his throat. Sienna sought a place of peace within herself as the carriage rattled on. Her mind drifted...

She stepped lightly under the great black oaks of Silvane Forest, luminous sable leaves shining silver by the morning light. Then she rode atop Duchess, who sped through a meadow, her brothers and her mate keeping chase with playful yelps. Sienna laughed, her head back and hair flying in the wind. Then she was in her cottage with a cozy fire crackling in the hearth. She smiled as she poured two cups of tea and walked to the sofa. She handed one to her friend Arabelle, who smiled back. Arabelle faded, replaced by the handsome form of Nikolai. Her lieutenant. Her protector. Her lover. Her love.

The carriage jolted to a stop. Sienna held his image in her heart before opening her eyes. The carriage door swung open, and the sounds of a murmuring crowd hit her along with a biting wind. The sea of accusing faces parted as the Legionnaires marched her roughly along the cobblestone to a platform at the center of the familiar town square, a place where she’d walked and shopped as a young girl. Upon the platform was a separate raised dais with a solid shaved trunk jutting toward the sky and encircled with a stack of fresh-cut pine for a fast burn. One of the Legionnaires jerked her arm to twist her about and face the crowd once they stood upon the platform.

Lord Barker stood forward and to her right with his lackeys in a line. The icy wind billowed the hem of her cloak and sheer gown, chilling her bare

feet. She stared out at the horde who'd gathered in the cold to watch a witch burn. Her arms and legs trembled from the cutting wind and the fear and the hatred, but she held her head high nevertheless.

Lord Barker cleared his throat. "I hereby condemn Lady Sienna, formerly of Worley House and now of Silvane Forest, for *witchcraft*." He emphasized the last with a loud bellow, letting it echo through the square.

The horde watched in wide-eyed silence.

Sienna wondered who among them might have been planning to join the cause of the Black Lily, for she saw no allies among them now. Only the faces of a blighted people who had been choked by fear too long, seeking one to blame for their misery in this frightful world.

She bit her lip to hold back the well of tears. Regret was a bitter beast, a solid stone in her chest. It had all been for naught. Nikolai had begged her to relent and surrender the search for more recruits, but she had convinced him otherwise. If she had listened, they'd be back in her cottage among the black oaks, safe and sound. Even so, she held on to the belief that they had to try. Despair and surrender only gave the wicked more strength. She had to hold on to hope, even as she looked on her own death.

Lord Barker continued. "For her numerous, murderous crimes against the people of the village of Sylus. And for the murder of our very own Widow Winchester here in Dale's Peak."

Sienna snapped her head in his direction. The audience gasped. One petite woman, her face withered with age, put her hand to her mouth in shock. Sienna couldn't bear for them to think her guilty of such abhorrence. But what was worse was knowing she would be put to death without ever seeing Nikolai again.

Lord Barker walked toward her and unclasped her red cloak, whipping it off her body with a violent tug. The wind pushed the fabric of her nightgown against her body. He grabbed her arm and twisted her around,

then tore the strap down below her shoulder, exposing her breast. She covered herself with her arms and hands though her back faced the crowd.

“Do you see!” He shoved her closer to the edge of the platform. “She has the devil’s mark! She is his bride and colludes with him to cast sorcery against mankind.”

More gasps and mumbling amongst the people of her hometown. Simple people could always be goaded into belief with something as small as a red birthmark as unusual as Sienna’s. He needed little evidence other than that to condemn her to death.

He turned her body once more to face the horde and gripped the wrist of her arm trying to cover her exposed body. He tore the gown from both shoulders down over her hips to let it pool at her feet. Sienna closed her eyes, unable to witness her own humiliation as he exposed her bare and bruised body to all.

“Do you see how freely she gives her body as a bleeder? She gives herself to many vampires at once. Only a witch and a harlot would show such disgrace. This woman who was once a lady among our town gave all of it up for a life of the damned. To pleasure the immortals and to cast her spells.”

It did not matter that it was all lies. It did not matter that she’d been taken by force and abused, then accused and wrongfully condemned. This was the queen’s orders, to kill her in the most brutal of ways. First with humiliation and then with fire while the people of her birth looked on. The winter wind stung and prickled over her skin like a thousand needles.

One boy said, “She *is* a witch.”

Another woman shouted, “Then burn her!”

“Yes, burn the harlot.”

And that was all it took. The people of Dale’s Peak had always shunned those who gave themselves up as bleeders. Lord Barker knew this. Volkov’s

prize of biting her ruthlessly in more than one place and leaving open, savage puncture wounds was all part of the plan to prove to the people of Dale's Peak that Sienna was nothing more than a whore for the vampires and an evil witch, deserving of a death on the pyre.

"Good-bye, Lady Sienna," whispered Lord Barker with a sneer.

She snapped her eyes open then spat on the true face of evil. He merely pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped it away, nodding his head to the Legionnaires behind her. She was lifted bodily and set on the dais with the wooden pole along her spine. Her hands were bound behind it. Then her ankles were bound at the bottom. The ugly, contorted faces of the throng drove into her heart like a hundred daggers. Her naked and bruised body exposed for their condemnation only added to the damage to her spirit.

Sienna stared up at the gray sky, trying to block the angry cries and vehement demands for her burning death. There would be snow today. The wind swirled, stirring her hair around her face and her breasts.

"Nikolai," she whispered to the winter sky, wishing she could hold him one last time. With all her heart, she prayed he would survive somehow, that he would not mourn her death too long. That he would fight the cause against men like Lord Barker and vampires like Volkov, all in her name.

The popping and crackle of pine pulled her back to the present. She stared down where the torchman had lit the kindling at the bottom. The heat wafted up quickly. The din of the crowd died as the fire flared to life. The rising wave of heat blurred her vision as she stared at Lord Barker with his menacing glare.

A cloud of black smoke billowed up and choked her. She coughed, twisting her body to the other side, but there was no escaping the smoke and the imminent flames. The heat reached up to her toes and feet. A piercing pain shot through her body as the flames licked her skin, rising up her legs.

She screamed, tears of pain streaming down her face. The fire danced high along her right leg and hip, a giant spark popping up on her cheek with a burst of pain.

Now she wished for death. Wished for the sweet release, for this pain was unlike anything she could imagine, her flesh being baked on the fire, the smell of her own skin melting away. She wept and stared straight ahead, hoping her heart would give out before the fire reached her face.

She repeated her mantra, calling her soul to still.

Nikolai, Nikolai, Nikolai...

Her mind drifted as the pain grew too intense. Beyond the crowd, through the rising flames and the smoke clouding her vision, a tall figure barreled forward, his blond hair a streak of lightning as he knocked one person after another out of his way, zigzagging and pounding his way through. Her avenging angel stormed closer to the platform, the look of a malevolent demon come to collect his souls. Her mind floated into darkness, her voice dying among the smoke and flames but not before she whispered...

“Nikolai.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

If rage had a name, it was Nikolai. He heard her screaming from the snowy fields sloping away from Dale's Peak. He blurred through town, following the cries of a mob and the crackling sound of fire and the smell of burning flesh. As he flashed into the town square, he saw in horror the maddening crowd watching his beloved Sienna burn alive. Her naked body exposed, her fair skin charring blacker with every second. He blurred through the horde, up to the platform, and leapt to the dais with his unsheathed dagger. In a blink, he'd cut her free, scooped her in his arms and bounded back to the platform. She cried out when he touched her burnt skin. Her head lolled to the side as she fell unconscious.

"Sienna. *Sienna*." He set her down and removed his coat, not noticing a soul but her until someone spoke.

"Who the bloody hell do you think you are?"

Nikolai stood slowly, white-knuckling the hilt of his dagger, and faced the man whose voice he recognized from when he was bound on the widow's floor. The man flinched at the expression Nikolai shot him.

"And who are you?" Nikolai asked with such dark gravity, the men behind him stepped backward. The Legionnaires had frozen, watching, none of whom he recognized.

"I—I am Lord Barker. This woman has been condemned as a—"

The lord's eyes went wide. His mouth fell open as he gurgled blood and

tried to suck in air. A deep slit opened in his throat, staining his clean, white shirt and satin vest crimson before he crumpled to the ground. No one had seen Nikolai move. He was dangerous on any other day. But today, he was utterly lethal. He stood over Sienna like a dragon over his most precious treasure, daring any man to come close where he could devour them.

“Who am I?” Nikolai swept his cutting gaze over the crowd. “I am the devil himself. And if one of you even moves in her direction, you’ll be dead before you can take a breath.”

A Legionnaire reached for his sword. Within three seconds, Nikolai had cut the throats of every man on the platform, gutting the vampires from naval to sternum and nearly severing their heads as well. Before they had even fallen into mutilated heaps, Nikolai sheathed his dagger dripping with blood and lifted Sienna in his arms, gently wrapping his coat around her exposed torso.

He walked to the edge of the wooden steps, heaving deep breaths, his rage riding him hard, his voice razor-sharp. “Get out of my way.”

The crowd scattered, mothers clinging to their children. Nikolai sped back the way he had come, taking the south road toward Hiddleston. As he passed Hanover Stables, a man stepped forward onto the road and waved. Nikolai stopped, his inner beast telling him to kill and maim some more. *Make them all bleed.*

He recognized the startled face of the stable owner, Bart, who held both hands up in surrender.

“Please, I mean you no harm. I heard what was happening today and refused to go to support such villainy.” He cast a sorrowful gaze at Sienna. “This town is corrupt. I knew she was innocent.”

“Yet you did nothing to stop it.”

He twisted his beefy hands in his work apron with regret shadowing his face. “Wait. Please. For a moment. For her.”

Bart disappeared into a workroom. Astrophel whickered from her stall directly across. Ramiel stared out at him. Nikolai had forgotten them entirely. The stable owner returned with a white wool blanket but beckoned Nikolai closer under the overhang. Bart flipped out the folded blanket and spread it wide on the dry hay.

“Set her down and wrap her in this.”

Nikolai did so, cringing when her brow furrowed with even the slightest brush against her right side, which was blackened and oozing from her burned feet all the way up her legs and ribcage to her shoulder. Her face bore a blade-length burn from cheek to chin. And the bite marks. *Fucking hell.* Nikolai’s knuckles cracked as he balled his hands into fists.

He lifted her wrist and pierced her flesh, giving her his elixir. Though he could not heal this deep an injury, he could numb her pain. Her pinched brow smoothed as the elixir released into her bloodstream. He licked the wound so that it would seal shut.

Bart lifted one side of the blanket.

“I’ve got it,” snapped Nikolai, taking over and wrapping her bruised and burned body gently. It covered her like a butterfly in a cocoon.

“Do you want me to saddle the black for you?” asked Bart, waving a hand to the stall.

“No. I’ll travel faster on foot.”

Nikolai needn’t worry about her equilibrium now. She was already unconscious, and her pulse had slowed to the point his anxiety had taken root, burrowing into the dark places within him. His only hope was to get to Hiddleston and acquire a ship to take them across the Cimarron Sea to Cutters Cove. There he’d find Marius, and with his potent Varis blood Marius could make her vampire, instantly healing her. If he could only get her there in time.

“Is there anything else I can do?” asked Bart, wringing his beefy hands.

“Send word to Duke Friedrich of Winter Hill. He will send a man for the horses.” He cradled her close, the smell of burnt hair filling his nostrils where a tendril had caught fire and singed all the way up to her scalp. “And one more thing.” Nikolai pierced him with a lethal look. “If there is anyone in this godforsaken town who is willing to fight for the Black Lily and not cower behind the aristocracy as slaves, then send them to the Bull’s Head in Hiddleston. But not *one* man or woman who stood in that square and watched her burn is welcome near us. I can promise you I’ll kill them on the spot if I should see one of them again.”

“Aye,” he said with a definite nod, twining his hands in his apron again. “I know quite a few who are as sick of the corruption under Lord Barker’s rule of this town.”

Nikolai stopped midstep and turned. “You won’t have to worry about Lord Barker anymore. Or his lackeys.”

“No?”

Nikolai continued walking from the stables and called over his shoulder, “I killed them all.”

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The road back was mostly clear and deserted, as if the world had stopped moving when his beloved was tied to a stake and set on fire. He dodged off the road when he sensed by smell or sound a traveler or carriage in the distance, weaving into and out of the woods with ease, never slowing his frantic pace.

He thanked the stableman in his mind when the wind cut harshly against his cheeks and nose, knowing the pain of his force of speed against the winter wind would be tearing her skin apart. The snow dissipated the farther south he traveled, the landscape covered in yellow and brown foliage before the snows would find their way here.

He stopped for a moment by a gurgling stream, setting Sienna down safely by a fallen log. He quenched his thirst with water when there was nothing else to revive his energy. He wouldn't dare take a drop from her. After splashing his sweaty brow, he jerked his head at a sound from Sienna. In a flash, he had her in his arms again, her head lying upon his lap.

“Sienna? Sweetheart, did you say something?”

Her pulse had slowed further from when they'd left Dale's Peak, every unsteady beat stabbing him again and again because he'd not gotten to her sooner. The burns had not entirely covered her body but they'd done their work. She teetered on the edge of death, and he knew it.

“Sienna?” He gently brushed the hair away from her forehead and pressed a soft kiss to the porcelain, unmarred skin there.

“Nikolai.” A faint whisper.

“Yes, my darling. I'm here.”

Her glassy green eyes pooled with tears. “You came.”

“Of course I did. I am”—he faltered, words choking in his throat—“I am sorry I was not sooner.”

“You came. That is”—she dragged in a broken breath—“all that matters.”

“Hold on, Sienna. We're almost to Hiddleston. I'll find us a ship there and we'll make it to Cutters Cove. Marius will—”

“No, my love.” Her words were a breathy whisper, cutting him to the marrow. “I will not make it across the sea. I'll be gone soon.”

“*No*. You will *not* be gone. I forbid it.” He pulled her entirely in his lap, his face only inches from her. “Do you hear me, Sienna? You will not leave me in this damned world alone. Just hold on.”

She smiled faintly and blinked her eyes closed. “I want to touch your face.”

He unwound the blanket enough so that her slender arm was free. Still, she was too weak even to lift it. He cupped her hand in his and swept a kiss

upon her palm before pressing it to his cheek.

“There,” she said. “Now I am happy.”

Her mind seemed to be floating away already. “Sienna. Just stay with me. I know we can get there.”

“If you love me, Nikolai. You will take me home. To my beloved forest. My wolves. I want to die there, not on the cold sea.”

“Sienna, *please*,” he begged as if he were the one dying. In fact, he knew that he would, should he lose her now. There was no joy or light or life without Sienna at his side.

“Take me home, my love,” she said, her eyes still closed, her breath rattling in her chest.

Bundling her close and lifting to his feet, he pressed a tender kiss to her temple. “Yes, my sweet. If that is your wish.”

He sped through the woodlands, taking the fastest and straightest route not the winding road. Night had fallen by the time he came upon Hiddleston. The full moon shone bright and full among a starry sky. A beautiful night. Lovely and clear.

He wanted to veer toward the port and commandeer the fastest ship immediately, even if it meant coercing a captain with violence and intimidation. But she was right. The voyage would take a week if seas were calm. This time of year, it would take longer. And even now, her pulse had slowed to the point he could hardly detect it at all. Unable to come to terms with what was happening, he wound his way toward Silvane Forest, obeying her last wish, slowing as he came upon the trail where he’d encountered her the day he landed from Cutters Cove.

He walked past the knotty oak, remembering how she’d spilled her basket of pears. Remembering the lovely pink blush that had crawled up her neck upon seeing him. And her confident walk as she led him to her cottage, even as her pulse tripped so fast. He’d sensed her attraction but also knew

her will was made of steel. Her strength had lured him like a fish to the hook. And she'd caught him for certain, digging the hook deep.

Hart wolves howled in the nearby Silvane Forest. They sensed her approach. Nikolai gently shook her in his arms.

“Sienna,” he whispered. “Your friends are welcoming you home.”

He crossed into the dark woods, sensing a supernatural arm wrapping around him and Sienna, sending a chill down his spine. His boots crunched on the leaves. The howling drew closer. Her hart wolves were coming to her.

She stirred. “Nikolai?” Her head sagged against his chest, her body still cocooned in the woolen blanket.

“Yes?”

“I can feel the forest.”

Stepping under a grove of black oaks, the cool wind shook through the thinning leaves, knocking bare branches together in a somber lament for the Woman of the Wood.

“Yes, love.”

“Let me see.”

He stopped along the path of thick black oaks, moon and starlight shimmering on the silvery leaves. Kneeling on one knee, he set her down gently, bracing her torso up in his arms. He unwrapped one fold. She winced when the fabric stuck to her charred skin. His elixir had worn off.

“I’m sorry,” he said in earnest, pulse pounding that he’d hurt her in the slightest.

“Oh, Nikolai.” She stared up at him, her chest rising slowly. “You are so beautiful.” Her gaze moved to the sky. “The night...the forest is so beautiful.”

She was right. It was as if night’s beauty had come out to kiss her farewell. The moon shone perfectly in her round eyes, dark from the

shadows' embrace. He cupped her hand in his and pressed it to his heart, her pulse horribly faint now. "I am so sorry, Sienna."

Her dazzled gaze moved from the boughs and the stars above to Nikolai. Her mouth creased into the loveliest, warmest of smiles, a tear slipping from one eye into her hair.

"I am not. I am sorry for nothing, dearest Nikolai...man of my dreams... man of my heart."

Her eyes glazed wide, her mouth frozen as if she might say something more.

"*Sienna.*" He pulled her close, feeling for her pulse at her neck. Nothing. "Please don't leave me. *Please.* God, I beg you."

He begged the heavens to spare her. They did not. He thought this the cruelest punishment for his crimes. This was the final payback for his darkest sin, the one that still stained his soul. Fate had given him the loveliest maid in all the world only to take her away with brutality and pain.

He remembered the moment he fell in love with her. He stood in that small chapel at Marius and Arabelle's midnight wedding ceremony. It was only them four and the priest. He heard not a word the priest said at the altar, the moon shining through the rose window, the candelabras gilding the room in warm golden light. All he could see was the lovely creature standing by Arabelle's side, her auburn hair hanging in loose waves down her back with small braids crowning her sweet head. All he could think was how her silky cream skin shone by candlelight and her full lips tipped up in a gentle smile for her friend's happiness. He'd memorized the haunting beauty of her green eyes and the way they'd flicked toward him repeatedly during the ceremony, before darting away nervously. It was then that he knew he was lost. In love.

"Please," he begged again. "Please don't take her from me."

He cradled and rocked her in his arms as a torrent of wind swirled around

them, crashing through the trees and pouring down a shower of sable-silver leaves, mourning the loss of the fair lady of the wood. Nikolai crushed her to his chest and wept. And the forest wept with him.

Sienna was dead.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nikolai heard and felt nothing but his own grief. Immersed deep within himself and his heart-piercing loss, he jumped when something cold and wet touched his cheek. He looked up into the electric gold eyes of Duchess, the snow-white hart wolf. She nuzzled Sienna.

The wolf's mate, Luca, full black and fierce, stood on Nikolai's left. Her brothers, Hugo and Kai, stood to his right. For the first time, they did not bare their teeth in menacing show or warning. Rather, they looked on him with what he could only surmise was empathy. Strange, these beasts of the forest were more than animals. He'd always known it. And Sienna had always told him so. An eerie tingle prickled over his skin as if the air itself had changed, whispering of magic and mystery, something he could not detect with his acute vampire senses.

Duchess turned to leave but caught his gaze over her shoulder. Then Nikolai heard an echoing voice in his head. A lovely, melodious feminine voice.

"Nikolai. Bring Sienna. Follow me."

He stared at her in disbelief as she trotted ahead. When he didn't move, the biggest of her brothers, Hugo, stood at his side and snuffed. The beast was the largest of the four, his size and demeanor intimidating. Yet he seemed to be trying to encourage Nikolai, not intimidate. Duchess stopped on the path again and swiveled her head toward him. The voice came again.

“If you love Sienna, then stand with her and follow me.”

No mistake. The voice was somehow that of the she-wolf. But in his head.

He lifted to his feet, hefting Sienna close, her lifeless body heavy in his arms and her sweet head lolling against his chest. He did not understand where they were going or what they wanted, but it was apparent he was now receiving a guardians’ escort as the two brothers flanked him and Luca walked behind, watching the woods for danger.

“Faster, lieutenant. While Sienna’s spirit still hovers nearby.”

Nikolai was thrown off balance by her words. But when she started to lope through the woods, he kept pace, even while his own body sagged with fatigue from the long journey and from his gut-wrenching loss. But he did not falter. Soon enough, the five of them were at a full run, still slower than Nikolai could move with his supernatural abilities, but fast.

They wound away from her cottage, which puzzled him. He thought perhaps they wanted to see her home, where they’d always protected her. Instead, they led him deeper into Silvane Forest, farther into the heart of the wood where only black oaks grew in dense abundance. Thick-trunked giants sprouted everywhere, their gnarled roots jutting out of the earth. The charcoal branches were nearly naked now, the ground carpeted in black and silver leaves.

An unknown force shook Nikolai to the core. He stopped running, sensing a vibration in the air. No, not just the air. In the earth, too. A rhythmic tempo pulsed all around him, as if the forest had its own heartbeat.

“What is this place?” he asked Duchess, who had circled back next to him.

Her golden eyes were fire-bright. She crossed over into an open circle within a round of black oaks that was somehow filled with soft-tufted, spring-green grass on the verge of winter. Impossible.

Duchess walked forward, as did her brothers and her mate. The white she-wolf began breathing heavily, puffing out great white breaths as if she were choking on her own breath. She crouched on the ground, whining. Nikolai took a step forward, thinking she was injured and needed aid. Then the other three followed suit, growling rather than whining as their bodies trembled unnaturally.

“What—”

Before he could finish his thought, Duchess shimmered in a way that looked like a vampire did when they moved in a blur. Her white coat vibrated, and she opened her mouth as if to howl but no sound came out. Then a succession of cracking rippled down her body. Within a blink the wolf was gone and in her place crouched a woman. She paused, sucking in a lungful of air, then quietly stood to her full height and stared at him—a stunning vision with wispy white hair down to her naked thighs and sharp predator’s eyes. Black-inked tattoos contrasted with her pale skin, sweeping in sharp lines and a swirling pattern just beneath her collarbone and over her shoulders, sliding down her sides to her hips.

Nikolai stepped back, his heart hammering at a brutal pace. She was human? How was that possible? He could hardly wrap his mind around what he was actually seeing. Then, in another moment, where her mate and two brothers stood within the circle, were now three very large men. Luca was a dark-skinned male equal to Nikolai in height. His unearthly blue eyes glinted star-bright in the dark. The brothers were both bronze-skinned and packed with muscle like Luca. Hugo was the tallest, with broad shoulders and rippling with lean muscle. As a wolf, his glare was the most ferocious. This was the same in his human form. Hugo and Kai had long hair falling down their backs, but Luca had short-cropped black hair to his scalp.

They bore jagged and swirling tattoos like Duchess, though they appeared more violent in their making. The men bore interlacing knots across their

torsos and backs and down their arms and legs, similar but not the same. Whereas the ink Duchess wore looked as if the wind had smattered it prettily with a few sharp edges, the men's ink appeared as if a storm had cut it into their skin with beauty but also violence.

Nikolai pulled Sienna tighter in her arms, these beasts in men form seeming far more dangerous than they did as wolves. When he could find his speech all he could ask was, "How?" He continued to back slowly away out of the meadow, even as the rhythmic tempo vibrating out of the earth seemed to soothe him.

"Please." The woman stepped forward with a hand in the air, seemingly unaffected by her nude form. "Don't be afraid, Nikolai."

He scoffed, narrowing his gaze. "What are you?"

"We are hart wolves. As we've always been. I am Allora Godrick. This is my mate, Bron. And my brothers, Connell"—she gestured toward the smaller of the two, then toward the larger, severe one—"and Dane." She walked up to Nikolai, a subtle power humming on her skin, but not as strong as the constant throbbing pulse all around them.

He flinched away when she reached out with her hand. "Don't touch me," he warned. Though he sensed no fear, his instincts were to fight against what he couldn't understand.

"Please, lieutenant." She eased her hand forward and he kept still this time.

When she laid her hand upon his shoulder, a surge of calm and reassurance swept through him. She held magic in her touch, and perhaps it was trickery, but something told him it wasn't. There was no danger here, despite having never seen a hart wolf transform into a human before in his life. As far as he knew, no one knew this even possible.

"We will have time to talk afterward. But now you must bring Sienna forward."

The sensation of others hovering close drew his gaze to the surrounding shadows. Within the dark appeared one pair after another of glowing, gold eyes. Hart wolves, dozens of them, surrounded the ring wherein he stood holding Sienna. He turned in a slow circle, sensing their heavy presence, though not one growled or launched forward with aggression. They merely watched in a kind of reverence.

“Nikolai. Bring her forward.”

“To where?” he asked her, seeing only a plot of strangely fertile grass in the round.

She touched his arm again. He flinched as the pulse swept through him, and immediately a large slab of smooth black stone appeared at the center of the clearing. Or perhaps it was already there, only he couldn’t see it. He could also now observe a perimeter of standing monoliths made of the same shiny, smooth stone.

“The hartstone,” he whispered.

“Yes. And she wants you to lay Sienna upon her.”

“*She* wants—?”

“Time is running out.” Allora clutched his wrist with a tight hold, gravity in her voice. “Put her on the stone. *Now.*”

He felt no malevolence from the pulsing halo around the hartstone. Rather, he sensed something else. The same magic that murmured and sighed through these woods far and away pounded out a bone-rattling pulse this close to the hartstone. He didn’t know why or how, but he felt a tug on his very soul, pulling him toward the stone, assuring him this was right.

He strode forward in five long steps and set Sienna gently upon the black slab, realizing on the surface it wasn’t black at all, but iridescent. As he lay her body down, a ripple of luminescent light pinged outward. The liquid wave of light began to tremble, rippling faster. Nikolai’s breath whooshed out of him as an unseen force dragged him a safe distance and released him

on his feet. He stumbled to catch his bearings.

Allora and the others stood on either side of him, watching as the pulse intensified. Nikolai clasped his hands over his ears, as did the others, the throbbing beat increasing. The luminescent light waved off the stone, piercing the darkness and shining out on the black oaks, their sable trunks shining like silver beacons.

The wool blanket wrapping Sienna evaporated. Her arms fell outward into a cross as her burnt body levitated off the stone, higher and higher till she was even with the lower boughs of the trees. Tendrils of her red hair floated like seaweed waving in an unseen ocean. The hartstone's light rose from the stone slowly, then like lightning pierced straight into Sienna.

Sienna's arms flexed straight out, her back and neck arched, her mouth open toward the sky in a soundless scream. Her body glowed from the inside, brightening to a blinding white. Then multicolored flames burst upon her skin and licked up out of her body, burning away the blackened, charred decay, transforming it with a pearlescent glow.

Nikolai watched in awe as every inch of her body was covered in flames of red, orange, blue, green, and gold, purging away the scars and bruises and bites, the injuries that had caused her death. Nikolai fell to his knees, removing his hands from his ears, as her body lowered to the hartstone, the thumping pulse fading.

Once she lay upon the flat surface, the heartbeat of the stone dimmed to a distant echo. Sienna's chest rose and fell. She lifted an arm to her throat and sat up. Nikolai lurched to his feet but couldn't move forward, paralyzed with fear that this was all a dream. If so, he prayed he'd never wake up.

Sienna pushed herself up and stood off the stone with a stumble. Nikolai was there in a flash before she could fall, his hands on her bare waist. She looked up into his eyes. The same spark of beauty shone there, but now the green was flecked with bright gold. A star-bright aura haloed her skin, as if

the cosmos had fallen to this spot and filled her body with its radiance. He could feel its heat vibrating up his hands and arms. He trembled as he continued to hold her, trying to convince himself this was real.

She lifted a hand to his jaw and smiled, speaking in a broken whisper. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Clutching her to him with frantic speed, he let out a choked laugh. “You thought you lost *me*?” He buried his face into her hair, her smell of lavender-in-the-woods tinged with a third scent—fire. But not the sickening smell of charred flesh. The smell of wildfire when it devours a forest, warning all creatures that it is dangerous and wields power, demanding all onlookers to bow in awe. Nikolai reveled in her smell, the softness of her skin, wrapping her so tight he feared he might crush her. His hand slid down her back and braced her close.

“Sienna. There’s something you should know.”

“What is it?” she asked, her face still buried in the crook of his neck.

He stepped away, though it nearly ripped out his heart to do so, and turned, half expecting them to be back in wolf form. Sienna peered around him slowly. He took her hand and walked alongside her.

Allora walked forward and met them, her smile the kind one might bestow on a long-lost friend finally come home. In fact, that is precisely who Sienna was. She had left this realm, her spirit journeying elsewhere. And now, she was back. Transformed, though Nikolai could not yet detect precisely how.

“This is Allora Godrick,” he said. “You know her as...Duchess.”

Sienna gasped and jumped, squeezing his hand on instinct. Her gaze moved from Allora to Nikolai, a slight frown pinching her brow.

“It can’t be.”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” said Allora, stepping forward. “But it’s true. I am your friend, the one you call Duchess.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sienna, shaking her head, taking in the sight of the other three behind her. “So you were human all along?”

“We are hart wolves first. Humans second.” She seemed at a loss for words to explain, then gestured toward the others behind her. “You know my brothers,” said Allora. “This is Connell. And Dane. And my mate, Bron.”

They all nodded a greeting, not stepping forward to clasp her hand, which was a relief to Nikolai. He knew in his heart of hearts that they meant her no harm. Rather the opposite. But his innate need to shelter her from all men still twisted in his gut. Especially after what the last ones had done to her.

Dane flicked his gaze to Nikolai, a tilted smile cracking his stern expression, as if he knew the torture Nikolai suffered. “Perhaps we’d best have this conversation tomorrow.” He glanced up at the starry sky. “It will be snowing soon.”

Nikolai tested the air with his senses, finding no smell of the weighty pressure before a storm or snowfall. “Are you sure?”

“Quite,” said Dane. He stepped back toward the shadows. With a crackle of energy and a rippling pulse of power, he transformed into his husky brown wolf and fled into the woods. His brother nodded at Sienna again and, without saying a word, followed his brother. The many hart wolves that lurked in the dark and had watched Sienna’s awakening now whisked away as well. Only the swift padding of their feet could be heard as they retreated into the woods.

Luca shook his head back and forth, then he too shifted into the black wolf with a crackle of electricity. He did not venture away but waited for Allora.

Allora lay a hand upon Sienna’s crown. Sierra shied away a little, leaning toward Nikolai. Allora brushed her hand down to the tips of a lock of

Sienna's copper hair. "I am so grateful the hartstone has bestowed her gift upon you."

Sienna frowned, looking back where it still beat a constant pulse. "I am, too. But it changed me somehow." She gazed at her hands. "I feel something new burning inside of me. Not painful at all. But...different."

"We will discover what that might be tomorrow," said Allora. "Tonight, I believe your lover wants you to rest. He has also had a long, difficult journey." She smiled at Nikolai. And in her eyes he saw empathy for his tragic journey, not the physical but the emotional one that had nearly crippled him. Killed him.

He gave her a thankful nod.

Allora smiled, then turned toward Luca. She caressed Luca's muzzle. He licked her hand. She started to run away with Luca chasing after her. With a tinkling laugh, she shifted into the white she-wolf, the two of them disappearing into the shadowy night together.

Nikolai swept Sienna into his arms, his own muscles sore with fatigue from carrying her so far already, though he didn't give a damn. He'd let his arms break in half before he let her go again.

"Nikolai, I can walk," she said, clasping her hands around his shoulders.

"Enough. My own beast is going to claw right out of my skin unless I get you indoors and safe."

"Then take me home." She pressed a kiss to his neck and burrowed her head against him.

Nikolai's stomach flipped end over end at her gentle affection. Not an hour before, he thought he'd lost her forever. But the beating, living hartstone of Silvane Forest brought her back. He wasn't sure what it had done to her in the process. But like Allora said, they'd figure that out tomorrow. Right now, he wanted to be alone with the woman he adored, worshipped, cherished...and loved.

Chapter Twenty-Five

She had died?

“All I remember was a dream,” she told Nikolai as he stoked the fire to life in the hearth.

Sienna sat on her sofa with a quilt wrapped tightly around her. Nikolai had taken it from her bed and covered her body the second they’d walked inside her freezing cottage. He’d gone outside and found a few dry logs and kindling. The chill slowly melted away, and yet Nikolai hadn’t looked at her once since they’d come inside.

He stared into the hearth, one arm propped on the mantel, his shoulders bunched, his head ducked low. “What happened in the dream?”

“I wandered through a misty wood. All I could hear was your voice calling me.” She fisted her hands in the edges of the quilt. “But I couldn’t find you.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Didn’t even look at her.

“Finally, I stumbled into a meadow where your voice seemed to emanate from a silver-white tree. When I touched it, my entire body caught on fire. That was all I remembered before waking up on the...on the hartstone.” She longed for him to look at her, to touch her, to hold her. “What did the hartstone do to me? Besides bring me back. I feel different.”

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice dragging on gravel and rock.

Silence deepened between them. Gilded by firelight, his profile was

sharp, his lips pressed tight, his expression grim and distant.

“Are you—are you all right?”

He scoffed and finally turned to her. She swallowed hard at the tormented expression contorting his face.

“Are you angry with me?”

“Angry with *you*?” His tone was full of menace, yet he didn’t move from the mantel. “I want to race back to Dale’s Peak and burn alive every man, woman, and child who stood there and watched what happened to you. I want to hunt down that bloody bastard Volkov and his men and rip their fucking throats out with my bare teeth. I want to murder the world and bathe in their blood, and still, it wouldn’t be punishment enough.” His voice trembled with rising fury. His vocals strained with quaking rage. “Not nearly enough.”

Sienna stood and approached him slowly, for he seemed about to bolt at any minute. Or combust with boiling rage. She lifted a hand from under the quilt.

He followed her hand as if it were a snake about to strike. He was afraid.

“Shhh.” She reached out and swept a lock of hair away from his stern brow. His eyes slid closed, and he exhaled a shaky breath. “Let the anger go, Nikolai.”

“I bloody can’t.” Voice still quivering, his chest rose and fell quickly, and his eyes remained closed.

“Yes, you can,” she soothed. She slid one hand to cup his gaunt cheek. He’d worn himself out, saving her, his paleness more striking now that she could see him in the light. She lifted her other hand, letting the quilt drop to the floor. Wrapping his nape with a soothing caress of her nails, she dragged him closer.

At first unyielding, he let her pull his head down. She combed her fingers through his silky hair and brushed an airy kiss over his lips. His eyes

popped open, gleaming bright with desperation. Need.

Still not moving a hand to touch her, he said, “You should rest.”

“No.” She unbuttoned his top button, then worked her way down in a slow line. His gaze followed her fingers. “I died, Nikolai. And by some miracle have been brought back to life. I do not need rest.” She tried to pull his shirt off, but he wouldn’t move his arm from the mantel. “I could use your help here.”

“What are you doing?”

“I thought it was quite clear. I’m trying to remove your clothes so I can take you to my bed.”

“Sienna...” He clenched his jaw and deepened his frown. “I won’t take you. Not so soon after Volkov, after—”

She stopped him with a finger to his lips. “He didn’t violate me in that way. He took only my blood.” She glanced down at her bare body. “As you can see, my body is healed. But my heart is not. And here I am, begging you to touch me. To make good on your promise.”

“What promise is that?” he asked, voice a husky roll of thunder, his body so rigid and his arm so stiff on the mantel as if he were holding up the wall, the world, and gravity itself purely by sheer will.

“In the widow’s house. You promised to give me pleasure to take away the pain.”

He released a shaky breath, his expression crashing into sorrow. Perhaps she shouldn’t have reminded him of that moment, the last precious moment they shared before their nightmare began.

“I’m raw, Sienna. Scraped from the inside out. I held your lifeless body in my arms a few hours ago.”

“Then hold me alive...now. And let me heal you, Nikolai.”

“I can’t be gentle.”

“Who said I wanted gentle?”

“I don’t trust myself.”

She smiled and closed the space between them, wrapping her arms around his waist and under his unbuttoned shirt, his body taut, unyielding. She pressed her soft curves against his hard frame. “I trust you.”

He breathed her name on a long sigh. “Sienna.” Then he finally moved. He swept her hair off of one shoulder where he grazed an open-mouthed kiss, hot and wet. Sienna angled her head in the other direction, inviting him to taste, to bite. But he didn’t.

“More, Nikolai.”

She knew he still held himself back, fearing to hurt her in some way. What he didn’t understand was that she was stronger than she’d ever been. The hartstone had breathed fire into her veins, which now lit up her senses to a heightened level. Her skin ached, craving the sensation of friction, hungering for him to heal her in the only way he could. But the man—obstinate, with willpower of iron—would not give in to the passion simmering between them, begging to be released.

“Fine,” she whispered. She’d have to show him she had determination of her own to match his. She needed to do something dramatic, to make him understand. Dropping to her knees, she undid the lacings of his trousers.

“Sienna,” he warned.

She flicked him a glare. “I want you, Nikolai.” She pulled free the last lacing. “I *need* you.” She freed his cock—full and thick. He couldn’t deny he didn’t feel the same desire. She had no experience in this realm at all, but instincts took over, the innate need to taste him overriding all sense and reason. Gripping him at the base of his shaft, she opened her mouth on the tip.

“Fucking hell.” He clenched a fist into her hair. Instead of pulling away, he urged her on, pumping forward slowly on a hiss.

She moaned, staring up at him and holding his burning gaze. His mouth

gaped, the tips of his sharpened fangs long and protruding.

Volkov had filled her with fear and loathing with his toxin, but the hartstone had washed that all away—death and fear in one. She yearned for Nikolai to mark her deep. She surged forward, sliding her mouth on a groan.

Before she knew what had happened, she was off the floor and on her back in the bed. Nikolai knelt above her and stripped away his shirt, revealing his sculpted abdomen. His trousers hung loose on his hips, his cock protruding straight up against his belly.

“Put your hands behind your head under the pillow.”

His command was rough and razor-sharp. She obeyed.

“Spread your legs for me, Sienna.”

Already breathless, she crooked her knees in obedience.

He shook his head, gaze wandering south to her sex. “Wider.”

Heat flushed up her chest and into her cheeks.

“Wider, sweetheart. You’re going to lay yourself bare and give it all to me. Then I’ll give it all back.”

Licking her lips, her mouth gone dry, she let her legs fall open till her knees hit the mattress. Completely and utterly exposed.

“Right there. That’s what I want.”

He gripped his cock and pumped in a slow rhythm, then fell forward on his other arm and lowered his body. He brushed his hard chest over her sensitive breasts, teasing her nipples into tight peaks. Dipping his head toward her neck, he whispered, “Don’t move your hands from beneath the pillows, no matter how badly you want to.”

She clenched her fists, trying to obey.

“I want to be in control of every sensation you feel. Tell me you understand.” He grazed the head of his cock through the folds of her sex. “So wet already.”

She whimpered.

“I didn’t hear you, Sienna.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I understand.”

His voice dropped another octave. “Good.”

Beginning under her jaw, he scraped his fangs down the side of her neck, then up the slope of one breast, letting one canine prick her sensitive nipple. She gasped and instinctually raised her knees to squeeze her legs together. He lifted up with a warning look.

“I want your knees flat against the mattress and your legs wide, sweet Sienna.”

She bit her lip, nodded, and did as he demanded, her blood stirring hotter to his rough commands. Then he lowered down and sucked her nipple hard, growling when she arched her back and pressed closer.

“Nikolai,” she murmured, squirming beneath him.

He circled around the peak with his tongue, then lifted up and blew, the cool wetness drawing low in her belly. She watched him as he licked two of his fingers, then set to work between her legs, rolling the nub between them.

Her mouth dropped open on a gasp while she pulled one arm partly free. He froze.

“Damn,” she muttered and thrust it back beneath the pillow.

“Good girl.” He thrust two fingers inside her.

Arching her neck, she begged, “Please. Please.”

“What do you want, sweet Sienna?”

“I want you inside of me. All of you.”

Suddenly he pulled his hand away and leveraged over her, his thick cock at her entrance. “Don’t move,” he commanded, pushing inside of her just an inch.

She wanted to pull her hands free and claw down his back, wanted to

wrap her ankles around his thighs and rock her hips up into him and take him deeper. Instead, she held perfectly still, breathing hot, heavy breaths.

He glided his lips along the underside of her jaw, a growl vibrating in his chest. "I can smell your arousal." He trailed his tongue down her throat. "All for me."

"Yes," she whispered, her nails cutting into her palm where she squeezed her fists tight.

"You are mine, Sienna." He nuzzled under her ear with a soft caress of lips, but his voice was nowhere near gentle. "From now...until death. Whenever that may be. You are mine."

She opened her mouth to speak, but then he thrust his cock deep and plunged his fangs into her neck. She sucked in a gasping breath. His warm, erotic elixir flowed straight to her core. He pounded hard over and over with fierce thrusts, keeping his fangs embedded in her skin as he sucked deep and long. A feral growl rumbled from his chest, vibrating against hers.

"Nikolai!" An orgasm ripped through her body. Too hard, too fast. She couldn't help but squeeze her legs together, trapping his hips and whimpering her release. He drove hard and held still while the waves crashed through her. She finally pulled her arms from beneath the pillow and clutched his flexed biceps.

Catching her breath, she licked her lips and gave her own command. "Roll over, Nikolai. It's my turn."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nikolai grinned. Satisfied with her erotic surrender and her fervent cries during the violent orgasm he gave her, he was more than willing to let her take the reins. For now. Gripping her waist, he rolled, keeping himself inside her. When she planted her palms on his pectorals, squeezing her full breasts together, her pink nipples erect, his cock thickened more.

She opened her mouth on a groan, raising her hips and slamming back down, slowly rocking and picking up speed.

“Bloody fucking hell, woman,” he muttered, gritting his teeth together and trying not to come on that sight alone.

A woman taking full charge of her desires was beyond arousing. But Sienna—beautiful, sensual Sienna who had known no other man but him—demanding control so that she could pleasure herself on his body. That made his blood run so hot and his cock so hard, he hoped his body didn’t combust.

Tilting her head forward, her hair slid over her shoulder and teased the skin on his chest, swishing back and forth as she found her rhythm, raising her ass then sliding back down, stroking him with her tight sex. Her full breasts swayed and bounced with each downward thrust.

“I am yours,” she said, pumping her sweet hips in a faster tempo. “And you are mine.”

He curled his hands around her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh.

“Yes, Sienna. Show me.”

The air resonated with a quivering energy. The same he'd felt among the standing stones in the heart of Silvane Forest. Sienna's eyes glimmered, the green shimmering with ethereal sparks of gold, a fiery aura licking around her. She seemed unaware, for she continued to stare at him and pounded her hips, the energy building and vibrating through him. He gripped her harder and lifted his pelvis, thrusting up on each downward plunge of her perfect ass.

Lifting to a sitting position, he took one pink nipple into his mouth and suckled on a groan. She clenched her fingers in his hair, stinging his scalp, and screamed, her inner walls pulsing while she rocked her pelvis in little circles. He banded his arms around her waist to keep her still and drove his cock with one final thrust, groaning as he spilled his seed inside of her.

He found the punctures in her throat which he hadn't yet sealed and opened his mouth to suck her essence inside of him again. Like honey from the gods. He wanted more of this woman, so much more. She mewled little moans as she came down, and he licked the puncture to seal the wound closed.

Her blood coursed and mingled with his, lighting him up inside, filling him with potent energy and strength. He reveled in the euphoric sensation, his heart so full, as she looked down and swept her mouth across his, lips trembling.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he whispered. The emotions shattering across her face spoke of too much at once. He couldn't make out their meaning.

“I'm afraid to lose you again.”

He frowned, then raised up and rolled with her, flipping her to her back. Caging her face between his palms, he settled his weight on top of her.

“Afraid to lose me?” he asked with a questioning smile. “I think you have that the other way around.”

A tear slipped down one cheek. “I didn’t want to leave you behind. Not when I’d just found you.”

“Found me?” He brushed a thumb high across her cheekbone, soothing.

She stared at him, her emotions still running high, flitting across her face too fast for him to decipher. But one he knew well, and that was fear. He swept in, ghosting his lips over hers then settling deeper, melting her resolve in one, heart-stealing kiss. When he pulled away, her eyes had softened.

“Now tell me what you mean. Found me how?”

She licked her lips, her lashes dropping to brush cream-white cheeks.

“Tell me,” he commanded in the voice he’d used during sex, the one that made her obey him.

She licked her lips again then finally spoke, the words rolling out fast. “Remember when I told you I used to dream about you?”

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t an exaggeration. From the night after I met you, you’ve been haunting me. Or I should say, the image of you. I thought it just a fancy. Nothing more than an infatuation. But it was a lie.”

All the while she spoke, Nikolai moved one hand down her shoulder and trailed his fingers lightly up and down the side of her ribcage, comforting strokes to keep her going. But he did not interrupt her. And she did not look at him. Taking a deep breath, she went on.

“But then you showed up in the flesh, and suddenly my world changed. No, that’s not right either. *I* changed. After the first time you drank from me, I wanted something I’d never wanted before. I’d been content to live here by myself with the hart wolves—and now I don’t know what to think of them—but regardless I wanted more. And *you* were the ‘more’ I wanted...that I still want. Not just a lover for now or for a few months, but for always.” Having said her piece, she let out a trembling breath, still

avoiding eye contact.

“Sienna,” he said gently, “look at me.”

She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Look at me,” he commanded again.

She relented. The vulnerability shining back at him—soft and fragile and precious—stole what was left of his heart.

“Now it’s my turn,” he informed her in similar fashion that she’d done earlier before she climbed on top of him and rode him like a seasoned seductress. “Firstly, we’re going to need to have a talk about your hart wolves. For they aren’t just wolves now, are they?” She opened her mouth to speak, but he laid a finger on her lips with a short shake of the head. “I know they’ve been your protectors for some time.”

He moved his trailing fingers to her throat, gliding the pads of his fingers softly over her delicate collarbone, lingering at her pulse. His fingers were gentle but he knew the look in his eyes was not, for putting her safety in the hands of anyone but himself made him want to snarl and bite.

“I’ll need to be sure they will continue to do so when I leave.”

Her eyes widened, fresh tears pooling. “You’re leaving me?”

He continued gliding his fingers down the center of her breasts, then circled one. Gooseflesh rose under his fingertips, her nipples tightening to peaks. His cock instantly hardened.

“This is what is going to happen, Sienna.” His voice dropped low, the sharp edge of aggression filling his words as he spoke slow and steady. “I am going to hunt down Volkov and acquaint him with the true meaning of pain before I cut off his fucking head.”

Trailing his fingers lower to her hip, he shifted over so he could caress more of her milky skin along her thigh.

“And then I’m going to Hiddleston to send word to Marius and Arabelle what has transpired in Dale’s Peak and the rising armies which that bitch,

the queen, is enslaving.”

He knew his words were biting, but he kept his hands soothing and gentle, his voice even and steady. He raised up with his weight on one arm, hovering over her, sliding his fingers lower while he held her gaze.

“Then I’ll come back here to your cottage. For if this is your home, then it is now mine.”

He slid his middle finger into the folds of her sex, still wet and wonderful. She opened her mouth on a gasp. He lowered and hovered close, still not dropping his weight, locking her gaze to his, whispering against her lips.

“Then I’m going to lavish so much pleasure on you, you’ll never want to leave this bed.”

He stroked deeper. She whimpered.

“Open your legs, Sienna.”

She did with a smile.

“I’m going to mark you deep, sweetheart.” He slid out his finger, then drove his cock inside to the hilt.

“Nikolai,” she breathed.

“That’s right.” He ground in a circle. “You’ll be saying my name a lot. You’ll be screaming it as well.” He gripped her hip, his thumb pressing on her pubic bone, then slanted his mouth over hers, tasting her deep, stroking his tongue and his cock to the same sensuous rhythm.

Her fingers curled into his shoulders, nails digging in. It felt glorious, pushing him harder. He didn’t let her up for air. No. He smothered her with his mouth, his hands, his body, driving into her hard and deep. So deep. He swallowed her long moan when he felt her sex clench around him. Only then did he release her mouth, hovering close as she panted out her sweet little whimpers.

“I claim you for life, Sienna.” He rolled in slow, then pounded hard at the

end. “My love for you runs deep.”

“Oh, Nikolai.” She scratched her nails down his back, pulling him closer, her lids half closed. She wrapped her heels to the back of his thighs, tilting her pelvis up.

He came on a violent shudder, filling her for a second time. Not enough. It would never be enough.

Afterward, he rolled to his back and pulled her with him into the crook of his arm and whipped the coverlet over them.

She nuzzled her cheek against his chest and wrapped an arm around his waist. When his breathing had subsided and the fire had burned down to glowing embers on the ceiling, coloring the wood beams orange, she whispered into the sweet darkness. “I love you, too.”

He curled her closer, brushing a thumb over her birthmark. It was changed, bigger than before.

“The hartstone marked you, my sweet,” he whispered into her hair.

“Really?” Her contented sigh eased his demons for the time being. “What does it look like?”

He stared at the dark scarlet mark, flaring out wildly on her shoulder blade. “Like a flower on fire.” He pressed his lips to the crown of her lovely head.

“Mmm,” was all she replied.

Nikolai felt her body go limp as she slipped off into dreams. He fell right behind her, sleeping for the first time since they’d left their lovers’ bed in Winter Hill.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sienna jolted awake, some sound pulling her from sleep. The room was full dark and steeped in silence. Then she felt Nikolai's body jerk next to her, his body covered in a sheen of sweat. He mumbled something incoherent, twisting his head away, a frown puckering his brow.

She shook him gently. "Nikolai...wake up."

In a blink, he sprang upward. She did, too, pressing a soothing hand to his heated back. "Shhh. It was a nightmare."

Breathing heavily, he thrust both hands into his hair, then collapsed back onto the pillow. Sienna leaned on one arm, staring down at him. Placing a gentle hand upon his chest, she whispered, "It was just a dream."

Finally, he turned his gaze on her, his expression unreadable as he studied every line of her face, lifting a hand to brush his knuckles over her cheek.

"It wasn't a dream, love." He dropped his hand to her thigh, curling his fingers possessively. "It was a memory."

She lay on her side facing him, curling her knees up. He kept his hand where it was between them. "Tell me about it."

He refocused on the ceiling, his breathing returning to normal. "I can't."

A single thought shot straight to her, the vicious words of Volkov as he gloated over her. *That anyone could love the former lieutenant, a monster in his own day from what I understand, is quite a shock.*

She didn't know how, but whatever disturbed Nikolai now had to do with

what Volkov said. It was an intuition, homing in on the source of his pain that spoke to her of Volkov's accusation and what she knew was true. Nikolai was still haunted by some past sin he kept close to his breast.

"Tell me, Nikolai. What is it that shadows your eyes so often? What are you afraid of?"

Silvery blue eyes shot to hers, flaring bright with his emotions riding high. "I can't," he repeated.

Needing to soothe him, to heal him desperately, she combed her fingers into his hair along his temple when a flash of memory pulsed through her. Not her memory, but his.

Absolute euphoria flooded his veins mingled with guilt, dread, and horror. Staring down at a beautiful dark-haired woman, her eyes glassy and lifeless, the vicious bite mark on her neck still trailing blood and pooling on the white sheet beneath her head. Head swimming, intoxicated with the potent mixture of blood and something else. He ran out of the bedroom and through the next chamber where Legionnaires laughed boisterously, some with whores propped on their laps, some feeding, some grunting on top of their women...

Sienna snapped back to the present, knowing full well she had witnessed a vision, a memory. Nikolai's memory.

"You didn't mean to kill her, did you?"

He flinched and stared at her, perfectly still. "What did you say?"

"The prostitute. The one you killed while feeding. You didn't mean to do it."

He bolted out of bed and peered down at her. "How—how could you possibly know?"

"I just saw it. I think...I think it is because of the hartstone."

He stared in silence for a full minute, his expression one full of loathing and disgust—for himself. "How can you even bear to look at me?" he

asked, self-hatred lining his face as he paced away from her toward the hearth and stirred the coals with the fire-iron.

Sienna slipped out of bed and put on a muslin wrap. She joined him, settling on the sofa and tucking her feet beneath her. Still nude, he stacked two more logs on the fire that he'd brought in last night.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked.

"No. I'm a bloody vampire, remember?" He stabbed the coals with the fire-iron, anger feeding his jerking movements.

He finally stood, bracing both hands on the mantel, inhaling and exhaling deep breaths. Sienna understood in that swift memory she'd stolen that guilt had racked him for ages for his crime. She also understood that in that moment of recognition of what he'd done, he was confused and horrified and intoxicated with something other than blood. It was a mistake and unintentional.

She roved his perfect body, the sinewy muscles down the side of his torso, his hips, his legs outlined in firelight, his golden hair falling forward. He was so perfectly beautiful that her heart fluttered. For he was hers. Without a thought or a care, she said what was on her mind.

"You are a beautiful man, Nikolai. Inside and out."

He looked in her direction, the firelight gilding his square jaw, pensive brow, and sensuous lips, proving him more than beautiful. Breathtaking.

"Don't say that," he bit out. "There is *nothing* beautiful about me."

"You are so wrong," she said gently.

"How can you possibly say that after seeing what I've done?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I didn't just see what you did. I felt it. No, more than that even. I read the motivations of those in your memory, the Legionnaires that were there. They'd gotten you drunk on purpose. I believe they even used a hallucinogen to loosen your inhibitions. Then they put you alone in a room with a willing prostitute, and your vampire took over,

unable to control the bloodlust.”

He stared at her in profound disbelief.

“It wasn’t your fault, Nikolai.”

“Of course it was. I drank her to death. I *murdered* her to satisfy my hunger and the beast who lives inside me.” He pounded his fist upon his chest over his heart, his voice a guttural growl. “I don’t”—he squeezed his eyes shut—“I don’t know how I did something like that. I can’t let myself lose control...around you.” He opened his eyes, blue-fire gaze burning back at her. “It would kill me.” The last he said in a broken whisper.

Anyone else would step away from the fuming man in front of her. But she was unafraid. His anger was turned inward on himself, not on her. She knew this as if she’d felt his emotions herself.

She stood before him and curled both her hands gently around his fist, then tugged. He resisted only a second before allowing her to pull his fist to her own chest. She uncurled his tight fingers, then splayed his hand over her own heart. Sienna felt the self-loathing flowing through his veins. A pulse of fire swirled in her chest, beating like the hartstone did upon her awakening in the forest.

“You are no monster, my love. Even if one lives inside you. Let that guilt go.” She pushed the fire from her chest and into his hand, up his arm, through his chest to wrap his heart and fill his body.

Nikolai’s grim expression softened, and his eyes filled with wonder. He crushed her body to his. Hovering his lips over hers, he whispered in a shaking breath, “I have carried that sin on my soul all my life. Willingly.” He brushed his lips against hers in reverence. “Then you come along, steal my heart, and wipe my slate clean in a single second. As if it were nothing at all.” He slid his fingers along her nape, brushing his thumb along her jaw. “Wash it all away with one look, one touch.” His words trembled. “How?” he demanded. “How do you do this?”

She brushed aside the blond lock of hair catching the firelight like a spark of fire. “There is no sin to wash away, Nikolai. The hartstone has shown me the truth. It only speaks the truth. You were not at fault. The soldiers, your elders were. You were a young vampire then. You didn’t know their intentions. They tricked you and used you for sport.”

“I could have stayed home and not gone with them that night. But my ego prodded me on when the senior officers chose me as their nighttime companion to venture into town.”

She cupped his hand between both palms and pressed a tender kiss to his lips. “There was no intent. You made a mistake. And you’ve never made it again. You cannot go back and change that night, so let it go.” She pressed her lips to his again, sliding her tongue in hesitantly. “You will never harm me. I know it as sure as I know you love me. As I love you. Let it go,” she whispered ardently, then glided her tongue deeper, tasting the heady scent of man that was Nikolai. “Let me take it all away.”

Her skin heated at once, tingling with the magic of the hartstone. Nikolai plundered her mouth, taking control with desperate hands and mouth. He skimmed his palms down her waist, over her hips to her thighs, inching up the fabric of her robe till he touched skin, easing his hands under to cup her bare cheeks.

“Up, sweetheart,” he demanded against her mouth before slanting and going deeper.

She linked her arms around his neck and let him take her weight, wrapping her ankles behind him, one on the back of his thigh, the other higher at the small of his back. He carried her next to the fireplace and pressed her back to the wall.

“Nik—” She gasped when he squeezed her flesh hard and thrust his cock inside her with a heavy grunt.

She dropped her head back to the wall. He groaned, scraping his fangs

along the tender skin just under her jaw but not biting, then trailed his tongue where his fangs had been, melting Sienna into a wanton, wild creature. This wasn't a slow burn or a tender coupling. It was raw and fierce, both of them staking their claim.

Sienna scraped her nails down his back, leaving welts in their wake.

Nikolai bit her hard and sucked and grunted with each pounding thrust inside her, squeezing her flesh tighter, sure to leave a mark. He captured her hands, laced his fingers with hers and pressed them against the wall, caging her in with his body, his heat, his force and power.

Releasing his hold on her neck, he locked on to her gaze, his eyes sparking like exploding stars as he embraced her in every possible way, caging her in till all she could see, think, or breathe was, "Nikolai."

Their breaths mingling, his voice ragged, he ground out, "I can't get enough, sweetheart. I want it all."

Arching her back and pressing her breasts against his chest, she relished the rough friction. She felt the fire within, her own magic simmer and burn, mingling with her passion.

"Then take it all," she said fiercely. "Let the beast go and take what you want."

His canines sharpened longer than she'd ever seen, but she wasn't afraid. Nikolai feared his beast would overrun him, but Sienna knew something he didn't. Despite his own misgivings and faults, he was a man of honor, a vampire with principle. In his right mind, he would have never harmed that woman so many years ago.

He was in his right mind now, his most lucid and focused frame of mind. He pulled out of her and released her hands. She kept them against the wall above her head as he hiked her higher with unbelievable strength till he looped his arms under her legs, her knees notched at his elbows. His hands free, he wrapped her ribcage and skated his mouth up her jaw, growling as

he went, slow and steady, licking a trail down her neck to her pulse. He lapped the place at the base that he seemed to adore the most, always giving it so much attention.

“When I fuck you, Sienna, the whole bloody world disappears.” He pushed his cock inside her, easing in with slow precision.

She sighed when he hit her deep and stayed there, grinding deeper. With her legs splayed in this position, she wasn’t sure he could go any farther. She rocked her hips forward and found she was wrong.

He groaned and sank his fangs into the base of her neck, latching on tight and sucking hard. His elixir poured through her veins, lighting up the sparks licking under her skin.

She plunged her fingers into his silky hair, holding him close as he quickened the pace, the nub of her sex grazing along his shaft as he drove into her.

He molded himself into her soft, pliant curves, slamming into her with the powerful force of his muscular body.

“Come for me, sweet Sienna,” he whispered and nipped her earlobe with a sting.

When he sucked on her earlobe, grunting with each aggressive pound, she let one leg loose to catch on his hip. He then slid his hand between their bodies where they were joined and stroked her tight nub, circling fast and hard. She came on a scream, clenching one hand in his hair and the other on his shoulder. He continued on, pushing her higher again so fast before she’d even come down, his fingers working her, demanding more.

“Not again,” she whispered on a short breath, dropping her mouth to his shoulder where she bit him hard, climaxing for a second time. Or perhaps the first had never stopped.

He pumped twice more, then held her fast as he spilled inside, his chest rumbling like dark thunder.

She could do nothing but hold on, letting her cheek fall to his shoulder, her body boneless. She had no idea how but he held her there, unmoving for a long time, while she did little more than pant and try to regain her senses.

He swept hot, open-mouthed kisses along the sensitive column of her throat, gentling her back down to earth.

It was then she understood the intense strength of a vampire in his prime. Especially when he shifted so her legs dropped together and he swept them up again, never allowing her feet to touch the ground, before he walked back to the sofa. He sat and tucked her head in the crook of his neck and began stroking his fingers in a languorous line up and down her spine. He grabbed the pastel quilt she kept on the sofa and covered her up.

She nuzzled even closer and inhaled deeply of his skin, that divine scent that made her knees weak the first time he bit her, filling her with that dizzying concoction of euphoria, intimacy, and desire that only Nikolai had ever given her.

He continued to caress her back and comb his fingers lightly through the long locks of her hair, soothing her into a dreamy state. When he kissed her crown and said, "Sleep, my love," she finally did.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sienna stood in her yard with Nikolai at her back and Allora in front, her mate and brothers in a semi-circle behind her. Snow had fallen overnight as Dane had predicted, covering the forest in a light dusting of white. The biting chill in the air promised more to come.

Sienna thanked the stars they'd shown up at dusk fully clothed. Though Sienna was certain after a full day of lovemaking following a full night, Nikolai more than understood she was without a shadow of a doubt his woman. But she also knew her vampire tended to be jealous, even when unnecessary.

Now that she took them in, they weren't exactly fully clothed. Allora was. She wore rough-hewn brown leather pants and a white tunic that fit her trim bodice and hung loosely past her waist with a thin leather drawstring at her breasts. She wore two tight braids along each temple, the rest of her flaxen-white hair in loose waves down past her hips. Her mate and brothers wore similarly made pants but no shirts. Bron wore a black vest made of roughened leather.

Sienna thought to ask if they were cold, then thought better not to mention their state of dress or the lack thereof. Their jagged and swirling tattoos inked over most of their exposed skin, giving their appearance a savagery that their rugged clothes only enhanced. At first glance, they looked little more than barbarians. But Sienna knew better.

“This is rather awkward,” she finally said with a shy smile. “Would you like to come inside?”

“No,” replied Allora, offering a smile in return. “We are not fond of confined spaces.”

Willow whinnied from her corral, seemingly anxious. Sienna couldn’t blame her. The horse had finally accepted the presence of the hart wolves only to see these strangers standing here, still smelling like the hart wolves that had watched over her while Sienna was gone.

“Over here then.” Sienna gestured toward a fallen pine log near the corral fence where she often sat and painted. Those days of leisure felt so far away.

Sienna took a seat first and Allora next to her, angling her body toward her. Not surprising, none of the men sat or even spoke. Crossed arms and feet planted apart, they commenced to dark brooding and glaring.

Allora took Sienna’s hand between both of hers. “How do you feel?”

A flush of heat crawled up her neck into her cheeks as she glanced up at Nikolai where he leaned against the fence, arms crossed.

How did she feel? She felt completely and utterly sated by her vampire lover. She could not say that.

Nikolai’s blank expression didn’t waver but his mouth ticked on one side as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. His penetrating gaze intensified the flush in her cheeks. She cleared her throat.

“I’m feeling well.”

Allora gave a knowing smile and her hand a squeeze. “It’s not every day someone is brought back to life.”

Curious, Sienna leaned forward. “What did the hartstone do to me? I mean, other than restore me to life. I feel as if something has changed.”

“She is able to read minds,” interjected Nikolai. “Or at least memories.”

“I see,” said Allora, not seeming surprised at all though her smooth brow

pinched briefly. “We don’t know what the hartstone has changed inside of you. It does not bestow the same gifts on the creatures it touches. It is a stone of making.”

“And it made you, didn’t it?” asked Sienna.

“Not exactly. It made my ancestors, giving us the duty to guard over this forest and the hartstone.”

“When did this happen to you?” asked Sienna. “I mean, your people.”

“Not long after the queen became the first vampire, thousands of years ago.”

Sienna frowned. “You always knew it was the queen and not the king who was the first of the immortals?”

She answered with a slight nod of the head. The humans and vampires alike had believed all along that it was King Grindal who had been the first of their kind, the one who’d killed his brother and had wiped out over half the human race in a blood frenzy, the first to experience *sanguine furorem*. But it had always been the queen who was now guiding her loyalists back into the age of darkness.

“And so”—Sienna cast a glance to Bron, Connell, and Dane—“you are all immortal, too.”

“All creatures can be killed,” Allora continued. “But yes, any being the hartstone touches with her magic is given unnaturally long life. This means you too will have long life, Sienna. The stone also transforms or imbibes one with a magical gift or power, just as it transformed the queen into a vampire.”

Allora’s gaze flicked to Nikolai. Sienna looked up to find his face still unreadable. The man’s expressions made her want to either shy away or pull him close, the mystery of what was going on behind those otherworldly eyes always drawing her closer.

“You see,” said Allora, “my ancestors were tribesmen of this region long

ago. The first generation of vampires had nearly killed them all till only four warriors were left standing. Those warriors sought solace in Silvane Forest, for it had already become a forbidden place for humans. But our forefathers, these warriors, had nothing left to fear with all of their clansmen and family dead. The stone only shows itself to those it chooses. And our forefathers were given that gift. Summoned by the stone, they were lured to its heartbeat and were transformed into beasts, into the first hart wolves. Each warrior became the leader of his own clan, his blood carrying the hart wolf gene which would pass on down the line to their clansmen. My mother had gone against her father in her choice of mate. She hid me and my brothers away from the pack with her mate, our father. But both our parents were killed by the queen's guard out on a hunt. And your grandmother took us in. She cared for us, raised us, kept us warm and fed. In return, we kept her safe when we'd grown, deciding to keep our secret since we preferred our wolf forms more than our human ones anyway. And so, when you came along, we wanted to protect you as well."

Sienna stared down at their clasped hands, Allora's delicate yet rough. Working hands. "I—I don't know what to say. I feel strange...the way I saw you before."

She never thought of them as she did her goat or even Willow, Arabelle's lovely mare, for she knew they were intelligent creatures with magic of the forest in them. Yet, she'd—

"Good *God*," exclaimed Sienna. "I've ridden on your back a hundred times."

Allora laughed that tinkling laugh of hers. This even cracked the grim expressions of the three men behind her. Sienna saw that they were devoted to Allora.

"I'm very strong in my wolf form. I never minded at all."

Sienna squeezed her hand. "Thank you." She stared up at the men behind

her. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me. And especially—especially for taking me to the hartstone.”

Dane cut in at that point, his voice a rolling growl. “That was not us, Sienna. The stone summoned us. We sensed you and your vampire drawing near.” His sun-gold eyes flicked to Nikolai behind her.

“Still. ” She reached up and took Nikolai’s hand. “We both thank you.” Though she was still unsure what the stone had transformed or awakened inside of her, she could feel a stirring of energy singing along her veins.

Nikolai said nothing but gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. Suddenly, he stood at attention, his chin up. Then the others. Allora dropped her hand and stood.

“What is it?” asked Sienna.

“Vampire,” said Connell next to his bigger brother.

“On horseback,” added Bron, a frightening growl rumbling from his throat.

“Wait,” said Nikolai, nose on the wind, stepping forward. “It’s my cousin. Riker.”

Sienna heard nothing for moments as they stood and watched the trail from the direction of the Glass Tower. Finally, she heard the steady pounding of hooves.

“Only one horse,” said Connell. The others said nothing, watching like the predators they were toward the sound drawing closer.

“No,” muttered Nikolai, voice quaking, as he walked forward into the clearing. He watched the trail as a horse trotted forward bearing a shirtless and bloodied Riker, hunched forward on his mount. “For fuck’s sake,” he swore, grabbing the horse’s reins.

Dane leapt forward and steadied the horse while Nikolai leaned up to help him down.

Riker bellowed in pain when Nikolai tried to pull him over the saddle.

“My legs,” he rasped, his voice thick and hoarse as if he’d screamed till it was lost.

Riker’s leather pants were soaked with blood. One of his legs twisted abnormally. A bone had torn through the tough fabric on the other side. His chest had been carved and sliced in cross-hatches.

“Oh God,” gasped Sienna, her hands to her mouth as she realized what they had done. They’d carved the word “traitor” in his chest.

They’d also cut one of his eyes out and slashed his face, several gashes bleeding and smearing dark crimson on one side.

“I’m sorry, Nikolai. I tried not to tell them where you were,” whispered Riker, leaning down to him. “I fought it. But it’s true...King Dominik’s elixir...it’s true.”

“Quiet now,” said Nikolai, gripping him by the nape and his shoulder. “Just quiet for now. It’s all right.”

“They’re coming...for you.” He glanced up, his one blue eye piercing Sienna. “For her.”

“Dane. Help me,” growled Nikolai.

Together, they pulled him off, keeping his torso level. Bron and Connell jumped in and held his legs. Riker screamed, his pain echoing through the woods, then he fell unconscious. His right leg was broken nearly in half, held together by his pants.

“Inside,” said Nikolai.

Sienna rushed to the door and held it open. After they carried him through, she jostled around them. “Here. Put him in the bed.”

Gingerly, they eased him down, but he felt no more pain at the moment. As soon as they had his head on the pillow, Nikolai sunk his canines into his own forearm then pressed the puncture to Riker’s lips. Riker’s throat worked slowly as he took in Nikolai’s lifeblood to try and heal the wounds.

“Who is he?” asked Dane.

“He’s my cousin,” said Nikolai, opening and closing his fist to work the veins and pump more blood into Riker’s mouth. When it started to dribble off the sides, he pulled back. “He planned to help us. To help the Black Lily.”

“What did he mean?” asked Sienna softly. “About King Dominik.”

“It is said his elixir has the power of persuasion. He must’ve bitten Riker.” Nikolai looked up at her with desperation and fury marking his face. “He wouldn’t have given up information about us unless he couldn’t resist.”

Sienna rushed forward and clasped his shoulder. “I know that.” She stared down at the unconscious soldier, mutilated and broken. “They did their worst and he still survived.”

“They let him live to torture me.” He trembled beneath Sienna’s hand. “To show me the pain they put him through.”

Bron, who’d stepped back to the open cottage door, sniffed with his nose in the air. “More of them are coming.”

“Good,” said Nikolai, his voice a blade of ice as he stood and walked for the door. “Let them come. Let them *all* come.”

Allora was at Bron’s side. “I will call upon the clans.”

“They may not come.” Bron placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You know that.”

“They will if they know there are vampires invading the forest for slaughter,” she replied. “They’ll have to set aside their differences for the good of the wood.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Go.”

With a sudden crackle of energy and burst of sizzling power, Allora shifted into her wolf form, tearing off out of the cottage and into the woods, a white streak against the white snow, howling as she went.

Nikolai turned to Sienna, gripping her by her upper arms, his face close to hers. “Stay inside, Sienna. Don’t come out. No matter what.”

“Nikolai. I think I can help.” Even now, she felt the stirring of fire within her gut, a swirling tempest of flame urging her to stand beside him. Magic. It was magic that whispered the flames to life.

The others filed out behind them into the yard.

“Sienna.” His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits as he squeezed her arms. “Stay. Inside. Do not come out. Do you understand?”

There was no arguing with him. She put a hand to his cheek and gave him a compliant nod.

“Let the monster free, Nikolai.”

His cold glare—which was not for her—remained in place as she stepped toward the door. Though dread shivered down her spine, knowing the queen would send many troops, her spirit buoyed up when she heard him say before she closed the door, “I plan to.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The beast he'd kept caged for so long crept from the darkness, craving blood and violence and death. And Nikolai finally planned to feed the creature to its fill. His favorite dagger in hand, long blade sharp and ready, he marched forward in the direction they would come, sensing the three men flanking behind him. The smell of horses was on the wind, lots of them. The hart wolves would sense them, too.

"They'll leave their mounts outside Silvane and come by stealth," offered Nikolai. "Look to the trees, not just the ground."

He sensed the change of energy in the air, knowing two of them had shifted. Nikolai glanced back to see Bron, now his fierce black hart wolf, trotting into the woods ahead of him. Connell was close behind him. Dane still followed behind in human form, a steady snow beginning to fall.

"The queen will have sent an army infected by *sanguine furorem*. They'll be savage. And thirsty."

"Good," replied Dane, deep voice rough as rock. "Desperation makes men make mistakes."

Nikolai agreed with a tight nod, swiveling to face the quiet woodlands, sensing the presence of his own kind drawing nearer. "I appreciate that you and your brethren are here, even though this isn't your fight."

Dane grunted. "Intruders in our woods, coming to harm one of our own. It is our fight."

Nikolai understood by the tenor in his rumbling voice that Sienna was to them one of their pack, a sister. He was suddenly grateful for them, for their protection of her all this time, long before he knew her. They'd kept her safe, a lovely woman living alone in the woods. So vulnerable. He could barely get words past his throat, thick with all the fear and dread of what could have been should she not have had her wolf guardians.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly, meeting the gold-eyed gaze of Dane.

“As I said. She is one of us.” In a blink, he shifted into the giant beast of a hart wolf, eyes narrowing on the woods as he trotted quickly on silent feet.

Nikolai marched forward, smelling vampire on the wind. “Come, you fucking bastards.”

He stopped on the path, standing in plain sight, and closed his eyes. He thought of Sienna—beautiful, loving Sienna—standing on a crate and pouring her heart out for the cause of the Black Lily, lying beneath him with trusting eyes and a more trusting soul, burning at the stake with pain marking every line of her face, dying in his arms and taking his heart with her. And coming back to life...

No way in hell would he let that go without retribution. Vengeance seduced him with the promise of blood and death to his enemies. The beast inside smiled at finally being unleashed to wreak hell and deliver pain.

Nikolai opened his eyes and watched the blur of vampires as they flashed through the woods, coming closer. He kept perfectly still, letting them come to him. Dead ahead, striding straight up the path was the one he wanted most of all. Gripping the hilt of his dagger and clenching his other hand into a fist until his knuckles cracked, Nikolai held steady. And waited.

Volkov strode forward with astounding confidence, arrogance, the tails of his black coat whipping behind him. Hundreds of vampires fell in line within the naked trees, branching out in staggering waves. Many of their mouths were bloody from recent feeding. The queen was arming her

soldiers in the most lethal of ways. Volkov came closer within a few yards and stopped, a grin widening his face with menace.

“It seems we have good news.”

Nikolai refused to answer, remaining frozen, as his beast crept forward, black claws pushing open the door, sharp teeth ready to rip throats.

“I’m surprised she survived.” Volkov lifted his head, inhaled deeply with his eyes closed, then opened them, ice-cold gaze boring into his. “But she most certainly did. I can smell her. So sweet. I’ll be so pleased to see her again. I wasn’t quite finished with her yet.”

“You will die before you step foot beyond me.”

Volkov laughed, the chilling sound echoing into the boughs. “One vampire against an army.”

“I am not alone.”

Volkov’s gaze flicked over the perimeter, finding no one at Nikolai’s back. Though hesitant, he spewed more filth, his voice low and grating. “This time, when I have her in my bed, I’ll take more than her blood. I’ll sate my hunger till she *begs* in pain and agony for me to stop. But I won’t. You can die knowing I’ll keep your red witch alive a very, *very* long time.”

And that was it. Nikolai’s monster broke through the cage. He charged. Volkov leapt forward on a snarl. In a swift maneuver, Nikolai bounded two steps up a tree, then dove on top of Volkov, embedding his dagger in his back with a satisfying crunch.

Volkov, pumped high with human blood, cried out and threw him off. He blurred several yards away trying to reach the dagger but to no avail. Nikolai smiled and sauntered closer, slow and steady. The army of Legionnaires circling. One helped Volkov and removed the bloody dagger.

Nikolai knew it wasn’t a fatal blow, that it would heal swiftly with the amount of human blood he’d gorged on. His intention wasn’t to kill. Not yet. He’d make good on his promise to his beloved. Volkov would know the

meaning of pain before he drew his last breath. With less confidence in his step, Volkov sidled forward flanked by three vampires on either side.

An eerie howl erupted. Volkov and his men swiveled to look behind them. Another howl shattered the silent wood. Then another to the east. And another to the west. Dozens of pairs of golden eyes gleamed from the shadows. Snarls and snaps of teeth came from every direction.

“Did you forget why Silvane Forest is forbidden to vampires?” asked Nikolai, marching faster with determination.

“Those beasts are no match for us.”

“We shall see about that.” Nikolai blurred forward to capture his prey.

...

Sienna wrenched her hands together, gasping when she heard the chorus of hart wolves echoing in the forest. The hartstone’s beacon urged her to join the fray, but she had promised Nikolai. So she paced by the hearth, waiting for news. Praying.

She’d cleaned Riker’s face and chest as best she could, soaking several towels with red. He’d not moved, but the gashes on his face and his chest seemed to be knitting together. She wasn’t sure about his legs. They’d been crushed brutally by heaven knew what. But he seemed to be in a very deep sleep while Nikolai’s blood healed from within.

When the door clicked open, it hadn’t been long, but she sighed with relief, thinking Nikolai had returned already. But the sickening figure who stepped into the room rolled her stomach with nausea.

“Hello there, milady,” said the ghastly Boris, grinning, canines extending long out of his mouth.

At once, she backed up, gripping the fire-iron behind her back. He circled in. She stepped away, putting the sofa between them. His expression was a mixture of wonder and wickedness as he perused her body from top to toe.

“Not sure how he fixed you.” He sniffed the air like a dog, wrinkling his nose. “You’re not a vampire. So that wasn’t the trick.”

She brandished the iron in front of her. “Stay *back*.”

He laughed. A guttural, frightening sound that raised gooseflesh on her skin. In a flash, the iron flew across the room and clattered to the floor and Sienna was pressed to the wall with Boris’s large hand wrapped around her throat. She gripped his wrist, digging her claws in, which had no effect. He dipped his head and leaned into her hair and inhaled.

“Mmm. Very sweet. But how’d you do it, witch?” His hard, black eyes held hers. “I watched you burn.”

Yes, he’d gloated in the carriage as he delivered her on the step of doom into the hands of more monsters who stripped her body and tied her to post, then set her on fire. A humming pulse swirled in her belly, blooming outward. She welcomed the fire-flower, willing it to open for her.

“Get your hands off me, creature,” she spat.

He grinned wider, his canines sharpening more. “Volkov has business with you first. But when he’s done, I’ll be happy to take the leftovers.”

The bloom spun into a spiral of burning energy filling her chest, bosom, arms, legs, hands. Boris flinched as he watched an ethereal glow emanate from her skin.

“I said, get your hands *off me*.”

By instinct, she punched out with her inner force, a pulse of orange flame leaping off her skin and scorching her attacker. He bellowed and fell onto the floor, clamoring backward. Filled with conviction, righteousness, and the need for absolute vengeance, she slapped her hand in the air toward the monster. A sinewy rope of fire extended from her wrist and wrapped his throat, sizzling his skin.

“You know what I am now, don’t you, vampire?” she said, knowing now what the hartstone had made her. “I *am* the Red Witch of the Wood.”

With a snap of her wrist, the fire-rope sliced through his neck and severed his head in a clean, cauterized cut. His head rolled to the floor, eyes and mouth still moving as it thumped against the wall, smoking.

• • •

The wood was alive with cries of agony and death. The black oaks stood as sentinels and witnesses of the carnage spilling vampire and hart wolf blood on the new fallen snow. Bron streaked by, leapt in the air, and attacked a vampire scrambling up a tree, shaking it by the leg till it was a mangled, twisted mess. As it writhed and tried to crawl away in the snow, Bron crunched into his throat and snapped his neck.

Dane grappled with two vampires at once, one clinging to his back and trying to sink his fangs into him. But the burly wolf was too ferocious for them, shaking them both off. He clamped his jaws on the face of one and shook till his head popped free. The other started to run, but Dane was on him, a paw between his shoulder blades as he ripped his head off, too. Dane swiveled and charged another leaping for his brother.

The packs of hart wolves filled the night with fierce growls and crunching bone and snapping limbs. Nikolai had no idea there were so many hart wolves lurking in Silvano Forest. But now he was glad of it. These vampire fledglings were hardly a match for skilled warriors.

Nikolai and Volkov had been in their own death dance for far too long, while the wolves fought several opponents around them, dispatching them quickly. Nikolai was ready to end it. They circled each other once more. Nikolai tore his ragged shirt from his chest and tossed the frayed garment to the ground, relishing the kiss of cold snow on his heated skin. They'd sliced each other several times, the wounds healing slower and slower.

Nikolai hadn't felt his own claws prick from his fingers in ages. The most primitive aspect of the vampire, claws extended only when more monster

than man took hold. Nothing felt better than tearing through Volkov's flesh and hearing him scream.

No. That wasn't true. The best was yet to come.

With an evasive lunge, he leapt and somersaulted through the air over Volkov's head. Landing directly behind him, he gripped him with his forearm across his throat, his other around his gut.

Even now, Volkov laughed, a maniacal sound knowing his life was at an end. "Tell me, lieutenant," he taunted, still using Nikolai's lost title.

"Dying words? Go on. Say them."

"Is this rage because I tasted your girl? Or is it because she liked me better?"

"Enough." Nikolai dug deep into the flesh of his belly and ripped, pulling out the sinewy muscle, hot blood streaming into the white snow with a hiss. Volkov screamed.

A tumult on the main path snapped his attention. Wolves still snarled and yelped nearby in battle with their enemies, his own kind. But vampire cries lit up the falling night along the trail. Orange light emanated from the gloom. Volkov was limp in his death-clutch as his lifeblood drained away, but not quite dead.

Nikolai dragged his body, an arm hooked around his throat, to the trail to see what new devilry had stumbled into the wood. There he found it was heavenly, not something from hell walking up the path. Frozen, rooted to the spot with Volkov still in his grasp, he watched in rapturous awe the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

Sienna was encased in gold, red, blue, and orange flames, her arms spread wide, palms up, the fire flickering from the tips of her fingers, sparking off of her crimson gown. The folds of her skirt billowed as she strode forward in long, confident strides, the downy snow melting as it hit her blazing aura. Her auburn hair floated around her head like a halo,

burning bright with copper flames. The sight of her was stunning, but nothing compared to her face. Glowing with an inner light, her expression was one of a woman who knew her power, of a queen newly crowned, of a goddess wielding retribution upon her helpless enemies.

The hart wolves stepped aside as she walked the path, falling snow melting upon her halo of golden fire. The vampires, bloated on blood and their own superiority in the throes of *sanguine furorem*, charged toward her. Nikolai opened his mouth to warn her, but there was no need.

One by one, she felled them all. With a flick of her finger, blades of fire flew from her palm and found their mark, piercing the heart of each vampire in her way, incinerating them into ash from the inside out. The first twenty fell at her feet with frozen looks of shock right before her fire filled them and they died in a pile of black ash.

“Sienna,” he whispered, unable to say anything more. Her name was a prayer of worship on his lips, the fire goddess lighting up the cold night with swift punishment for their enemies.

Volkov gurgled in his grasp. He’d almost forgotten. While vampires circled more cautiously, she drew closer to Nikolai.

“Let him go, my love.”

He stared in awe, this woman he loved with all his heart, burning in a halo of flame that didn’t touch her skin but rather kissed her with beauty and might. He dropped Volkov to the snow.

With one hand, she reached out. A curtain of flame shot from her body and lifted Volkov till he was hanging in the air almost in the boughs of the trees. He screamed, kicking and swinging his arms to no avail as the flames licked around his body.

“No mercy,” said Sienna. She pulled an arm back and launched a ball of blue flame from her palm. Hitting him like a cannonball, it spun him up into the night as he bellowed and burned far into the woods till they could hear

him no more.

With utmost calm, she sauntered forward to Nikolai, then faced the line of vampires encroaching on her right. “Fight with me, love.”

Shaking off the awe, he put his back to her to face the vampires encroaching from the left. “As you wish, sweetheart.”

Allora, Bron, Connell, and Dane circled in with them, readying to fight the vampire horde. They descended as one, falling in from the shadows and the trees, but they were no match for the hart wolves’ ferocity, for Nikolai’s skill, or for Sienna’s fire-magic. One by one, the vampires fell till the few dozen that were left alive limped and skulked away back to the Glass Tower.

Allora in her white wolf form stood on the path and howled. She was met with a chorus of chilling howls, the crystalline night shaken with blood and death and the eerie baying of hart wolves in victory.

Nikolai watched as dozens of wolves ghosted past him, a few casting him a wary glance before trotting one after another back into the darkness. Some of them had shifted into human form, helping one another to carry their injured. And a few of their dead.

Striding forward to Sienna, Nikolai caught her gaze. Her blaze dimmed, the flames sucking back inside her body as he drew closer, leaving her with a slim ethereal glow.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, noting the blood staining his bare chest.

He had no words, gathering her into his arms before he crushed his mouth to hers and kissed her deep. Her fire still simmered on her skin, warming him in the most complete way. With a groan, he pulled away and pressed his forehead to hers, cupping the back of her head and keeping her there as he rocked gently. She kept her hands wrapped around his waist, giving him the moment he needed to be sure all was right. He opened his eyes to find Sienna watching him with her sweet green eyes, sparks of gold still

flickering. All was so very right in his world.

A mournful wail broke them both apart. The howl was familiar.

“Allora,” she said.

Nikolai grabbed her hand, and they ran off the trail to find Dane, the man, kneeling over his fallen brother, Connell, whose lifeless eyes stared up into the sky where snow drifted down onto his bronzed face and body. A snap of piercing electricity marked Allora’s shift, then she knelt beside her brother weeping, cradling his head in her lap.

“No, dear Connell,” she whispered, brushing his chestnut hair away from his brow. “No, dear one.”

Bron stood silently watching, his black coat soaked in vampire blood, his head bowed.

Dane knelt beside his sister and gently closed Connell’s eyes. “Good night, my brother,” he whispered, the jagged tattoos covering his back, arms and chest seeming more stark and savage against the snow. With no words of anger or fury, he lifted his brother in his arms and walked away toward the heart of the forest. Bron followed. Then Allora, stifling another sob before shifting into her white wolf form to escort her brothers, one living and one fallen, to their clan’s home somewhere in these woodlands.

Sienna swiped a tear from her cheek and hiccupped on a sob. “We should go with them.” She stepped forward.

Nikolai stopped her with a gentle tug. “No, sweetheart. They need privacy now.” He swept her up into his arms. “Close your eyes.” He pressed her head into the crook of his neck to ground her as best he could before speeding her home. He needed to get her there. Safe.

After depositing her on the sofa and dragging out into the woods the body and decapitated head of the vampire he recognized as Boris on her living room floor, he returned and bolted the door. After a quick check on Riker, who remained unconscious, he started a fire, then pulled her into his lap on

the sofa.

They said nothing at all for a long time, the night's events sinking in with pain, regret, victory, and sorrow. He sifted his hand through her hair, watching the fire. She kept her head against his shoulder until finally, she lifted up and cupped his face with one hand, the world held in her sage-green eyes.

“Tell me we will be all right.”

“We will be more than all right.” He knew the despair breaking her expression into grief was not only about what they'd lost, about who they'd lost, but about who they might still lose in the future. “Listen to me.” Now he cupped her cheeks, sliding his fingers into her hair. “We will win this war. Despite losing Connell, and what they did to Riker”—he swallowed hard against his own pain—“we won this battle.” He swiped the tear rolling down her cheek with his thumb. “You won, sweetheart.”

He couldn't begin to explain to her what the sight of her full to the brim with the fire-power of the hartstone had done to him. The hartstone remade humans into beings with a power befitting their souls. Nikolai's love was made of fire and light. He'd always known this, but now she did, too.

She pressed her forehead to his as he'd done before. “I love you, Nikolai.”

His heart tripped, recognizing the truth and good in her words, which settled the beast within him so that he could tuck it away until he needed the monster again.

“As I love you, sweet Sienna.”

He tucked her close, her face nuzzled against his neck, and washed away the pain with soothing strokes and gentle caresses, just as the falling snow outside thickened and covered the bloody carnage in the woods. Time and compassion and comforting words would soften the battle scars of this night. Nikolai needed this to be so, for he knew the war was not yet over.

For now, he would hold this precious woman and her tender love close to his heart. He would let her heal his own long-suffering wounds, like jagged shards in his soul. He would cherish his beloved Sienna and strengthen for another day.

Epilogue

Sienna set the bucket of feed on the ground to latch the gate. Mildred baaed at her. “Oh hush. Go finish your breakfast.”

She’d been wondering how much longer Nikolai would be gone to Hiddleston and barely finished notching the hook in the latch when she was swept off her feet and into his arms. She squealed and kicked her legs.

“Put me down!” She laughed.

“No.” He lowered her slowly, sliding her body against his, keeping her feet off the ground.

Hooking her arms around his neck, she caught her breath. Or tried to. It was a difficult thing to manage, breathing in and out calm and steady, when your lover was Nikolai. When all he had to do was look at her a certain way with those blue-fire eyes, that heavy, dark gaze he’d give her which said everything he wanted and planned to do to her behind closed doors. And sometimes not behind closed doors as she’d learned last week while she was in the barn tending to Willow. That very look he was giving her now, his piercing blues fixed on her mouth.

She licked her lips, and his eyes darkened further still.

“Kiss me, Sienna.”

She did, always ready to comply. She opened her mouth sweetly over his, giving him a gentle nip. He cupped the nape of her neck and slanted his mouth to go deeper, showing her the kind of kiss he wanted. She laughed.

He growled. He didn't pull away until she'd softened against him and moaned in his mouth.

"I love that sound," he said against her lips, sucking her bottom lip.

"I love it when you make me make that sound."

That earned her a full smile from Nikolai. A rare and beautiful sight. He released her from his grip, setting her lightly on her feet, then looped the satchel he'd been holding over his shoulder and let it drop to the snow. He opened the drawstring and pulled out a square package wrapped in brown paper with a rope tie and held it out to her.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

Looking up at him from beneath her lashes, she held it close for it had some weight to it, then she pulled the bow and unwrapped the crinkly paper. She gasped when she saw the vibrant, scarlet material.

"Oh, Nikolai."

He lifted it from her hands, the wrapping falling away, and let the material unfold open. A gorgeous red cloak, finely made with a white silk lining and small stitching.

"I had her put in pockets for you as I know how your hands get cold."

Sienna stood and stared at him with adoration as he held it out for her to put on.

"Let's see how it looks."

She turned around and let him drape it warmly over her shoulders. He then fitted the silver clasp at the neck and lifted the hood up over her head. It felt luxuriously soft and cozy.

"Now then," he said, reaching a hand in to brush the apple of her cheek with his knuckles. "Almost perfect."

"Almost? I'd say that it is perfect, but Nikolai, you didn't have to go to all that trouble and—"

He lifted a red velvet box from his pocket and opened it. Sienna hitched in a breath, not quite grasping what she was looking at.

“How did you know... Is this the one...?”

“I know, because I made it my business to know what had caught your attention so thoroughly that day at the market. And yes, it is the very one you beheld...then put back.”

“I can’t accept it,” she said. “It’s too expensive.”

He chuckled and removed the diamond pendant of the wolf running with a shining ruby twinkling for the eye. He unclasped it and lifted her hair with the back of his hands on either side of her neck, dipping his head forward to latch the necklace while she continued to protest.

“Nikolai, I know that you’re no longer earning wages from the Glass Tower. I won’t accept something so extravagant. The cloak was unnecessary as it is. Now, we can take this back to the jeweler in Hiddleston. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

He finished latching it on her neck, then cupped her face and pressed a swift kiss to her lips, delving deep with his tongue.

She gripped the fabric of his coat at the shoulders and held on till he was finished, which wasn’t for several minutes.

“It is a gift, Sienna. You will accept it.”

“It’s too much.”

“It isn’t enough.” He brushed his thumb down her cheek and across her lips. “Nothing will ever be enough. But I will give you what I can. And you will accept it. This makes me happy.”

“But the expense—”

“Sweetheart,” he said on a chuckle. “Do you remember that I spoke of my father with a smallish estate in the east the other night?”

“Yes. I remember.”

“He left it to me, of course. And I might’ve exaggerated in its smallish

state.”

“Really? How much exaggeration?”

“It’s not small at all. It’s rather large.”

Sienna quirked a brow. “How large?”

He glanced up at the sky as if measuring. “I’d say about the size of Winter Hill. But with larger gardens.”

Sienna’s mouth went slack. “You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “My father was well respected and earned the respect of King Grindal. The king compensated him for his loyalty when he retired from the king’s guard.”

Sienna brushed that wayward lock of unruly hair that always seemed to fall over his brow. “I’d love to see it one day.”

“You will. When this war is over, I plan to marry you and take you there. I know you prefer the forest, but I’d like you to see it all the same.”

Sienna’s chest clenched as her face slackened for the second time. “Marry?”

His lips firmed and brow pinched together. “Unless...that is, if you want to stay here and keep things as they are, I’ll understand. I’ll stay—”

She leapt up and wrapped her arms around him with a laugh, her hood slipping to her shoulders.

He folded her in a tight embrace, molding her to his body, and dipped his face into her hair.

“Would you like that?” he asked on a husky whisper.

“I’d love that.” She nuzzled into his neck. “You want to marry me,” she said as a statement not a question.

They remained wound together. “My father had a chapel built on our land. There’s a wall of glass behind the altar so that moonlight would bathe my mother when he married her there in their midnight ceremony.” He pulled away, piercing her with his burning gaze. “I would like to marry you

there.”

He tucked a lock of her hair caught in the morning breeze behind her ear, tracing the shell with his fingers. She shivered.

“Will you marry me there, my love?” he asked so sweetly her stomach fluttered.

She placed her hand under his coat on his heart to feel the strong beat. “Yes. I will marry you there.”

“Good.” He smiled.

The distant howl of a hart wolf pulled their attention to the east.

“Did you get your letter away?” she asked, remembering why he’d gone to Hiddleston in the first place.

“Yes. I expect we’ll hear back from Marius and Arabelle in two weeks’ time. I just hope he doesn’t change his mind before then.”

“He won’t.”

After Allora and Dane had buried their brother somewhere in the heart of Silvane Forest with the burial rites of their clan, Dane approached them one evening to tell them he would join the Black Lily. Sienna had seen that look in a man’s eyes before. In Nikolai’s when he vowed vengeance against Volkov. Dane needed justice for his brother’s death. And the Black Lily needed strong, powerful men like him. The fact that he could shift into a vicious, deadly hart wolf at any moment was an advantage they’d keep between themselves and Marius and Arabelle for now.

Allora and Bron had come by every evening at dusk in wolf form since the battle in the forest. They patrolled and watched for another invasion from the Glass Tower. But none came. Their sunset visits at the cottage served to say all was well.

“I hope Riker is healing well there.”

“Marius will be sure he gets all the care he needs.” Nikolai was silent a moment, his heart heavy ever since they’d put Riker on a ship with Ivan

two weeks ago. "I did receive other news while in Hiddleston."

"What is it?"

"King Dominik's wife Queen Lana died in childbirth. It was a son."

Sienna gasped. "No."

"A *stillborn* son." He squeezed her reassuringly with a brush of his lips at her temple. "So it seems you needn't fear your prophetic nightmare, love."

Sienna nodded, but didn't feel any relief in the death of the northern queen and her infant son. She sighed heavily, turning her thoughts back to Queen Morgrid. "Why don't you think the queen has gathered her forces and attacked again?"

"From a military standpoint, I'd say she knows there is a formidable force living here in the forest that she doesn't yet understand." He tipped her chin up with one finger and traced the line of her jaw. "The Legionnaires who escaped will tell her of the red witch setting flame to her enemies as if she were burning parchment. As long as we remain here, you are protected. By the hart wolves, by the forest, by me...and by you."

"But we can't stay here forever. Arabelle needs us."

"No," he replied, taking her hand and guiding her toward the cottage. "We'll wait for word from Cutters Cove. Then we'll join the fight again. Friedrich suspects there may be allies among his people in the north. He plans to discover where his uncle and the queen are hiding and building his army through enslaving entire villages."

"I hope he finds them."

"He will. Friedrich may seem all charm and good looks, but the man is resourceful. He mentioned a spy around his castle, a schoolteacher, who may actually be on the side of the Black Lily. But he isn't sure and must be cautious with his uncle always on the watch."

"Well, till we're needed, we'll stay here," she said on a sigh.

A pang of dread settled in her gut. The last time she'd left the forest,

she'd been burned at the stake. Nikolai squeezed her hand and stopped in the doorway. Wrapping his fingers around her nape, he perused her face in a slow sweep, his intensity speeding her heartrate.

"Your life will never be in danger again," he ground out with such strength, she shivered. "I will not allow it. *Never. Again.*"

The pain Nikolai had endured when she'd died in his arms was more than she could fathom. She couldn't imagine the agony she would feel if harm ever came to him.

"I will shove a blade down death's fucking throat, and I"—he squeezed her nape, edging her closer till his lips were a hairsbreadth away—"I will always take care of you."

She did not argue or protest such a promise, for if there was anyone who could stare death in the face and defy its mere existence, it was Nikolai. She gentled him with a soft kiss and a sweep of her fingers into his hair.

"And I will take care of you."

"I know you will, my fire witch," he said adoringly. Then more softly, "My love."

"Let's not talk of death, Nikolai."

Another grazing of lips, his gaze growing darker.

She touched her fingers to the wolf pendant at her throat, cherishing him more than he could know. "Take me inside and show me life."

And so he did, sweeping her into his arms where he preferred her to be. He shut the door on the cold world and the danger, the future peril, the battles yet to come. He held her close in their bed, beneath him, and as he drove inside her body showing her the sweetest part of life, she saw in the spark of his blue-fire eyes the promise of a future wedding in a lovely chapel at midnight. With that promise in her heart, she could face anything. With Nikolai, she finally found the right path, the only path. The one where she walked at his side.



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Acknowledgments

To every reader who steps into the world of fantasy romance with wide eyes and an open heart, who longs for the lovely escape into a supernatural adventure, who cheers for love to conquer all, and who for a moment, despite the darkness, believes in the hope of happily-ever-after. To you I say, thank you.

About the Author

Juliette is a multi-published author of paranormal and fantasy romance. She calls lush, moss-laden Louisiana home where she lives with her husband, four kids, and black lab named Kona. From the moment she read *Jane Eyre* as a teenager, she fell in love with the Gothic romance—brooding characters, mysterious settings, persevering heroines, and dark, sexy heroes. Even then, she not only longed to read more books set in Gothic worlds, she wanted to create her own.

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