

Evernight Publishing



**DARK  
SEDUCTION**

Immortal Guardians

**KATALYN SAGE**



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## **DEDICATION**

For Tim, the love of my life and my very own Guardian;  
for Grandma Lorna, my biggest supporter; and for my  
girls.

Thank you for critiquing and editing the crap out of my  
screw-ups without strangling me to death.

# **DARK SEDUCTION**

## ***Immortal Guardians, 1***

**Katalyn Sage**

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*Destiny fused, product of love,  
Carried within a treasure.  
Counter born of unmoving draft,  
Fueled by secluded pressure.  
Essence awakened, powers unbound,  
The choice the beholder makes,  
Motions begin, balance upheld,  
Ascension not meant to break.  
But for this future to come to pass,  
The essence remains concealed.  
Only the bond a mate fulfills,  
Then will the time be revealed.  
The war proceeds, destroys, corrupts,  
Brought to the land of man.  
The council restored, justice ensues,  
The stronger side will stand.*

## Chapter One

“He asked you a question, human.”

Ally’s heart pounded, and her stomach tightened. All she could do was stay frozen in place, only able to stare at the two men who’d just walked out her parents’ front door. Had she reacted a little faster upon seeing them, she could have been out of sight before they’d emerged.

Ally hadn’t been that lucky. Tonight was supposed to be a fun evening with her parents and brothers, eating one of her mom’s delicious homemade meals, laughing and playing board games until her parents went to bed. But everything had changed before she’d even made it to the door. A gunshot inside the house had stopped her short, and she’d been rooted there ever since.

The man directly in front of her shot the other one an angry glare before facing her again. “Do you live here?”

“No.”

“How do you know the—” He glanced at the mailbox before facing her again. “—Stanfords?”

Every sense inside her came to life, telling her to lie, to preserve her own safety. But anyone who knew her would affirm that she was a really shitty liar. She’d never gotten away with telling one her entire life.

Ally tried to swallow her fear—not only fear for herself, but also fear of the unknown. Her family had to be inside the house, and she’d heard a gunshot. If she hadn’t been running late tonight, she would have been inside having dinner.

Fear reignited in her, refusing to be pushed down. Why had she heard a gunshot? Why couldn’t she hear any sounds from inside? Her youngest brother, Skylar, was always laughing. Why couldn’t she hear him? An all-consuming dread moved throughout her body. Deep inside, she knew something had gone terribly wrong inside the house, and she was standing face-to-face with the monsters who had caused it.

Rapists, serial killers, stalkers—none of them had anything on these two in the creepy department. She had never seen more intimidating people. They looked so similar to each other that they

could have been brothers. Both had buzzed haircuts and tribal tattoos wrapped around their skulls. Both men shared the same menacing eyes—jet black—if that was even possible. When light hit them a certain way, she swore she saw red gleaming back at her, but that wasn't the worst part about them. Their teeth all seemed to be capped with sharp, silver points.

“How do you know them?” he asked again, more forcefully than before.

Ally took a small step back from them, the timbre of his voice kicking her into action. He was on her just as quickly, his strong hands grabbing her shoulders. She cried out from the pain, but it did no good.

“Answer me!” Ally caught sight of those teeth again. If anything, they were longer than they had been a second ago.

“Make her talk,” the other one growled.

A sinister grin spread across his face. His eyes radiated a red glow that made Ally try even harder to escape his grasp. He opened his mouth as he lunged for her neck. Closing her eyes, she let out a blood-curdling scream. She expected pain. She expected death. What she didn't expect was to be thrown to the ground instead. The jolt of the hard, snow-covered ground momentarily distracted her. Her eyes opened once more as she stared up at the scene unfolding before her eyes. There were three men now, the same two who had just come out of her family's home and another one. They battled each other, the lone stranger fighting off the other two, throwing one off of him just as the other attacked. Sounds she'd never thought humans could make came from their mouths. Feral and loud, they were the kinds of sounds expected from beasts, not men.

Ally scrambled to her feet and watched as the three men fought. They were each brandishing weapons now, clearly not afraid to use them. The larger of the first two men stabbed the newcomer in the side, and his roar of pain rent the air. Ally couldn't hold in the terror washing over her, and a strangled cry escaped her lips. The newcomer shoved the other two away, still able to use his strength despite the savage wound.

Their eyes met. Hers were scared, and his were furious. The world seemed to slow around them as their gazes clashed. He seemed surprisingly familiar to her, as if she'd seen him before.

The world came crashing back as a one of the others punched him in the face. Their eye contact broke as he returned to fighting. Placing himself between her and his enemies he looked at her over his shoulder. "Get out of here!"

Ally's breath caught in her throat as she saw pearly white fangs descending from his mouth. The sight of those, coupled with the white gleam radiating from his eyes rendered her immobile. One of the other two lunged for her, but the newcomer blocked his path. The close call had her rushing forward, reaching the front door at the same moment her savior was thrown into the hedge that lined the sidewalk. She risked a glance at him just as he looked up at her. The glance was quick, but it told her so much. He hadn't meant for her to see that side of him. Whatever that side was.

He was back on his feet a second later, battling them once more. Ally slammed the door and slid the dead bolt into place. She could still hear the sounds of battle on the other side of the door. She only hoped it didn't find its way inside. Closing her eyes, she breathed a sigh of relief as she leaned back against her parents' front door. She knew being inside the house didn't mean she was any safer, but whoever that guy was, he was doing all he could to protect her from the other two. She'd been able to tell that much, even though his teeth and eyes had frightened her as much as the others' had. He was deadly and powerful, larger than life, and somehow more virile than any other man she'd ever seen before.

Ally's eyes popped open in panic, finally looking past the battle she'd just witnessed outside. She'd heard a gunshot when she arrived. A gunshot in *here*. Anxiousness filled her as she stepped through the living room. A pool of red liquid grabbed her attention. It was just inside the dining room, and as she followed it, her little brothers and her mother came into view, lying on the hardwood floor.

Anxiousness turned into full-on panic as she ran toward them. Blood pooled everywhere, surrounding their bodies. Tears streamed down her face, and her stomach was in her throat.

*Please, dear God, please don't let me be too late.*

Their skin had started to pale, their open eyes staring out at nothing.

*Oh God. What should she do? What should she do?*

She lunged for the phone and punched the button to dial.

Pulling it to her ear, she heard nothing but silence. She wished more than anything in this moment that her cell phone's battery hadn't died hours ago.

Ally started hyperventilating. She needed to help her family, but she couldn't think of what to do, her thoughts everywhere at once.

Pulses. That's what she needed to check. Ally returned to her mom to feel for a pulse. Her hand froze halfway as she reached forward, noticing her ravaged neck. She touched the other side, but felt nothing. Although her body was still warm, it had already cooled considerably. Choking on a sob, she crawled over and checked Trevor. Again, his neck had a huge hole in the side, and his heart no longer beat.

Ally pulled Skylar, her youngest brother, to her. "Muncher?" She cried and rocked her baby brother in her arms. No pulse beat in his little body. His neck hadn't been ravaged though. They'd gone for his shoulder instead. Ally gagged as her stomach heaved, but she still held Skylar to her. "Please wake up."

*Please let this all be a dream. Please.* She couldn't handle it all being real.

Ally opened her eyes again and searched their faces. This was real. Her family, the people who meant the most to her, had been murdered.

No. Not murdered. They'd been slaughtered.

A faint gasp of breath made her turn around to find her father on the other side of the dining room. In all the chaos of finding the others, she hadn't even realized he was there. His breathing labored, he lay there as a pool of blood spread around him as well. As opposed to the others, he'd been shot several times. The blood stained his white shirt a bright crimson. The shot to his chest appeared to have barely missed his heart, but that slight miss meant her father was still alive. He was still with her, but he wouldn't be for long if she didn't get him some help. Facing her little brothers and mom again, she shakily placed Skylar against her mom.

A gunshot sounded, and Ally realized the battle outside still raged on, but she couldn't worry about that now. Her father was what mattered right now. She rushed over to him and knelt by his side. "Dad, I'm here."



His eyes widened as he gripped her blood-soaked hand. “Alaina. What are you doing?” He gasped for breath. “You have to hide. They’re looking for you. They know who you are.”

Alaina?

She brought her hand up, wiping tears from her eyes. He wasn’t even making sense. “Dad, it’s me, Ally. You’re going to be okay. Where’s your cell?” She looked around for his phone. He always set it on the table when he was home, but she couldn’t see it. “You’ll be alright, okay? I just need to call 911. Oh, God.” She continued to scan the room looking for his phone. “What happened?”

Her father grimaced and tightened his grip on her hand. “We never told you who you really are, Alaina. Your mother...she didn’t want you to know yet. But you need to know. You need the truth...before it’s too late.” His breathing worsened and his body convulsed as he coughed up blood. Ally pulled him to his side as blood spilled to the floor. He rolled back, his eyes closed. “Didn’t know this could happen,” he whispered. Tears ran down his cheeks. “Listen, baby. Go to the bank...Get in the safe deposit box. And Phanes, you have to call Phanes.”

“Dad, stop it!” She couldn’t take him giving up. Her dad never gave up on anything. “We don’t have time right now. Where’s your cell?”

More gunshots sounded outside. Her dad’s eyes opened again, his gaze meeting hers. She felt it was the first time he’d really seen her since she came in. “Ally-cat...I don’t...I...They took it.”

“They took it?” No. No! Why did they have to take it? It was her only shot at calling for help! “Why hasn’t anyone come? Didn’t anyone else hear the shots? Or any of *that*?” She gestured to the front door.

“No one will come. They masked everything.” He coughed up more blood as he rolled to his side. Ally carefully patted his back until he caught his breath. “There’s so much we’ve never told you.”

“What do you mean they masked every—”

A beeping sound interrupted her, so loud and piercing it startled her. She looked around, her gaze dancing around the room as the beeps came faster and faster.

Her father's eyes widened again as he gripped her wrists tightly. "Get out of the house *now!*"

"Dad, no—"

"*Goddamn it!*" he yelled. "I've protected you my whole life. I'm not giving up now. Run, Ally. *Run!*" He pushed her away, and then he slumped back to the floor as if he'd used his last ounce of strength.

Ally realized then what was happening. She turned toward her father again and gripped his ankles. Heaving with her back, she slid her father across the hardwood floor, trying to block out the sounds of his agony-filled cries. The beeping continued to speed up, urging her to pull harder.

"I love you, Ally-cat," he whispered through his cries.

Tears flooded her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Her shoes slid repeatedly in the blood covering the hard floor, making her fall over and over again, but she knew they were almost there. She could see the front door. She'd save him. She wouldn't leave him here to die.

He was all she had left.

Ally's father pleaded with her to leave him—begged her to run—but she continued to pull him through the living room. He kicked, pushing her away from him, yelling at her to get out. Ally fell back, landing on the hardwood floor. She scrambled to her feet and lunged for him again. Just as her hands brushed his ankles, a huge, rolling flame barreled toward her. Heat slammed into her, throwing her backward as an explosion enveloped her.

## Chapter Two

Draven pushed himself off the hedge as the two demons barreled toward him. He dodged blows from both of them, narrowly missing their fists. He knew the two demons, a sense of duty rolling through him at the chance of fighting them off. Clay and Quenton, typically known as Q, were Damion's right-hand men and two of the highest-ranking demons within the Collective, the demonic organization out to destroy humanity along with most other creatures in existence as it vied for ultimate power.

Evil radiated off the two in waves. Had he not sensed them as soon as he had, the human female would have been their next meal. Just thinking of her sent a flush through his body. She was beautiful, more so than any other female he'd ever met.

And she felt familiar, which had surprised him when their gazes locked. He'd been so distracted by the shock he'd nearly lost the fight.

Draven turned his attention back to the fight just as the two demons separated, moving to take him from different angles. Q and Clay were from the Underworld. Their race had never been meant to reach this realm. Abassy demons were cunning and powerful, and they packed a killer bite. Their iron teeth released a poison that, depending on their mood, either killed or enthralled a victim. Staying away from those bastards' mouths was vital to anyone, no matter how powerful.

Draven continued to fight, dodging punches and kicks while doling out a few of his own. He hoped the Abassy's cloak was strong enough to keep their showdown out of human view.

Rule number one: it was in everyone's best interest that all Lore creatures, both bad and good, remain hidden from humans. Of course, humans weren't the only ones that weren't aware of the existence of other races. There were entire realms in the dark about how the universe functioned.

There were few humans who were "in the know" on supernatural business, but if anyone planned on blabbing it to the world—no matter if they were human or Lore—they were generally taken out before they had the chance. Centuries ago, creatures of all types were tried before the high council, both for exposing Lore affairs to humans and for causing shifts in the

delicate balance of the universe. Draven hadn't heard of a trial in ages, but it had been rumored that loudmouths often found their heads severed from their bodies, and supposedly that was a lenient sentence. Of course, since the council had been MIA for so long, no one knew what the hell to expect, though the council had enough of a reputation that even the bad guys didn't want to be on the receiving end of its wrath.

The Abassies finally made their move, charging toward him from two different directions. Clay reached him first and went low, wrapping his arms around Draven's legs, while Q plowed into his chest. Draven fell to the ground from the force of their tackle. The tang of alcohol and sweet smell of the female washed over him, telling him Q had gotten a lot closer to her than Draven wanted to admit. But that scent—her scent—was incredible. He inhaled deeply, reveling in it

Q took advantage of Draven's distraction and crawled over him, grabbing one of his arms and pinning him to the ground. He threw a punch right at his nose, but Draven twisted just in time. Q roared in frustration as his fist slammed into the snow.

Before either of the bastards had a chance to bite him, Draven threw the Collective demons off and sprang to his feet. He stood slowly to his full height, grinning at the demons while his fangs fully descended. Clay and Q peeled their lips back in response and showed him their gleaming iron teeth. They matched each other, look for look, in the immortal pissing match that was playing out in the humans' front yard.

Draven sized up the Abassies. Clay seemed somewhat incapacitated. As they battled, he'd grown weaker, stumbling and missing the mark whenever he threw punches. Overall, Q had done most of the work. Knowing which one was less likely to jump his back, he decided on his target.

He charged Q, and with a single bound, he was in striking distance to deliver a punishing blow. He pulled back his arm and let it fly forward. Just as his knuckles would have met the fucker's jaw, he heard a gunshot and felt his right bicep rip.

"Fuck!" He grabbed his arm and whirled around only to see the barrel of a 9mm pointed at him. Clay was barely able to keep it steady.

The bastard had *shot* him.

A growl escaped his chest and his eyes glowed as he stared down the half-assed demon. Sensing movement, Draven turned back toward Q only to see a fist flying toward his face. Draven barely dodged the blow and recovered quickly. He threw out a left-handed punch, saving his injured shoulder from the screaming pain swinging with his right would have undoubtedly caused. Mr. Badass flew backwards, his head crashing through one of the humans' car doors. His body went limp.

Another shot zinged past Draven. He turned toward the gun-wielding demon and curled his lip into a slow, sinister grin. Not even Clay misinterpreted his expression, even though he was clearly intoxicated. Draven was exhausted from numerous battles the last few nights, but he wouldn't let that fatigue ruin his chances at taking down the Abassies. It wasn't every night he got to go toe-to-toe with such high-ranking Collectives. And if he played his cards right, he would end both of them tonight.

That would put a kink into Damion's plans.

Draven rushed forward, using the super-human speed inherent in all vampires. The demon shot rounds at him as fast as he could pull the trigger, each bullet missing contact with his massive form. The Abassy's eyes widened with fear as Draven careened into him, sending them both to the cold, snowy ground.

They continued to fight for control. The battle had become easy now that Clay was growing drunker by the minute. Draven had never seen an immortal so inebriated—unless they'd drank their self into a stupor at the one local Lore-owned club, Pandora's Box.

Draven quickly took control of the fight, pulling one of his carbon steel blades from his holster. With one powerful stab, he pierced the demon's heart.

Clay wailed in pain, but Draven had learned long ago that he couldn't let the sights and sounds get to him. He had to keep going. A blow to the heart wouldn't kill the bastard, as it would many other creatures. Abassies had to be decapitated and their remains burned in order to finish them off, but a hole in the heart would sure as shit stop him from fighting as Draven sliced through his neck.

Draven pulled the dagger from the Abassy's chest, which earned him another agonized cry. As Clay started begging for his

brother's help, Draven sawed his dagger through the demon's neck. Blue blood sprayed everywhere as Clay screeched, until—finally—his head was severed.

Draven turned around to face the other threat, in case Q had woken, but as he turned, he saw that the Abassy was no longer there. Draven used his senses to try to get a bead on the demon, but he couldn't sense him in the immediate vicinity.

His attention was drawn toward the house as he heard a commotion on the other side of the door. Just as he picked up on the female's voice, the house exploded before his eyes.

Glass shattered as the family's flaming Christmas tree flew through the window and hit the snow before rolling down the front yard. The door broke in two as a body crashed through the opening. Draven's keen vampire senses picked up on who it was, and he was on her in an instant. The door pieces landed in the snow, but he caught the female before she actually slammed onto the frozen ground.

He did a quick check over her. She was out cold, but she was alive. Blood and soot caked her skin, and her hair and clothes were charred. The overwhelming scent of blood assaulted his nose, not only from hers but that of four others. He knew then that there'd been others in the house and that none of them had survived. Draven's gaze shot over to Clay's body, which had caught fire during all the chaos. The blue flames bellowing from his body had started to reduce him to ash. Normally he would stay on scene until the clean up was done, but there was no time tonight.

Holding the female in his arms, he ran toward the street. Spotting a small SUV, he wrenched the door open and slid her in the backseat, situating her in as comfortable a position as he could. He removed his trench coat and placed it over her. Her head slumped against the seat, but he reached forward anyway, gripping both sides of her head. He closed his eyes, willing her to remain asleep, willing her to remain calm. He needed time to figure out what the Collective was doing here as well as what they'd wanted with her and her family.

Draven slid into the driver's seat and started the car. Throwing it into gear, he peeled out and made it down the street just as four police cars came screeching to a halt in front of the

burning home.

## Chapter Three

Ally opened her eyes as a big, muscular man placed her on her bed.

He removed the warm blanket she had been wrapped in, exposing her to the cooler air in her room. A shiver escaped her as she took in the man before her. She stared at a pair of jeans that hugged the nicest butt she'd ever seen. Her gaze slid up his body, finding rippled muscles and golden-tanned skin under a black wife beater.

She'd always been a sucker for bad boys in wife beaters. And those arms...

*God, they're as big as my thighs.*

It had been *far* too long since she'd had a dream like this. She hardly noticed what he was doing as he removed blades and guns that had been hidden all over his body. She almost missed the harness that he'd been wearing until he slid it off and it thudded on the floor.

Ohhhh. He *was* a bad boy.

Ally had to force herself to pry her gaze from the perfection of his body. She just *had* to see his face. She needed to know the man she dreamt of. She drew her eyes up. Up past his hard chest and broad shoulders, she finally reached the perfection of his face.

Oh. Yeah. This one was definitely fantasy worthy.

Dark brown hair framed a chiseled face. He had light green eyes, a thin nose, perfect lips, and just the right amount of stubble dusting his jawline. She absently nodded at a question he'd asked, not knowing or caring what he said. His resonant voice sent chills through her body.

And then he removed his shirt.

Ally felt a rush of heat run through her as she saw his bare upper body. He truly was a thing of beauty, the broadness of his shoulders and back well muscled. He even had a black tattoo that started on his left shoulder, and as he turned to face her again, she saw that it wrapped around and ended on his left peck.

She wanted to lick every inch of it.

Ally could hardly think clearly as he dropped his pants. She gasped at his near-nakedness. He was more ripped than any man had a right to be.



Only his black boxers remained.

He approached her and she caught sight of another tattoo on his arm. It looked like one of the daggers he carried surrounded by an intricate design. He wound that arm slowly around her back as his other arm slid under her legs. He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom as if she weighed nothing. He started the water and waited until steam filled the room before he carried her to the shower.

Ally looked up at him as his gaze slid to hers. He let go of her legs and slowly lowered her down his body until her feet touched the wet tub floor.

It was at that second Ally noticed his mammoth size.

She wasn't tall by anyone's standards, not at her measly five foot one, but this man's body completely blocked the water from hitting her. He stood probably a foot and a half taller than she did, making her feel more petite than she'd ever felt before. He was probably somewhere around six and a half feet, if not taller. But that's not what made this man unforgettable. It was his muscular build that took her breath away.

Where had she seen him before? She must have seen him somewhere, otherwise she wouldn't be dreaming of him. Had he shopped in the store she worked at? Or maybe he was in a movie or on a billboard. Or hell, maybe she had seen him in a magazine. He was gorgeous enough. That had to be it. No one looked this good without some digital touch-ups. He was *too* perfect.

Even his scent awoke everything female within her. Whatever spicy cologne he was wearing had pheromones that were definitely working for her.

Mr. Fantasy reached down and started pulling her shirt up. He paused briefly and stared into her eyes as if to ask permission.

"God, yes." She tried to make it sound like he wasn't turning her on, but the most she could manage was a whisper. His stomach muscles jumped at the sound of her voice, and her breathing quickened at the sight.

He pulled her shirt off, and she placed her hands on his chest. She couldn't resist the urge to run her fingers down the hard ridges of his stomach. She'd had the impulse to touch this chiseled perfection ever since he'd taken off his wife beater. When she started drawing her fingers back up to his chest, she felt the rumble

as a growl escaped him.

Excitement flooded her yet again. She flashed her gaze up to his eyes with a side grin.

*Oh yeah, grrrrrrrowl for me, baby!*

Yeah, like she'd really say that—not even in a dream could she be so bold. But she wanted to hear it again, so she repeated her gesture, running her fingertips up and down the hardness of his body. He growled again, causing her excitement to go up a notch. “What’s your name?”

“Draven.”

God, his voice was so sexy. He had a deep baritone that vibrated right through her, igniting parts of her she hadn't known could be excited by the mere sound of a voice.

“Draven.” Ally purred. She continued to trail her fingertips over the ropes of his stomach. Electricity hummed through her, beginning in her fingers, traveling through her veins.

Wicked thoughts ran through her mind as she felt the chords of his muscles tense under her touch. She quickly shimmied out of her pants and bra before tossing them from the shower. She slid her lacy thong down her legs in a slow seductive manner. Draven watched intently as she bent slowly until it reached her feet. She stood up straight again, lifting her leg. She kicked, flinging her thong from her foot, and her toes slammed right into the side of the tub.

*Ow! Dammit! Dammit! Clumsiness did not usually find its way into her dreams!*

Frustrated, she bit back the pain from stubbing her toes. She needed to find a distraction to get her mind off it. She eyed him again.

*What. A. Distraction.*

His erection strained against his soaked boxers.

Ohhhh, the wicked thoughts.

Based on the size of that bulge in his boxers, she was convinced that at any moment it would rip its way through the cloth.

She looked up at Draven with a sexy smile, despite her nerves. There was something realistic about this dream, more so than any fantasy she'd ever had.

Draven reached around her, grabbing some body wash

from the edge of the tub. Once he poured some into his hands, he lathered them up and started rubbing the soap over Ally's body. God, his hands felt good on her. His skin was kind of rough, but the feel of his hands made her want to moan.

He started at her shoulders, massaging her arms before continuing slowly down her back and stomach. His hands were strong, and yet so gentle as they skimmed over her skin. Goose bumps spread everywhere he touched.

He went further down to her legs as he knelt in front of her, lathering up her thighs as he went. Water started hitting her legs and soaking Draven's hair as he worked over the lower half of her body. She'd never had a full-body massage before, but the man before her was clearly a master at it.

She watched him lick his lips as he stared at the junction of her legs, his eyes rapt on that part of her body. Only that area and her breasts had been skipped so far, and Ally ached to have him touch her there. Her body craved more of his sensual touch.

Different emotions spread across his face as Ally watched him. Hunger. Lust. Awe. Even uncertainty.

He kept soaping and kneading her legs, staring at her sex, but he quickly shook whatever idea he'd had out of his head and stood back up. He stepped around her and led her under the stream of water. Luxuriating in the feel of it, she closed her eyes and lifted her head under the warm spray of the shower, letting it soak through her hair. She grabbed her shampoo and sudsed up her hair before letting the soap rinse from her hair and body. If he wanted a clean body, he was going to get one. She couldn't wait to do all the wicked things running through her mind.

She opened her eyes, noticing Draven's gaze riveted to her breasts. He watched as the water sluiced down her curves. She could see the hunger in his eyes. Wagging her eyebrows, she pegged him with a grin. "Your turn, big boy."

"No, Ally, I'm fine."

"Uh, uh. I want you to feel as good as I do, and you've made certain that I feel pretty good."

Against his half-assed protest, Ally put soap on her hands and started lathering his chest. He shivered at the light touch of her fingers as they glided over his hardened nipples. She was still shocked at the hardness of his body. His pecks were hard and tight,

and his muscles pulsed with every caress. He placed his hands on her hips and kneaded them as she massaged her soapy hands over his shoulders and arms. He flinched, but remained quiet. Pausing her ministrations, she noticed the wound on his arm.

Ally looked up at him and found that he was still staring down at her with half-hooded eyes. The pain apparently hadn't been enough for him to lose his arousal. She couldn't complain. The way this man looked at her made her feel incredibly sexy, made her feel more desirable than any other had ever made her feel, even if she was making all of this up in her dream.

The wound forgotten, a wave of excitement shot through her as she perceived his needy gaze. Normally, the men in her dreams took charge and ravaged her right away, but apparently this one was a little different, and yet all the more titillating.

Feeling bolder than she would otherwise, she pulled her left leg up and set her foot on the edge of the tub. Draven's gaze went straight down to her spread legs. Stepping closer to her, he pressed his erection to her stomach. They both let out a moan at the contact.

Ally lifted her chin to him, angling for a kiss. Draven's green eyes started glowing as he stared at her parted lips. Light literally gleamed from his pupils. Her gaze slid further down to his remarkable mouth. He had gorgeous lips, ready for kissing, and his tongue kept darting out as if he'd had the same thought. Also, he had the cutest fangs poking out from under his top lip.

She paused, staring. *Fangs? Are those fangs?*

Yes. Yes, they were. And they were getting longer as she stared at them.

Just like another part of him.

Her heart leapt at the sight of his fangs, partly from fear and partly from pure excitement. And okay, partly from the feel of his engorged sex as it pushed against her stomach. She'd never dreamt of a vampire lover before, if that's what he was supposed to be.

Draven wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips to hers. Their lips barely touched, but it sent a warm, pulsing sensation through Ally's body. His kiss was so soft, so tender, that she melted right into him.

Her body practically begged for more.

Oh, this man knew what he was doing. His entire body was made for sex, and it was clear that he knew how to use every part of it.

Draven pulled away, breathing heavily. He slowly opened his eyes before his brows furrowed. "What are you?"

She raised an eyebrow at him and smiled. "I'm whatever you want me to be." Oh, she liked this naughty streak in her.

"Your eyes are glowing."

"Mmmm." She nodded. "Well, it *is* a dream. Anything's possible. Please, Draven, *take me*."

Draven closed his eyes as his head fell back. "Dream." He groaned. Shaking his head, he picked Ally up again. As he stepped out of the tub, the water shut off. She realized he was taking her to the bedroom when he wrapped a towel around her.

*Oh! Yes, yes, yes!*

Draven threw another towel over his shoulder and continued carrying her into the bedroom. He placed her on the bed and turned away. Ally closed her eyes for just a second, imagining what was to come. When she heard wet fabric sliding down his legs, she quickly looked over, but he had already wrapped a towel around his waist.

*Damn it!*

Draven turned around as if he'd heard her thoughts, and she made no attempt to hide the disappointment on her face. He barked out a laugh as he crawled into bed. Leaning on one elbow, he looked down at her, his fingers tracing up and down her arm. Little tingles spread through her at the light touch of his fingertips.

"Ally, you're in need of protection right now. Just until we figure out what's going on. I'm here to make sure you're alright."

"Stay as long as you like." *Wouldn't mind if you'd get completely naked though.*

A smile played at his lips as he looked over her. "Would you like me to heal you?"

"What? How can you heal me?"

"A sip of my blood will have you well on your way."

Ally's nose crinkled at his suggestion, but she finally gave him a nod.

Draven scored his wrist with a fang and held it out to her. She grabbed his wrist and slowly, hesitantly, pulled it to her

mouth. After a tentative lick of the opening in his wrist, she looked up at him in shock.

It tasted *so* good!

Never could she have imagined that blood could actually taste good, and his tasted *amazing*. She quickly placed his wrist against her mouth and drew, gently sucking on the warm liquid that flowed in his veins. It filled her mouth and slid down her throat as she swallowed gulp after gulp. Before she could stop herself, she bit him. Hard. She moaned, barely registering that he moaned at the same time. She sucked harder, her hunger for what he provided growing. She drank and drank until she had her fill. Releasing her hold on his wrist, she reclined on her pillow, licking and sucking all traces of his blood from her lips.

That had been a surprisingly sexual experience. The act, nearly making her orgasm. She'd have gone over the edge had she not stopped. It wasn't something she could explain, but the taste of his blood brought hers to a boil.

Ally opened her eyes and looked over at him. His eyes were filled with longing. She studied him as he dropped his gaze from hers and swept his tongue over his wrist. The wound closed before her eyes.

"Could I heal you that way?" Her gaze darted to his injured arm.

Draven's eyebrows popped up and he froze. He remained that way for a few seconds before his brows furrowed and his fangs enlarged. "You're not scared of me?"

"Should I be?" Ally teased. "Why would I be scared of you? You're my protector, remember?"

Draven pulled his lips back a little as his fangs came out in full force. He stared at her neck, his eyes glowing.

"I can't." He closed his eyes and turned away, sitting on the far edge of the bed.

"Hey," Ally said as she touched his shoulder. "I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that you're helping me, right? Let me repay you. Besides, I feel like you want to, if that makes any sense."

Draven turned back toward her, his eyes still glowing with hunger. "I won't hurt you."

"I know you won't hurt me. Take me, Draven."

His eyes slid closed momentarily. Whether he was savoring this moment or having an internal debate with himself, she didn't know. He opened his eyes again and held her gaze as he pulled her wrist to him. With tenderness, he slowly bit into her flesh. Ally jumped as he pierced her skin, but the sting of it wore off quickly. He immediately pulled his fangs back out and gently kissed the puncture holes.

"I'm okay." Ally grinned at him.

He looked up at her with such an adoring smile. She instantly forgot the pain she'd felt and just wanted his mouth on her skin again. "Do it again."

Draven's lips closed over her wrist again as his fangs pricked her skin. The pain quickly subsided, turning to pleasure as he pulled blood from her vein. He kept his eyes on hers, and she could see the passion in them. She knew what he was feeling because she had just felt it herself. Her hormones sizzled as he took her blood. After what only felt like seconds—far too soon, really—she felt him lick her wrist. It was over. It was done.

The holes sealed within seconds, just like Draven's had, and within seconds, his lips were on her skin again. The tender kisses tingled throughout her body, as if her body craved his touch.

"Thank you." He lay down on his side and pulled her to him. "Now, rest easy, little one. I'll protect you tonight."

Ally reveled in the warmth that surrounded her. She didn't understand how, but his skin had grown even warmer than it had been earlier, and that warmth spread to her. Never before had she felt so adored, so cherished. He had looked at her as though she had given him the world. She didn't need to have sex in this dream tonight. It was clear she was dreaming of something far more meaningful than that. She was dreaming of love. Of partnership. Giving and taking. She snuggled in closer to him and sighed with contentment as she lay wrapped in his arms.

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Draven remained awake, holding the little female he'd stumbled across earlier that night. She was so beautiful lying there in his arms.

He thought of what happened earlier, his memory playing over and over again.

While he and Ally were in the shower, he'd meticulously

checked over nearly every inch of her body. She'd been bruised, burned, and even had cuts in numerous places, but her desire for him had trumped the need to care for her injuries. Sure, he'd desired her even before he'd sensed her arousal, but he'd been able to tamp down that need. Except, when he'd seen and scented her arousal, all reasoning had flown right out the damned window. He'd been tempted to take her right there in the shower, had been about to, even.

That's when she'd muttered the word "dream," stopping him dead. No way would he take a female when she wasn't aware that it was real. So, he'd been a good boy. A saint, some might say, by taking her to bed—and *not* for sex. Then, like the dumbass he truly was, he'd offered his blood to her so her wounds could heal. If he'd been smart, he would have taken her to a human hospital, but taking her there could have risked her safety. Collectives could be anywhere. In any case, vampire blood was a much better healer anyway.

Not that he should have healed her that way.

Watching her drink from him had been utterly amazing. He'd always taken from others, but only once had he given his blood to another. It had been so long he'd forgotten the feel of it. His only other experience of giving his blood had been with his Fated. She too had been injured and in need of his blood. Of course, she deserved his blood as his Fated, his reason for existence.

He wasn't sure why he'd allowed Ally to take from him, but the moment she placed her soft lips to his wrist, he didn't want her to stop. Her first reaction to tasting his blood? She looked at him in awe, and he couldn't ignore the instant hard-on he got when he saw blood running from her lips.

The little sex kitten had licked the dripping crimson from her lips by swooping her tongue over the soft, pouty flesh. He hadn't realized he had licked his own lips and fangs until she beamed at him.

Never before had he seen such a sexy mouth in his life. In fact, she had to be the most beautiful female he'd ever beheld. Ally's pink, juicy lips were made for kissing, and seeing blood on them made him want to taste them again with an unwavering need.

One which he denied.



Remembering the sight of her in that state shoved all thoughts of his missing female right out of his head. She couldn't have had nearly the appeal his Ally had.

No, no, no. He did *not* just think *his*.

He just needed to get information from her, and then he'd be on his way. She wasn't his. He'd already had a female, a Fated one. He couldn't be thinking this way about Ally. He'd already had a chance with a female, and he'd lost her.

That was it. That was all.

His mind replayed their exchange again. He wanted to feel those blunt human teeth bite down on him again. When he'd felt that pressure, his arousal had spiked. Again. His head had fallen back, it had felt so good. And when he heard her moan as she enjoyed his blood, it made him want to give her more. And gods, didn't he love giving it to her. His erection throbbed—then and now—as he thought about all the ways he could please her.

No. He couldn't please her. He had to move on and get out of her life.

Well, he *could* please her, but he *shouldn't*.

He thought back to when she'd released her teeth from his wrist and lain back on her bed in contentment. Her skin had developed a healthy glow. He hadn't realized until then how pale she had looked earlier. Her hair no longer looked scorched, but rather now shone a brilliant sun-kissed blonde. She was positively radiant, and he'd already thought her stunning before.

Oh gods, when she let him feed from her...

Her decadent taste filled his mouth, shooting his entire body into hyper-drive. Much to his amazement, his erection had gotten even harder, aching to be inside her. Had he ever wanted someone so much as he wanted this little female?

Her blood tasted sweet, a hint of strawberries and cream. Tasting the sweetness in her blood had made him want to taste her fully, made him wonder what she'd taste like if he sampled her sex. She would have willingly let him. Now that they had shared blood, they could sense each other's emotions.

As Draven had drawn on her blood, he'd felt power coursing through his body. There was something incredibly strong about her, so much so that the power still thrummed within him.

He'd also sensed something else, an awareness deep inside

he'd never hoped to feel again, but he couldn't think like that right now.

He just needed to get information from her and get out. He couldn't be messing around with a human female, they couldn't know anything about the Lore.

Oh gods, what had he just done?

Stupid. Bastard.

He'd just shared blood with Ally—a *human woman*—and now for days they would share a blood-tie. That type of bond was only meant for the lover he'd had many, many years ago, the lover he still felt long after she'd disappeared. Had he not shared that undeniable tie and known that she had been fated to him, he wouldn't have hesitated to take Ally tonight. He wouldn't have become a celibate SOB over the last few decades if he hadn't felt that bond.

No, Ally was just similar to his female. There was no way she and his Fated could be one and the same. He'd never heard of the Fates giving anyone a second chance at something as strong as a Fated mate. Those bitches got off on making people miserable.

As long as he and Ally didn't keep taking of each other's vein, the bond would fade in a few days. And as bad as he wanted to bed her, he couldn't. He couldn't force them into a deeper bond without knowing her better.

Even though she wanted it.

Oh, she wanted it. He could feel just how much she desired him. She wanted him as much as he craved her. Maybe he'd wake her from her slumber and give her some of what she desired.

*No, dammit!* He needed to get his damned mind off of her.

Tomorrow he'd find out more about this angel. He'd figure out why he felt a connection to her and why the Collective would be interested in harming her.

Yeah. Tomorrow he'd get the information from her and be on his way.

## Chapter Four

Damion paced the office within his manor, which also acted as headquarters for the demons who served his cause. The Collective had been created by both Damion and his master over a century ago.

When he'd first come to the human realm, he'd initially set up shop in Manhattan. He still owned a building there, not wanting to lose a backup location. When he'd arrived here, he'd had no idea what exactly he was searching for. Only in the last couple decades had he realized he'd been closer than he'd ever thought, and yet still not close enough. After years of probing the area, he and his demons were drawn further inland, and now the Collective's main headquarters was in Newark, New Jersey.

If everything went as planned, his army would continue to grow and spread more heavily throughout North America and eventually the world. Soon, humans and other worthless creatures would become slaves to his kind. Earth would no longer be considered the human realm as it always had been. Although the term "human realm" no longer seemed fitting, as it had become a central hub for all Lore creatures because it had always been the safest.

But not for long.

The Earth realm would be his to do with as he pleased. Lore would no longer hide from humans. Instead, humans would hide from them. They were meant to serve vampires anyway, and anyone who protected them deserved to die.

Including the Guardians.

Damion continued to pace in front of his desk, hoping Clay and Q hadn't failed him. He should have followed his gut and gone himself, but he was born a leader and had to delegate responsibility. Clay and Q were some of the best he had, and although they weren't actually vampires, as he would have preferred, their race was as close as one could get. As Abassy demons, they could survive on blood, but they couldn't pass as human unless they kept their mouths shut. Their iron teeth couldn't retract like a vampire's could, so as soon as one of them spoke, all humans could see were their damned teeth.

Damion had learned to trust them. To an extent. At least the

bastards could go outside in the daylight, which was more than Damion could do himself. He hadn't seen the sun since his Instinct kicked in at the age of thirteen. Like many other pre-Instinct Lore creatures, he looked and acted exactly like a human. Hell, they're even just as weak and helpless until an event in their life triggered the change. Anger, pain, sadness, just about any extreme emotion could trigger their Instinct to kick in, and everyone was different on what made them tick.

Damion raked his hand through his hair as he wore a track into the carpet. He was running out of time. The ascension was fast approaching, and the prophesied one needed to make her decision soon. If Clay and Q came back empty-handed, they would have to start searching for her all over again.

He heard footsteps as someone entered the manor. After listening to the slow approach to the office, Damion willed the office door open. Q had his hand poised to knock, but he quickly dropped it as he saw Damion's feral gaze on him.

"Master." Q entered the office and closed the door behind him.

"Did you find her?"

"We might have." His eyes dropped to the floor.

Damion narrowed his gaze on the Abassy. "What do you mean? You aren't sure?"

Q drew his head up and looked directly at his master. "We got a little carried away," he finally said. "In torturing them for information. They didn't talk and refused any ties to her. But, when we walked outside, there was a young woman there. She might have been the one."

Damion's eyes glowed with irritation. "And where is she now?"

"Likely under the protection of the Guardians."

The room cooled down a few degrees as Damion stared at his first in command with pure anger. "The Guardians intercepted you? Who?"

Q squared his shoulders. "Draven."

"And?" Damion growled.

"*Just* Draven."

"*One* warrior got the better of *two* of you?"

"Yes, sir. During the interrogation, Clay stumbled across a

wine cabinet and...well, he downed it before I found him. I realized before he did that it was from Morpheus's collection."

Damion raised an eyebrow. "Wine laced with morphine? In a human home?"

"Not morphine, something else. And it was *heavily* laced."

No wonder he'd been no match against the Guardian. It was widely known that Morpheus's concoctions were serious shit, causing more deaths among both human and Lore than anyone liked to admit.

Damion turned his cold eyes on Q. "And where is your brother?"

Again the Abassy squared his shoulders, as if his godsdamned posture had any effect on his answer "Dead."

Q's cold statement effectively shocked the vampire, but he schooled his reaction just as quickly. There'd be no pity for the loss, no sadness when Clay was just one demon in the many. "It does make one wonder how humans came into possession of Morpheus's wine, but Clay's drinking is no excuse. Two of you battled against a single Guardian."

"I assure you, master, he was able to fight well, and Draven somehow saw through the cloak. It was like he knew we were there."

"I don't care if or how he knew you were there. The point is that you should have wiped the floor with his ass and brought me the girl!" Damion advanced on him, putting them nose to nose. His eyes widened as he caught the female's scent.

"That was her," he said coldly. "Go back and track her scent. Now."

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Q quickly retreated from Damion's office, not even sparing a glance at his master. When the boss man said jump, they had all better fucking jump with none of this nonsense about asking how high. All of them were better off continuing to jump until the bastard was happy.

He made his way to the front porch of the manor and traced back to where the battle had gone down. He materialized across the street from the human home that was now in pieces from the bomb they had set.

Q had the ability, like other Abassy, to travel to places by

thinking of the location and allowing his body's molecules to break down and reappear in the new location. Other demons had similar abilities, but his kind could choose to appear when it was convenient. They could actually see what was happening at the location before appearing, which was a bonus for his kind. At least he never had to worry about accidentally materializing inside a wall. He'd heard they were a bitch to get out of.

The only drawback to this power was that they could only trace to a location where they'd been before.

Q silently hid in the shadows of a large oak across the street from the charred home. Humans were everywhere. Firemen had extinguished the flames long ago, but now they were busy putting their gear back on the trucks. Investigators took pictures and examined evidence. If humans were more like his kind, they'd have already figured out who had attacked this family, and probably would have already hunted them down and murdered them as well.

Humans were stupid when it came to detective work. They were weak. And stupid.

And weak.

*Damn cattle.*

It was no secret that Q couldn't stand humans. They were worthless pieces of shit, and their only worth was that they were a tasty meal. Although, he had to admit to himself that their women were excellent choices for other needs as well. Yes, humans were good for food and sex. But that was it.

Nearly a century ago, he and his brothers broke out of the Underworld, where all-around mayhem was the name of the game. Although Abassies live for death and destruction, he hadn't wanted to remain in the Underworld his entire life. Truthfully, the place was a shit hole. Shortly after his escape from hell, he'd met up with Damion and found out what he and his master had planned. He'd jumped in with both feet. Being the first and only recruit for the Collective, he'd decided to bring along his brother, Clay. Later on, his other three brothers and a few more of his kind had pledged themselves to the cause as well.

Q continued to watch the human officials at the crime scene. It had taken a while for them to piece everything together, but what was left of the bodies was now being hauled off to the

morgue. If the humans had pieced all the parts together correctly, and he hoped that they had, then he'd counted a total of four bodies. He'd willed the girl to leave, but he didn't know how quickly she'd responded, as he'd been in the heat of battle. Her mind had been a tough one to crack, so he couldn't tell how well his mind control had worked. On an upside, he couldn't smell an overwhelming amount of the girl's spilt blood. If she had died, that sweet scent of hers would have saturated the air around the home.

So the girl had survived.

That was the only good news of the night. At least Damion wouldn't decapitate him if he could track her down.

Q kept his distance from the herd of humans wandering around the yard. With his ultra-sensitive hearing, he didn't have to get too close to hear the conversations going on amongst the investigators.

"We'll have to track down their oldest daughter, Ally. She's listed as next of kin. I'll have the station search for her last known address," one detective said.

When the last policeman finally left the scene a few hours later, Q walked to the front yard. He could barely make out the girl's scent. It certainly wasn't strong enough to track now that humans had disturbed the scene.

*Fucking. Cattle.*

The mouthwatering scent of spilled blood still infused the air. Though Damion's orders had been strict: get in, get the girl, and get out—Clay and Q had had their fun. Clay had wasted a lot of time interrogating the family, and a hell of a lot more while he downed the contents of their liquor cabinet. That shit was so strong Clay had been hammered within minutes. He'd asked the human father how he had come into possession of those wines, but all he ever admitted was that it had been a gift.

Their entire mission ended up fruitless, and he'd lost his favorite brother in the process.

His only consolation for tonight was that he could still find the girl.

With a curse, Q closed his eyes and disappeared, heading back to the Collective's headquarters to tell his master the news. When he appeared at the front door of the manor, Damion swung the door open and pegged him with a glare.

“What the fuck are you doing here without the girl?”

Q threw up his hands in surrender. He'd been coldcocked way too many times by Damion before being given a chance to answer his questions, and he was in no mood for that tonight. Besides, Damion was even pissier when he had to wait for Q to *wake up* for the answers. “The police are searching for the daughter's last known address. I'll go to the station tomorrow and find out the details.”

“Don't let her slip through your fingers, Q,” Damion growled. “Or you'll end up just like your brother.”

Point. Taken.

“Yes sir.” Q bowed and walked past Damion, and headed upstairs to his quarters.

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Ferox and Raine sat in the library of the Guardian's mansion, waiting for the others to arrive. They all filed in, sat on their usual couches and chairs, striking up conversations amongst themselves before the meeting started.

Thrash and Blaze sat next to each other, discussing their all-too-common topic of the previous night's sexcapades. It seemed they had a bet going on which one could get the most girls in one night.

Raider talked to Riley about different fighting techniques that he would surely be tested on any day now. As Ferox's cousin, Raider was one of his most trusted allies. They'd grown up closely, were practically brothers, and Ferox knew that he'd train Riley right.

Each Guardian was a warrior. Some were of vampire decent, while others came from different factions. Some of them were of mixed breed, but all were bred to be lethal.

And they all had one goal: they had all pledged their lives to protect the innocent.

Ferox and Raine's younger son, Ethan, entered the library and cast a look at Raine. She cocked an eyebrow at him when she noticed Draven wasn't with him.

Draven, next in line to the vampire throne and second only to Ferox among the Guardians, was never the last one to show up, and he *never* missed a meeting. He took his role very seriously and was out on the streets more than any other Guardian.



Even though most of the Guardians were lighthearted, they all took the very real threat the Collective and likeminded demonic organizations posed against humanity seriously. It felt strange that Draven wasn't with them tonight.

With an irritated sigh, Raine nodded at Ethan, who placed his fist over his heart and bowed to Ferox. The other Guardians and Raine followed suit and stood to bow to their leader with their fists over their hearts.

Ferox stood from his chair and repeated the gesture back to them. Even though he was the in-house leader of the Guardians, each of them deserved his respect as well.

Ferox had never felt he was a leader over the other factions. In this war, different factions had to band together to battle not only the Collective, but also other organizations and individuals who were hell-bent on destruction. And so far, the mixed-breed alliance had beaten back the Collective's defenses. Their brotherhood was legendary.

"Guardians," he said as he bowed. He turned to Raine and bowed again, showing love and respect to his wife. When he sat down, they all took their seats as well.

"The time of the ascension is growing near. It's time that we hunt the Collective instead of them hunting us. Raider has been secretly tracking them for months now and has found their most favored hideouts. Now is the time to seek out a fight. No longer will we sit and wait while innocents are hunted. We must destroy as many of those corrupt demons as we can to ensure we are not outnumbered when the ascension begins."

"What about Damion?" Blaze asked.

Ferox's jaw tightened. "*I will worry about Damion.*"

Raine reached over and grabbed Ferox's hand, giving her husband a loving squeeze. Then she spoke to the band of brothers sitting around the library. "I think I'm really close to uncovering something big about the essence. I'll continue to search for more information about the prophecy until we find our answers. It's clear we aren't the only ones looking for it. There has been increased activity within the Collective. Damion may know even more about this than we do. We need to get our hands on the essence before it's too late."

Ferox focused on his wife as she spoke, always so proud of

her when she took charge within a meeting.

He'd always loved his little Valkyrie. Not only was she smart, but she was also a fierce warrior, which drew him to her from the start. Not many dared battle a Valkyrie, and she could fight with the best of them. In Valhalla, she'd been ruthless in battle, known as one of the most tempestuous warrioresses.

He knew it irked her when he made up reasons for her to stay back at the mansion while they all went out to fight, but he didn't know what he'd do if he ever lost his mate.

When Raine finished speaking, Ferox returned his attention to his brothers.

"Raider will head up our meeting tomorrow night to go over the intel he has dug up on the Collective. He'll be in charge of splitting you into groups to attack their hideouts." He gestured to Raider.

Raider stood from his chair to address his brothers. "The plan is to attack as many groups as we can before they relay information to the others. So far, I've found two main hideouts, so we are splitting up into threes. Thrash, Blaze, and I will go together. Ferox has agreed that he will go with Draven and Ethan."

Raine tensed and quickly looked over at Ferox. "Is it wise for the three of you to go together?" she whispered.

"It'll be fine, darling. No need to worry," Ferox whispered back. He returned his attention to Raider.

"Oh, and Riley will stay with Raine. He'll be on call if we need help. We'll meet here again tomorrow night for training, and we'll go through the logistics of our mission. We're meeting at one so that those of you on patrol can still do rounds for a few hours."

Ferox chimed in. "As I mentioned before, our plans have changed. Don't just go to the bars and hang out all night. Patrolling now means really patrolling. Use your senses and try to stop Collectives before they hurt others."

After the meeting adjourned the warriors scattered. Some of them retired to their rooms, while others went to the in-house gym. Only Ethan remained in the library with Ferox and Raine.

"Where is Draven?" Ferox asked, relaxing in his chair. Though the Guardians knew him to be laid back, he always felt on edge when it came to Collective business.

Ethan shrugged. "He went out last night and I haven't

heard from him since.”

Raine and Ferox shared a worried look before facing their youngest, blood-related son. “Try and find him,” Ferox said. “We can’t lose any warriors right now, not when we’re already so outnumbered.”

## Chapter Five

Ally knew she was dreaming. She'd experienced this dream countless times before and every time it was pretty hazy. She was in a luxurious bedroom within a stone castle, the same room every time she had this dream.

But what was odd about this recurring dream was that she always saw it in third person and only she came through clearly. Everyone and everything else was blurred.

She always wore the same light blue dress, the cut and style elegant and fit for a queen.

It always felt as though she was coming in at the tail end of a movie when she had this dream. She stood near the bed, looking down on her prince as he slept. He was lying on his stomach, obstructing her view of what had to be a stunning face.

A man enters the room, causing her prince to jump out of bed and run toward him. She couldn't make out the stranger's face, but as the prince threw out his hands she could see he was in agony. She reached for her prince, only to notice that her own arm was bleeding.

Within a blink of the eye, their scenery changed, and she was lying with her prince in a lush, green forest. They were holding each other, surrounded by long grass and trees. It was sunny, but the thick forest they were in blocked most of the sunlight. Tonight, for the first time, the scenery was clear.

And Ally could actually see her prince's face.

And oh, was he *hot*.

His regal face was elegant in a manly way. Truthfully, he looked like another version of the man from her last dream. Only, instead of rough, he was noble, but devastatingly handsome all the same. He was so similar, in fact, that she as certain her mind had put this new man into her persistent dream.

Her prince looked up at her in awe, sending flutters through her heart as she watched. The two gazed at each other as though deeply in love, but at the same time he looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time.

She'd always hoped she would meet a man who would look at her like that. They slowly leaned toward each other, angling for a tender kiss.

And that is when she always woke up, always *right* before they actually kissed.

But this time, the dream didn't end there. She turned her chin and gave him access to her neck. He leaned in and placed his lips to her skin in a tender kiss before biting her. And just like in her previous dream, she looked like she actually enjoyed it. She gripped his head, pulling him closer to her as he brought her head down to his shoulder. Without a second thought, she bit into his skin.

It was crazy how the two dreams differed. In the first dream she felt every touch, every caress, whereas in this dream she was on the outside looking in, missing out on sounds and emotions.

What the hell was up with the vampire dreams lately?

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“Why have you summoned me? I pray for your sake that you bring me good news.”

“Master, thank you for coming,” Damion said as he bowed. “I do bring you news, though I can't tell yet if it is good or bad.”

His master pulled the hood from his head before regarding Damion with a doubtful expression. “Go on,” he said before he sat down.

Damion quickly sat as well. His master looked up to no one. “We believe we have located her.”

The other man's eyes lit up, and he leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. “That is wonderful news, Damion. And where is she?”

“She got away from us.” He momentarily floundered as a wave of rage surged through the room. “But we know where she is, and we're bringing her in. She is alive and well, master.”

The other man stood and walked around, idly looking at antiques placed around the room. Vili's temper seemed to show itself whenever there was talk of the girl, and Damion had come to realize that any time his master was quiet, it was generally an attempt to calm himself. Vili's eyes remained on Damion as his black robe dragged behind him. His light brown hair was cut short, and his goatee had grown in more since the last time he'd seen him.

“Be sure she remains that way, at least for now. The ascension is near, so there is no room for fuckups.”

“Understood, my lord.”

“And be sure to remember our agreement. If you capture her, she is yours to keep. Do as you will with her so long as she retains enough strength to fulfill our mission.”

“I understand.” Damion bowed his head again.

“And what of the project?”

Damion smiled up at the other man, but still he remained sitting. “It is going well. Our research is returning some fascinating results. I believe you’ll be pleased.”

“That is excellent. Is there anything else you wish to share with me?”

He shook his head. “No, my Lord.”

“In that case, I expect to be summoned tomorrow evening when you have custody of her. I do so wish to meet her.”

Damion thought he saw a hint of a smile touch the other man’s face, but before he could really recognize what it was, it was gone.

“If you don’t summon me, understand I will visit without invitation.” With that, he disappeared from the room, black smoke spiraling in his wake.

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Draven woke up with Ally’s arms and legs draped over him. She looked so peaceful lying there that he had the momentary urge to stay there and hold her for the rest of the day.

Rolling his eyes at the rumble of his starving stomach, he gently rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb her. He quietly pulled on his clothes and snuck out to the kitchen.

Ally would undoubtedly feel embarrassed when she realized last night hadn’t been a dream. He sensed how pure and good she was, naughty little sex kitten aside. He’d bet she’d never done anything shady or evil her entire life. And with everything she went through yesterday, she’d need something to make her feel better. Her trance should wear off soon, and as long as she didn’t go ape shit on him, he wouldn’t put another one on her.

He decided to make her breakfast. Cinnamon-vanilla French toast, a longtime favorite, which he found always made everything better.

As he started mixing the ingredients together, his mind wandered back to the beautiful goddess still sprawled naked on her

bed. Her towel had only lasted minutes after she'd fallen asleep. The way she floundered around, it was a miracle she hadn't tossed him right out of bed.

He couldn't get the little female out of his mind. He'd been dreaming of a woman like her for what felt like a lifetime, and he'd spent the same amount of time searching for the woman of his dreams, but it was too much to hope that she was the one he'd been looking for all along.

More likely than not, he was simply desperate for attentions from a female since it had been so long since he'd taken one.

Ally was beautiful. She had a thin build, although not too thin, and she had curves in all the right places—a body *begging* to be savored. She had golden blonde hair that reached the middle of her back, a perfect nose, and pink, pouty lips made for kissing. Her big, beautiful eyes were such a mesmerizing color, a violet tint rimmed with purple. And when she looked at him, he felt she could look right into his soul. Long, thick lashes framed her eyes and swept over her cheeks as she slept.

Gods, that woman. He could get drunk merely being in her presence.

Her irises glowed when she was excited, enhancing the coloring of her eyes. He'd never seen a more magnificent woman.

She was an absolute vision.

She affected him so much that he hadn't gotten much sleep last night. Since they shared a blood-bond, not only could they share each other's emotions, but they could share dreams and memories as well.

Finally, once Draven had fallen asleep, he'd dreamt of the night he'd met his guardian angel. His Fated. He hadn't had such a vivid dream of her in decades. He'd forgotten what made her so beautiful.

The one and only time he'd seen her, she'd been a stunner. Her hair was pulled back, only allowing a few ringlets to frame her face. He still didn't know exactly what happened. All he remembered was not being able to move and being in extreme pain. He heard screams, but couldn't do anything to help anyone. And just as he was passing out from pain, she'd saved him. But the dream must have transformed, because when he looked at her, her face was...

Ally's.

Draven had come awake startled. The dream had felt so real. He'd placed Ally in as the role of his female. After running his hand through his hair, he'd pulled Ally closer to him. His groin had ached to take her.

He'd laid there the rest of the night watching her chest rise and fall in time with her breaths. The times that she cuddled in to him, he'd known he was in heaven.

And didn't that make him a bastard? He couldn't get close to her, and he wouldn't use her and leave her. She was too innocent for that. Too delicate. Too precious.

*Oh, fuck. Precious?*

Did he really just think that?

Ally's sweet scent made his blood boil and made his cock stiff as a board. And damn him, but he'd wanted to wake her up and show her just how much he craved her. The more time he was around her, the worse this situation would become.

His blood-tie had connected them even more than he'd thought possible, perhaps because he hadn't fed from a live host in such a long time, or maybe he'd just willed it so, since he was so attracted to her. Or maybe it was fated so, although he wouldn't get his hopes up too high about that one. When it came to Fated mates, he'd been royally screwed in the past.

Draven pulled his head out of his thoughts. He dropped a few slices of batter-soaked bread onto the hot griddle and waited for them to cook. A big part of him hoped she would let him feed her. Never had he felt close enough to a woman to offer her food he'd made. Hell, he'd never actually cooked for anyone other than himself. Where he came from, feeding food to another was a loving, respectful, and sometimes even sensual act.

Ally had been so generous in allowing him to take her vein last night, he hoped she'd let him repay her.

Her blood had healed and energized him. Wounds he'd been sporting for days had cleared up, not to mention the bullet wound. With the shitty diet he lived on, that would have normally taken a few days for the bullet to dislodge and for the skin to stitch back together.

He knew his diet was a shitfest, but he couldn't bring himself to feed from another. Once vampires found their mates,



they never fed from another again, so long as their mates were able to provide that blood. Sure, he'd never been able to find his mate again, but bagged blood from hospitals and blood banks had worked fine. Between that and regular food, he remained strong enough.

But he had taken from her last night, and she thought it was all a dream. He'd taken from her without her conscious consent.

He really was a sick bastard. He didn't deserve someone so innocent.

Draven sensed Ally wake up and start looking for clothes in her bedroom. She still felt relaxed, which meant the trance hadn't fully worn off yet. She wouldn't realize anything was real from last night.

He had a flash of Ally's memory, her mother cooking breakfast for her in the kitchen.

Gods, please don't let her think her mother is alive.

He feared this was going to go over worse than he'd expected.

As he began flipping the French toast over, she walked into the dining room.

At the sight of her, Draven's jaw dropped and his stomach muscles tightened. The spatula he'd been holding snapped in two.

*Sweet. Jesus.*

His gaze fixed to Ally's body as she sleepily made her way toward the kitchen. She rubbed her right eye while keeping the other eye on the floor in front of her. She had on a tank top and the shortest shorts he'd ever seen.

Gods bless the man who invented those shorts.

Ally inhaled the scent of cinnamon and smiled before dropping her hand. Her eyes bulged at the sight of him, and she skidded to a stop.

Draven felt her wave of panic and embarrassment when she looked at him and realized what she was wearing.

Ally squeaked and beat feet from the room, but not before Draven got to look at her round cheeks peeking out from under those blessed shorts. He knew she felt his arousal because he felt hers spike in return. It was all he had in him not to chase after her. He had to will himself to stay put even though every bit of animal instinct in him screamed at him to touch her again.

Yes, he needed to stay here instead of pinning her against the wall and becoming more familiar with those shorts.

And what was under them.

Grinding his teeth, he turned away from where she'd just been. He started looking around for the spatula before he remembered he'd broken the damned thing.

Draven bent down, picked up the two pieces, and threw them away. He rummaged through her drawers—not the ones he wanted to be in—until he found another spatula.

By the time she returned to the kitchen, she had donned a pink, fluffy robe that covered her down to her knees. Somehow she could even make that look sexy.

Draven smiled at her, and damn him, he knew he blushed. It had been forever since he'd done that. He'd taken countless women into his bed before. Women didn't make him blush, but for some reason this cute little blonde did things to his body that made him act like a boy experiencing puppy love for the first time.

She stood, staring at him from behind the dining room table, her eyes widened with a mixture of fear and confusion. Keeping her robe cinched shut while folding her arms, it was obvious she wasn't getting any closer until she knew what he was doing here. In one hand she held her cell phone, ready to hit the Send button at a second's notice. Of course she'd planned to call the cops—consciously, she didn't know him from Adam.

“Good morning, Ally,” he said as he slid the French toast onto two plates.

He carried them over to her table and set them down next to the two glasses of orange juice and two sets of silverware he had already placed on the table. He returned to the kitchen and popped open the microwave to reveal a bottle of warmed maple syrup.

She hesitantly flipped her phone shut and slid it into the pocket of her robe. She slowly walked over to the table to look at the breakfast he'd made, eyeing it as though she thought it was poisonous. That expression turned to him as he set the syrup down on the table and held out a chair for her.

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Ally reluctantly sat in the chair he had pulled out for her. She continued to stare at the man who had just cooked her breakfast.

He really was a looker. More than a looker, actually. He was stunning. His face was chiseled perfection, and she recalled from last night how chiseled the rest of him was as well. He had a spectacular build, the likes of which one could see in an art museum. A sculpture of his body could sell for millions.

“Good morning.” She paused, trying to remember his name. “Draven. Thank you for breakfast.” After a moment of biting her lip and blushing, she added, “So last night...wasn’t a dream.” She hadn’t phrased it like a question, because it wasn’t. The memory of last night came crashing back into her mind, making her more than a little nauseous.

“No, it wasn’t,” Draven replied as he buttered up the French toast. Ally watched him as he topped off their breakfast with butter and syrup. Her mind recalled the intimacy they’d shared both in the shower and in her bed. And while they hadn’t actually had sex, she knew she would never forget the way he’d made her feel. As she continued to watch him with the food, she caught a blush and a half smile, which he quickly hid, but that little hint of a smile made her heart flip.

“Would you allow me to feed you?” He pierced a piece of French toast and held it out to her.

Ally couldn’t hold back the you’ve-gotta-be-kidding look that spread across her face. This gorgeous man was offering to feed her food he’d made. Her mind’s musings changed from last night’s activities to the fact that she didn’t even know him. He was a complete stranger, one who’d seen, touched, and rubbed her body, one who’d laid in her bed beside her. He hadn’t tried to harm her yet, and her heart screamed that she could trust him. Her body followed her heart’s demands, wanting him to stay forever. Something about this man felt downright comforting, like she’d known him all her life. And she’d seen how perfect he was last night, so maybe she could give him the benefit of the doubt.

*Dammit, Ally, what are you thinking? He’s a stranger. Do you know what your mom would think? And what dad would do?* That thought caused a pang to bloom in her chest, and she absently rubbed it with her hand. Truthfully, she’d never hoped to even meet someone this devastatingly handsome. And here he was in her kitchen, offering to feed her.

“It would mean a lot to me if you would,” he added,

flashing his dimples at her.

Oh, those dimples did it. She blushed instantly at the sight of them. Before she realized what she was doing, Ally opened her mouth and he slid the piece in carefully. Draven beamed at her as he pulled the fork from between her lips.

The French toast was *delicious*, like something in a nice restaurant. The cinnamon and vanilla blended perfectly, which made the breakfast all the more satisfying. She mentally added that to the list of likes for Draven. The man could cook.

## Chapter Six

With the breakfast mess all cleaned up, Ally could only stare at Draven. Her feet were up on the chair, and she hugged her knees to her chest.

She wasn't really sure what to say. She'd met the man last night and nearly slept with him, for God's sake. She didn't even know him though, not even a little. Sure, she'd dreamt of doing some pretty bizarre things with him, which only proved how little she knew of him.

She flicked her eyes up at the sliding door behind him, her eyes narrowed. "You shut the blinds?"

"Yeah. It's safer that way."

"Safer because..."

"I have an allergy to sunlight." He shrugged.

She stared at him. No way was he going where she thought he was.

"I'm a vampire."

Yep. He went there.

Ally bolted from her chair, putting it between her and Draven. He had to be joking, but how would she know, she didn't even know him.

"Ally, calm down." He stood as quickly as she had and put his hands up in surrender.

She glared at him through narrowed eyes and remembered seeing him with fangs. Although, that part of last night had surely been a dream, right? All at once that annoying feeling in the back of her mind came to the forefront. *Nothing* from her fantasy had been a dream. He'd bitten her and drunk her blood, and she...

Ally gasped. "I drank *blood*?"

Feeling like she was about to throw up, she backed away as Draven crossed the room toward her. Her breathing accelerated and her eyes widened. She'd exchanged blood with a *vampire*, a vampire that just so happened to be *in her house*. Vampires didn't exist. But what else would explain the exchange?

"Ally, calm yourself." His voice worked over her like smooth honey. His hands were up in surrender and he kept a small distance between them. "I won't hurt you, I swear. But you need to calm down. You did drink a little of my blood, but you needed it. I

wouldn't have even offered it if it would have harmed you. You liked it, right?"

Draven's scent wrapped around her as a wave of calm ran through her. Her body instantly relaxed, his calmness reaching through to her as though she was connected in some way to how he felt. "I...I think I did."

He pulled Ally's hand into his. She nearly pulled it back, but decided against it. His hands were warm, his touch comforting, not to mention that the connection sent an electric hum vibrating through her body. It didn't hurt at all. Instead, it felt oddly right. It was the same sensation she'd felt last night, both when he touched her and during their blood exchange.

"Tell you what. Why don't we hang out today and get to know each other? Since we spent the night together, it'd be nice to know more about you and your family."

Ally's jaw tightened at the mention of her family. She had no idea why she'd reacted that way until the memories of what had happened to them slammed into her. She remembered the two men, her murdered family, and the explosion. How could she have forgotten? Why wasn't she a crumpled mess on the floor? Why couldn't she react the way she should?

"It's because I calmed you."

"What?" Ally gaped at him. Had he heard what she thought?

"I calmed you."

She closed her eyes. "What does that even mean?"

Draven pulled away from her, the loss of his warmth causing an ache in her heart. She felt as though her body craved to be near him, but the very idea was ridiculous.

More memories of the night before flashed through her mind. She remembered Draven as he'd fought the others in the yard. But she hadn't seen him again until she'd woken up in bed, just before he'd washed her.

He had rescued her from the house. "How?" she asked.

"Come on, I'll explain." Draven flashed her a dimply grin before leading her to the living room.

She needed to know much more than how he had the ability to calm her, to be in her mind. She had to know more about him being—or at least thinking he was—a vampire. One thing was for

certain though. He was the sexiest man she'd ever seen. She could only hope he didn't realize her attraction to him and how his smile had her eating out of his strong, warm hands—quite literally only moments earlier. And though it may have been ridiculously stupid of her, she couldn't help feeling a strange connection to him. He made her feel safe. He made her feel desired.

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Draven and Ally hung out in her living room for most of the morning and well into the afternoon, just talking and playing video games.

He really wanted to know more about her family and needed to see if there was any connection between them and the Collective. Although Ally would talk about herself, she was hesitant to talk about her family. He didn't need to rely on his senses to know she didn't fully trust him. Her face said it all, but Draven couldn't push her. Instead, he told her all about being a vampire.

At first, she politely nodded along, as if deciding whether he actually was a vampire or simply a raving lunatic. But he hadn't piqued her interest until he told her about flashing and mind control. He'd had to explain the secrecy of their world, informing her that she couldn't tell a soul. That seemed to bring her out of her shell, and then she opened up and spoke freely with him. She'd stayed clear of the most obvious question as long as she could, clearly nervous to hear the answer, but she finally broke down and asked him how he got his nourishment.

Draven explained that his breed survived on both food *and* blood, which only seemed to fascinate her more. The fact that they could survive on both was a complete shocker since legend had always taught her they were monsters that could only survive by ravaging helpless victims. Another shocker for her was the fact that they were born, not transformed by being bitten. Her eyes landed on the intricate tattoo on his arm, her expression the same as when she'd seen it last night. "What does that mean?"

Draven looked down at it, letting his fingers trail over its colors. "It's my Guardian's Mark."

"Guardian," Ally said to herself. He could feel something—a memory, maybe—tickle her mind, but she couldn't quite grasp it. "What about the other one?" she asked, gesturing to

his shoulder.

“That one shows my lineage,” Draven replied, knowing that she referred to the royal branding he’d been given. As a member of the vampire royal family, he’d been branded as such. Steering the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go, he said, “Ally, I need you to remember what happened last night.”

She narrowed her eyes on him. “What do you mean?”

“Do you remember what happened? At your parents’ house?”

Ally gulped and squeezed her eyes shut. Yes, there was a memory there in her mind. She had purposely been keeping the images at bay, but he’d been able to catch glimpses of them from time to time. Slowly, he removed her trance, allowing her memory to come back full force. “I was running late. Mom invited me over for dinner after work, but I had to pull a double, and my best friend’s car broke down again so I had to give her a ride home.”

“Anyway, after I dropped her off at her apartment, I rushed as fast as I could to Mom and Dad’s house, but the traffic was really slow from the snow. When I got to the house, I parked out in front of the curb. I was so excited to see the munchers that I didn’t even pay attention to what was going on.”

Draven raised an eyebrow. “Munchers?”

“My little brothers. Skylar, my baby brother, was going to stay at my house last night. Mom said he’d been jabbering on about it all week.” A tear slid down Ally’s cheek, which she quickly brushed away. He could feel her trying to swallow the pain building in her throat.

Draven leaned forward, keeping his eyes trained on her. From their blood-tie, he was catching how she’d seen everything, her memory there for him to watch like a movie.

“I snuck to the front door, trying to surprise everyone.” She stopped, her jaw tightening as her lip trembled.

Draven pulled her hands free and wiped the tears that were flooding her cheeks. “What happened next, Ally?”

“I was almost at the door. I could hear my dad talking inside, but something didn’t sound right. He was panicked.”

Draven closed his eyes just as Ally did, and they both could see and hear the event as it played out in her mind.

*“Please, you’ve already hurt my family. I would tell you if I*



*knew anything. Please just leave. I won't turn you in. I'll just say you were disguised. Please let me help my family. Please."*

*"Save the dramatics, old man. Now, for the last time. Where. Is. She?"*

*"Please, I told you I don't know—"*

Ally spoke out loud again, but she kept her eyes closed. "That's when I heard a gunshot. I didn't know what to do. My body sort of just backed away from the house."

Draven could feel her fear as though he'd been right there with her. She had slowly backed away, all the while keeping her eyes glued to the front door. She'd wished her cell phone hadn't died while she was at work.

Ally couldn't speak anymore, but she didn't have to. The events played out clearly for Draven. She'd almost reached the hedge when Clay appeared in the doorway. His back was to her while he slid a gun into the waist of his jeans. Q had caught up with him at the door, and they'd come outside and spotted her.

Even Draven's heart had started to pound as he relived her traumatizing experience. Those Abassy bastards had sized her up within a second. Clay couldn't have given a rat's ass about her because he was already drunk. Q had been clearly interested in her sexually, which pissed Draven off. He'd started asking her questions, inching closer to her, but she'd been too frightened to respond. Then Draven appeared. The sight of himself—through Ally's point of view—was a bit off-putting. She saw him as something *different*. She'd known immediately that he wasn't human, and he felt the fear that had coursed through her from that revelation. His fight with Q and Clay ensued. He knew the details of that battle, so he was more interested in learning what she found out inside.

In Ally's memory, she kicked into action, running for the door. This was what he'd been waiting for...

But she froze.

She opened her eyes, her gaze locking with his. "I can't," she whispered, shaking her head.

"You have to. I need to know why they did what they did." Maybe he could see something inside that would have caused the Collective to target her family.

Ally returned to her memory, speaking out loud once more.

“I went in the house. As soon as I got inside, I saw my mom and brothers on the dining room floor.” Her breathing picked up, and she started to hyperventilate. As much as Draven wanted to soothe her, he needed her to continue, needed to piece everything together.

Draven saw as she checked their pulses. Had it been him, he’d have known they were already dead. The Abassies had had their way, draining all of them of their lifeblood. She cried openly with a small child in her arms. Skylar, her mind filled in for him. One of her “munchers.”

“They’d already died. And then, I heard my dad.” She’d run over to him and held his hand as he bled all over the floor. Ally stopped talking again as she sobbed into her hands. As she replayed the last moments of her father’s life, only a few details came through to him, but that wasn’t due to her memory. It happened because her pain was too great. Her mind skipped through it quickly, and Draven had to focus in order to catch as much as he could.

*“We never told you who you really are, Alaina. Your mother... she didn’t want you to know yet. But you need to know. You need the truth...before it’s too late. Listen, baby. Go to the bank... Get in the safe deposit box. And Phanes, you have to call Phanes.”*

*“Why hasn’t anyone come?” she’d cried. “Didn’t anyone else hear the shots or any of that?”*

Draven knew the answer to that, whenever there was a supernatural situation, someone had to put a veil over it, hiding it from human minds.

*“No one will come. They masked everything. There’s so much we’ve never told you,” her father had answered.*

How had the old man known? Wasn’t he human?

*“What do you mean they masked every—”*

Draven’s eyes opened as soon as Ally replayed the beeping sound. His hands gripped the couch tightly as this part of her memory came through vividly. He’d known that she’d been inside when the damned thing blew, but he didn’t want her to relive her own close call with death. “Stop, Ally.”

But she didn’t stop, and it was too late. She kept reliving the memory.

*“Alaina, get out of the house now!”*

*“Dad, no—”*

*“Goddamn it! I’ve protected you my whole life. I’m not giving up now. Run Ally, get out!”* He had pushed her away only to have her come back for him. Ally had fought to keep him alive.

“No!” Draven roared. He could do nothing but watch as heat and fire slammed into Ally, sending her flying through her parents’ door. Her memory ended in that instant, bringing them both back to the present.

Draven slid off his seat and crawled on his knees over to her. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight. Not only to offer her support, but to give it to himself as well. Her memory had been too realistic. He felt as though he’d found *his* family dead in their home. She’d been through something last night he’d never wish on anyone, and as he listened to her cry into his chest, he was only glad that she’d made it out alive.

“I never want to feel that hopeless again. I don’t want to feel this pain. I can’t live with this.”

Draven’s heart broke at the sound of her voice, his Instinct demanding he protect this female from pain. It seemed like a good task. After all, he did sign on to be her protector, even if it was supposed to be temporary.

## Chapter Seven

Draven heard a sound outside the house. Using his senses he listened in on what was happening on the other side of her door, the sounds of two men quietly talking. “Ally, I need you to calm down. The police are coming to tell you what happened last night.”

She pulled out of his hold and stared up at him.

“You can’t tell them anything about demons or vampires, and they can’t know we were there last night. We don’t need them suspecting either of us. Can you do that?”

Ally nodded, and he felt that her heart was too broken to speak. The detectives rang the doorbell, and Draven excused himself from the room while she answered the door. A supposed bathroom break was a perfect way to avoid sunlight, but instead of going to the bathroom he ducked into the hall and waited, listening.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. I’m Detective Andrews, and this is Detective Johnson. Are you Ally Stanford?”

She nodded and replied to them in her broken voice. “Yes, please come in and have a seat.”

Ally shut the door after the detectives entered the room. Draven returned when he heard the door close.

Detective Andrews held out a hand to him. “And you are, son?”

Draven cocked a smile at the Detective. He always got a kick out of people calling him “son,” seeing as how he had a century or two on them.

He shook the Detective’s hand. “Draven.” He slid a sideways glance at Ally before returning his eyes to Andrews. “I’m Ally’s boyfriend.”

Detective Johnson pointed his chin at Ally and spoke in a hushed voice. “Is she okay?”

Draven stepped toward her, wrapping his arms around her. “She just found out some distressing news about her family.”

The detectives exchanged wary glares. “And how is that?” Johnson said.

Draven gestured for the men to sit while he quickly came up with a convincing lie. “One of her family’s neighbors called a little bit ago.”

Both detectives nodded. Detective Johnson leaned forward on his elbows, his gaze meeting Ally's. "Well then, as you may have already heard, your family's home was destroyed last night in an explosion. I'm sorry Miss Stanford, but your brothers and parents were in the home when it happened."

Ally squeezed her eyes shut as tears flowed down her cheeks. Her hand found Draven's, and she gripped him hard. The state she was currently in crushed him. If he'd dared calm her in front of the detectives, he would have, but he knew she needed her full emotions intact. Otherwise, she would look suspicious.

"They're really gone," Ally cried.

"I'm sorry, but yes, they are."

Draven held her close, wanting to soothe the pain she was feeling, wanting to do anything that could make her feel better. Hell, he wanted to go out and track down Q and torture the bastard for her. Even if he had to go out in direct sunlight, he would risk it for her. Even if he couldn't explain that primal urge even to himself, it was a necessity, something his Instinct demanded of him.

The detectives spent nearly an hour asking questions about each of her family members. What were their hobbies? Who were their friends? Did they have any enemies? Did *she* have any enemies? How long had Draven and Ally been dating? Draven had tactfully lied on that one, not wanting the detectives to know that they'd only met last night. Ally answered all the questions she could until they were done.

Andrews and Johnson stood, sliding their mini-notebooks into their pockets. "That's all we have for you today, Miss Stanford." They both reached out and shook her hand. Detective Andrews dropped a business card on her coffee table.

"I want you to know that we're here for you. You can drop by the station if you need anything. And if either of you can think of anything that might help, please call me. Anytime. Day or night."

"Sure thing. Thank you, detectives," Draven said. Ally led them to the door as he excused himself from the living room. As soon as they were gone, Draven came back and took a seat on the couch. Ally walked over to him and sat, cuddling into him. Her eyes were red and swollen from tears.

“You did great. You know that, right?”

Ally shook her head, still leaning into his body.

“You did. I could tell you were nervous at first, but you did well.” Draven could only see the top of her head as he looked down at her. Her sobs had become short, quick inhales. “Do you want me to calm you?”

She pulled away to look up at him. It was plain as day in that gaze of hers that though she might not believe he was a monster, she wasn’t completely comfortable with it yet.

“I promise, it won’t hurt. Remember how I did it last night? I’ll do it just like that, alright?”

Ally nodded. “Okay.”

He looked deep into her eyes. She willingly held his gaze, her violet eyes warming as the sadness faded from her body. Not needing to place a palm to her head this time, he was surprised at how quickly she calmed, although he didn’t want to place her in a trance-like state this time. He merely removed the fear and pain coursing through her body.

Ally let out a sigh and closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he said, smoothing hair from her face. “Why don’t we talk about your family? You could tell me some good things you remember.” Draven still needed to find a connection between them and the Collective, but maybe it would help her feel better thinking about some good times.

“Well,” Ally said as she worried her lip. “Okay. My dad was a great guy. I had him wrapped around my finger ever since I can remember.” She laughed. “I didn’t really know what that meant when I was little, but I remember my mom saying it whenever I got my way. I could give him my pouty, puppy-dog eyes, and he’d cave every time.”

Oh, Draven could only imagine what a stunner that look had to be. If she ever flashed it at him, he was sure his heart would cease beating altogether.

“He always treated me like a princess,” she continued. “He was one of those guys who played with his kids every chance he got. Always taking us to ball games, and taking us to amusement parks, teaching me how to play soccer—which I was too clumsy to play, by the way. He had such a loving personality, and he never cared if he looked silly if it meant that we were having a good

time. He took us to Disneyland a few years ago, and I remember that he made us all link our arms together and skip through the parking lot singing ‘We’re off to see the Wizard.’ Of course, Skye was just a baby then, so mom walked behind Dad, Trevor, and me.” She broke off with a sigh, a small smile curving her lips. “We had so much fun during that trip. Dad ran from ride to ride, dragging all of us behind him no matter how much our feet hurt. He was determined to hit as many rides as possible. We were there first thing in the morning until the park closed down at night.”

She pulled out of his hold and sat on the couch, pulling her knees to her chest. “He was sort of my best friend. Well, as close as a dad can be to one, anyway.”

Draven sat next to her on the couch, leaning his elbow along the back. “What was your favorite thing about him?”

Ally smiled, and Draven got a glimpse of the memory that just sprang to her mind. “How much he loved Christmas. He was actually the biggest kid I’ve ever known. Normally kids wake their parents up Christmas morning, right? Not in my family. Dad woke up at four a.m. because he couldn’t wait to open his presents and to see all of us open ours. He’d loudly bang things around until all of us kids finally came out of our rooms, and then he’d have us sneak in to wake up mom. He always wanted her to think that we woke *him* up, but she always knew.” She laughed. “They really knew how to do Christmas.”

Draven took her hand in his. He couldn’t help but stare into her eyes. They sparkled as she thought of her family. “What about your mother?”

“Oh, my mom was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. She loved us all and was willing to do anything for us. Whenever she’d see a needy person on the street, she’d give them money. And once a week we’d prepare packs for the homeless with food and snacks, even blankets and hygiene products. She taught us that we should help people get on their feet, that what goes around comes around. She’d even started a dowry box for me. She’d collected things ever since I was little so that I would have what I needed whenever I got married. And she couldn’t *wait* for grandchildren. Mom and Dad had always wanted more kids, but they had to stop after Skylar.

“My parents met when they were teenagers in the foster

care system. It's a wonder they turned out the way they did, since both of them moved from home to home until they aged-out of the system."

Draven was intrigued that both parents had had such similar starts in life. Foster care wasn't popular among the Lore, his own family being an exception since they'd technically adopted Riley. "Neither of them knew their own parents?"

Ally shook her head. "I think that's why they always wanted to have lots and lots of kids of their own."

Draven could understand that. He'd never thought about building a family before, but he could understand people wanting big families if they'd been denied that pleasure. As it was, he'd been lucky in the family department. Sure, he only had one blood-related brother and an adopted brother, but the other Guardians in his band of brothers were family just the same.

Thinking of his brothers reminded him that Ally had had her own as well. He doubted there could be any link between the Collective and her little brothers, but he felt inclined to ask anyway. "How about your brothers?"

"Trevor and Skylar. I was the oldest, and when I was nine Trevor came along. Even though there was a big age difference between us, I loved him right away. I'd pretend I was his mommy and drive him around in his stroller. I'd dress him in his little baby clothes and help my mom change him all the time."

Draven could picture her as a little blonde-haired girl taking care of her baby brother as if he were her own. Maybe someday he'd see a daughter of his own doing the same thing.

"Eleven years later, Skylar came. He was my little buddy from the get-go. Even though I was quite a bit older, I loved helping my mom take care of him. She'd always said I would make a good mother someday." Ally gave a half-smile, a real one that made Draven think that she might be alright after all. "Even after I moved out of my parents' place I liked to hang out with my munchers as much as I could. I was either constantly at mom and dad's house, or the boys would come over here to play video games."

A tear spilled down Ally's cheeks. "They were really good kids. If I ever have any kids of my own, I hope they'll be just like them."



“So, why do you live here instead of with them?”

“I moved out of my parents’ house when I was eighteen. Mom and dad were seriously not happy that I wanted to move out so soon, but they understood that I was an adult and needed my space. Don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t hard to live with them, but between them and Uncle Phanes, they were overprotective of me, even more so than they were over Trevor and Skylar.

“Really, the only complaint I had about living there was that they chased off every date I ever had. In my parents’ and Phanes’s eyes, no one was ever good enough for me. I usually had plenty of guys asking me out, but my parents always made me bring the guy home before I could go out on the date. Pretty soon the invites stopped. No guys wanted to date the girl whose parents had to know the life stories of them and all their relatives. It really made high school a nightmare. Especially since Phanes was there during each one, interrogating my dates right alongside my parents.”

Draven shifted on the couch, propping his head on his arm. “I thought you said your parents didn’t have any relatives. Where does Phanes come in?”

“He’s really just my dad’s best friend. They’ve known each other for a long time. He’s a bit younger than my parents, and my dad met him when Phanes was just a teenager. Phanes’ parents were really wealthy, and when they died, he decided to start up a company. Since he and my dad were such good friends, they started it together.” A smile appeared and disappeared as more memories flashed through to Draven’s mind. “He’s been around my family ever since I can remember. He’s one of my favorite people in the world.

“Five years ago, when I was eighteen, I told my parents I wanted to move out of their house. I could tell they hated it, but they were still really supportive. Mom, Dad, and Phanes helped me house hunt because they didn’t want me to live in an apartment. They forked out the money for a down payment on this place for me. Even Phanes put down a pretty good chunk, though I tried to tell him not to. And, when I told them I didn’t want a roomie, they convinced me to get a security dog. Of course, they completely flipped when I brought home Jake.”

At the mention of his name, Jake padded through the doggy

door and crawled up on her lap. “They pretty much hated the fact that my idea of a security dog ended up being a Shih Tzu. But, little Jakers here became part of the family pretty quick. Everyone fell in love with his little personality and his ‘happy dance.’ And it turns out that he actually is a pretty good security dog. He always growls and barks when strangers are around.”

Draven chuckled, recalling his own run-in with furious Jake the night before. “Yeah, I had to convince him I was friendly last night when I brought you home. Pretty sure he wanted to bite my limbs off.”

“That’s my little protector for you.” Ally smiled, hugging Jake. “So, what about your family?”

“Mine’s complicated.”

“Are they vampires too?”

“My father is, but my mother is actually a Valkyrie.” He looked at Ally’s shocked face. “Yeah, other races besides vampires exist. I have a brother, Ethan. He’s just like me, half vampire, half Valkyrie.”

“I thought that Valkyries were all women,” Ally said. “At least, based on legend, I mean.”

“That’s right.” Draven smiled. “We are the only two ever born of a Valkyrie, and since we’re male, you can imagine what a scandal that caused.” Draven laughed. “I also have other brothers. They aren’t born from my parents, but they’re still my family.”

“Are they like foster kids?”

“Hardly.” He laughed again. “And only one of us is considered young enough to be a kid. The rest of us are all *old*.”

Draven wasn’t completely convinced he should be disclosing this information to a human, but somehow he couldn’t help himself. She’d taken all of this information surprisingly well, but he didn’t want to overdo it.

Ally’s cell phone rang, giving him a break from talking about Lore business. She looked down at her cell’s display before sliding her phone open. “Hi Phanes.”

Draven rested his back against the couch, looking around absentmindedly as he picked up on a male’s voice on the other end of the call. With his keen vampire senses, he could hear his words crystal clear.

*“Hi, Ally. Hey, I haven’t been able to reach your dad. I just*

wanted an update on the new client his team was pitching to today.”

“Oh.” Ally shed more tears. He felt guilt wash over her for forgetting to call Phanes. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she forced herself to talk. “Um, I, uh...Something’s happened.”

There was a moment of silence before Phanes said anything. “*What’s happened, Ally?*”

“Careful,” Draven whispered. “No one should know you were there.”

Ally nodded once and wiped away a tear. “The house blew up. Mom, Dad, Trev, and Skye were all in it.”

“*My God, Ally. Are you alright?*”

“Not really.”

“*I’m so sorry. I’ll take care of everything. I don’t want you to worry about this. I want you to stay where you are, okay? I’ll take care of it, and I’ll be out there as soon as I can.*”

“Thanks, Phanes.”

“*Be safe, Ally. I love you a-lotta-bit.*”

“I love you a-lotta-bit, too.” She hung up the phone and leaned into Draven, her body shook and he sensed her internal fight to not shed the tears that threatened to form in her eyes.

Draven wrapped his arms around her shoulders and leaned his cheek against her head. “I’m sorry, Ally.” He could only wonder what might have happened to her family if he’d seen the cloak around their home sooner.

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Q watched the detectives leave the girl’s home. He had hung around the police station since it opened up this morning. Pretending to be a newspaper journalist, he’d casually watched different detectives, listening in for any conversations involving the Stanford family. Keeping his head down and avoiding speaking with anyone was a bit of a problem, but in his case it was a necessity. Humans couldn’t see his iron teeth or they’d know he wasn’t normal. Sure, caps could hide the iron, but not the shape, and a mouth full of fangs wasn’t common by human standards.

After hearing Ally’s name, he had followed these two detectives from the station in hopes that they would lead him to the girl. Lucky for him, he’d tailed the right humans. He knew he’d located her when she opened the door. Not only could he see the

sexy little blonde from her doorway, but he could also smell her, too. Her delectable scent had wafted over to him in the slight breeze. Another scent was carried with it, and it belonged to none other than the Guardian who'd killed his brother.

Now that he knew where she lived, it would be only too easy to come back and get her tonight. Even though he could handle her himself, he figured he should bring backup in case Draven was still there and fucked up the pickup. Plus, Damion didn't like to have visitors arrive while he was asleep. He would appreciate the fact that Q waited until after nightfall to acquire the female.

Normally he would have brought Clay along, but since Draven had offed him last night, that was out of the question. And with that Guardian bastard babysitting the girl, he'd need some back up or else he might lose her. Again. With that in mind, he decided he'd wait for some of the vampires and other demons to wake tonight before coming back for her.

It was time for him to start figuring out who he could trust since Clay was no longer around. A leader always had a good right-hand man. The master had Damion, and Damion had Q, so he needed to find a demon worthy of his trust as well.

He'd worked with many of the demons for decades now, but none compared to Clay. Even some of his other brothers weren't as loyal as Clay had been. And though they were stronger, more animalistic Abassies, that didn't mean they were the right demons for the job. It just meant they were good muscle.

Inhaling her scent one last time, he closed his eyes and dematerialized, heading for the Collective's headquarters.

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Draven had fallen asleep on the couch, which made sense because he was a vampire. She assumed he would have normally been asleep during the day.

Ally slid from the couch and placed a blanket over him. Creeping into her bedroom, she took a long, hot shower and got dressed. She'd spent all day lounging and talking to Draven, and she'd enjoyed that time. Well, most of it. The parts she hadn't enjoyed involved mourning her family, and thoughts of them brought her back to her last moments with her father.

His dying wish was that she go to the bank and get into the

safe deposit box. The thought had nagged at the back of her mind all day, and she saw no reason to put it off. For all she knew it was urgent that she clean out whatever was in there.

Sliding on her shoes, she snuck out into the living room, passing Draven on her way. He was still zonked out on the couch, although he stirred when she passed him. She made a silent retreat out the door and got into her Outlander.

She'd be back before he even realized she was gone.

## Chapter Eight

It took longer to get everything squared away at the bank than Ally thought it would. Since she'd never accessed her family's safe deposit box before—hadn't even known they had one—she'd had to fill out some paperwork and provide a few forms of ID. All in all, it had taken her over two hours to drive to the bank and clean out the box. Of course, she'd been staring at its contents for nearly half that time.

To open it or not. That had been the question on her mind. She didn't feel ready for whatever answers lay within the box. Not when a note in her mother's handwriting had caused her heart to nosedive into her stomach. She doubted she'd ever forget the words written on that paper.

*Ally,*

*Your father and I are so proud of you. You have grown to be a wonderful young woman, and we love you with all our hearts. Both our lives began the day you were born, and we are so very blessed to have raised such a loving, gifted child. You made me a proud mother the day you were placed in my arms, and your father feels the same.*

*By now, you've seen the box this letter was placed with. I can only hope that both your father and I are standing right next to you, having explained the truth about where you came from. But if not, if something has happened to us, please understand that nothing is your fault. We were here to protect what matters most, and what matters most to us is you, Trevor, and Skylar.*

*The box holds the key to your past and to your future. Please don't hate us for keeping the truth from you for all these years. We only hid your true identity from you to keep you safe, and we never intended to hurt you. No matter what you find, please know that we've always loved*

*you as our own daughter.  
Please forgive us.*

*Love,  
Mom and*

*Dad*

Yeah, how does anyone just browse a letter like that and move on? Ally had stared at her mom's note for what was probably an hour. She wasn't really their daughter? How could that be? She looked so much like her mom.

Unable to dig any deeper into her past, Ally had taken the box and slid it into her purse. She owed it to her parents to be their daughter for a little while longer. She owed it to herself.

Ally walked out of the bank, feeling worse than she had earlier—if that were even possible. The sun was now hidden behind the skyscrapers, the sky itself turning black. The lack of light made the chilly night that much colder. She pulled her coat tighter, glad that she'd decided on a heavy coat rather than a light one. Her sweater just wasn't cutting it in this winter weather. Suddenly warmth and calmness spread throughout her.

"Where have you been?"

Ally stumbled, but caught herself, and her gaze landed on the man standing three feet in front of her. He hadn't been there a second ago. "Draven, you scared me."

Draven's eyes glowed in the darkness, the only light illuminating him from the streetlight overhead. "Where have you been, Ally?"

"I had to go to the bank." Why did she suddenly feel like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar?

"You couldn't wait for me? You couldn't have woken me up?" He dragged a hand down his face. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep."

"No," Ally replied. "I couldn't wait for you. I had to get there before it closed, and I didn't know when you'd wake up. It was important."

"What was so important that it made you go out on your own when you could be in danger?" Draven growled.

"That is none of your business!" she snapped.

They stood there, staring at each other. She didn't know

how long it lasted, but finally Draven blew out a long breath. “Ally, it scared me. I didn’t know where you were. How can I protect you if you disappear like that?”

“I’m sorry. I thought I’d be back before you woke up. It was something I had to do.”

At the sound of her voice, his expression calmed. He stepped in closer to her, his hand cupping her jaw. “I’m glad you’re alright. The thought of anything happening to you.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t stand it.”

Ally’s heart leapt at his confession. They’d only just met, and yet it was like there was a connection between them. A completely natural one, like magnets. “Why?” she whispered.

A smile played on his face. “I don’t know. There’s just something about you.”

She couldn’t look away. He was too perfect, his eyes mesmerizing her. Her heart sped up as he slowly inched closer to her. He was going to kiss her. She could feel it. This moment couldn’t be any better. She was wrapped in the warmth of his arms, could feel the beat of his heart. The heat of his breath tickled her cheek as his lips opened, ready to meld their mouths together.

And then his phone rang.

Draven pulled away, looking down at the damned phone that had ruined everything. Whipping it closed, he gripped her hand and began walking, leading her down the sidewalk.

“How about something to eat?” he asked.

Ally’s stomach chose that second to growl. Of course, any mention of food always had her stomach doing that. “Yeah, that sounds good. What are you in the mood for?”

“There’s a little Hawaiian joint down the street.”

“Lanikai! Yeah, I’ve wanted to try it out.”

“Alright, let’s go there. They have the best Garlic Chicken I’ve ever tasted, and I swear I could eat an entire vat of their Macaroni Salad.”

Ally gave a laugh, a much more carefree one than she’d thought possible considering the mood she’d just been in. “Sounds good.”

Draven stopped immediately, pulling her to a halt as well. He twisted her into his arms and stared down. “I have to,” he muttered. He was rigid, his body thrumming with something that



sent a shot of excitement and fear through her.

She was about to ask what he had to do, but her breath caught as he brushed his fingers over her cheek. Odd how she'd forgotten about the tingle whenever he wasn't touching her, but every time they touched, it was like her blood came alive.

Finally, blessedly, their lips met. Her hands slid up his arms and over his shoulders. The thrumming sensation ran rampant throughout her body, as if his mouth ignited more of that need within her.

She pulled him closer, his heat blazing against her, his scent driving her wild. She couldn't get enough of him. She wanted—no, *craved*—more. Their tongues clashed, dancing inside their mouths. A few giggles sounded around them from passersby, but Ally didn't care. She was where she wanted to be, where she *needed* to be: in the arms of the man her entire body hungered for. The man she'd unexplainably dreamt of her entire life. Draven pulled away as though he'd realized they were out in the open, but the retreat was slow, a seduction in its own right, and she savored every second of it.

“Mmmm,” she breathed, barely able to speak.

“Ally.” His whispered reply was more reverent than anything she'd expect to come out of this strong warrior. He pressed another quick kiss to her lips before pulling back again. His face morphed into shock as he realized what he'd just done. “Ally, gods, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—”

“I'm glad you did,” she interrupted.

Draven was silent for a minute, so many emotions crossing his face. “We can't do this,” he finally said. “We can't be together. You're human, it couldn't... We just can't.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but someone else beat her to it.

“Ahh. How sweet.”

Draven turned his back to Ally before she had even recognized the movement. His body tensed as he held her behind him, guarding her from the other man's view. She stretched, peering around Draven's massive frame so she could look at the man who'd interrupted their moment. His deep voice resounded louder than every other noise on the street, as if he'd demanded attention from anyone and anything within earshot. Just as Ally

caught sight of him, Draven's tenseness eased. "Gods, Thrash, you're lucky I didn't just attack your ass. What are you doing here?"

Thrash had raised an eyebrow when Draven mentioned the possible attack, as if he'd thought that her man wouldn't win the battle. Although he must have let it go because he answered simply. "Just out and about."

"Fighting?" Draven asked.

Thrash smiled, but it wasn't a friendly one. The burly blond facing them was handsome, but something about the scowl he wore could frighten off the scariest of men. It was meant to cause nightmares. He looked at Ally briefly before returning his gaze to Draven. "Not that I really give a fuck, but are you actually going to show up at the mansion tonight, or should I tell mommy and daddy that you're too busy fucking? Hmm." He laughed. "Won't they be pleased that you're with a human?"

Ally didn't need to see Draven's face to know he was pissed. She could feel the growl that reverberated through his body. "Watch your mouth, Wolf."

Thrash's eyes turned silver. He pulled his lips back, revealing what looked like human teeth. He appeared to be a normal man—albeit a huge man—as he looked at them menacingly, but the sight of his eyes shattered that illusion.

That was no nickname Draven had just called him. He *was* a wolf. A pair of fangs descended, peeking out from under his upper lip.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was stepping backward and tugging on Draven's arm, hoping he'd retreat with her.

Thrash laughed as he turned his attention to Ally. "Of course, with a sweet little thing like you, I can see how he'd want to be wrapped up in bed all night." He stepped to the side to get a better look, but Draven mirrored his movement, remaining between them.

"You want the Big Bad Wolf to eat you all night, Little Red?" He licked a fang.

Ally paled as she peeked around Draven. She'd never been overly fond of that fairy tale, and right now she was shit scared of the man—*wolf*—in front of her.

Draven growled. “That’s enough, Thrash. Don’t you even fucking think about it.”

With a final sneer, Thrash turned, strolling away from them down the sidewalk. He looked over his shoulder. “Fuck you, Draven. You know I don’t do leftovers.”

Once he was out of sight, Draven faced Ally and pulled her to him. His body visibly relaxing, he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Don’t worry about him, he won’t touch you,” he said. “He’s just an ornery bastard.”

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Ally and Draven returned to her home after picking up some grub at the Hawaiian place. Draven followed her up to the porch and waited patiently as she unlocked her door. They stepped inside as Jake barreled toward them with his tail wagging a mile a minute.

“Hey Jakers,” she said in a baby-talk voice. “*Oh!* Are you doing the happy dance? *What a good boy!*” Jake jumped around on his hind legs with his front legs up in the air, reaching for her. He was jumping around Ally as she bounced back and forth. Draven lasted mere seconds before he started laughing.

Ally started laughing too before she bent down and petted Jake’s head. Walking to the back door, she let him outside.

“Want to do a picnic on the living room floor?” she asked.

“Sounds great.”

“I’ll go grab a blanket”

Ally disappeared around the corner and he heard a little rustling before she came back with a fleece blanket. As she spread it out on the floor, Draven went into the kitchen and grabbed some plates and silverware. By the time he’d made it into the living room, Ally had lit a few candles and turned the lights down low.

They quickly got settled on the floor and started dishing up their plates.

“Alright, spill it. How do you know that Thrash guy?”

“He’s one of my brothers.”

Her eyebrows popped up. “One of your *brothers*? Like the ‘not foster kids’ brothers?”

“Yeah.” Draven laughed. “We’re really just a group of warriors. We’ve fought alongside each other for so long that we’re family.”

“That makes sense.” Ally took a bite of her Garlic Chicken, the flavor rousing a moan.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“How can you not?” she asked around a piece of chicken. “It’s like heaven. Mmmm. Especially when you dunk it in this Katsu sauce.”

Draven had to agree. The Hawaiian place had opened up a few months ago and had quickly become a staple for the Guardians. As if on cue, his phone rang. He couldn’t count how many times Ethan had called tonight.

“You know, it sounds like someone really wants to get a hold of you. Why don’t you just answer it? I don’t mind, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” he said darkly. “It’s my brother. If it were important, he’d leave a message.” He powered off his phone and slid it into his pocket.

“So, you said that you’ve been fighting with each other for a long time. Is that like a couple years or what?”

Draven chewed slowly so that he had time to think through his answer. Last night’s plan to wipe her and clear out was long gone. He’d warred with himself and finally given up on that. He was too involved now. He couldn’t help the connection that bonded them, and by that, he didn’t mean the blood-bond. No, it was something even more powerful, and she was too involved now as well. The knowledge she’d already gained and accepted was too much for him to wipe without causing her damage.

“Some of us have been fighting with each other for a couple of decades.”

She stopped chewing. “And how long have *you* been fighting?”

“I’ve been a Guardian for about a hundred years.”

This time Ally choked. She regained her breathing and swallowed her chicken. “One hundred *years*? How old are you?”

“Six hundred and six.”

“Oh my God.”

Draven snorted. Ally’s expression was priceless, and he was pretty damn sure he’d never forget it.

“What about your brothers? Are they as ancient as you?”

“Some are older, some are younger.”

“Got it,” Ally said. “So basically all of you are geriatric vampires, Valkyries, and wolves wandering around picking fights with people.”

“Not people. Humans don’t know about us.” Then he added hastily, “Except for you.”

“Are there a lot of you? Non-humans, I mean.”

“Yeah, they’re everywhere. Many of them live right around you. Most of us just blend in.”

“Oh.” She popped a piece of chicken into her mouth. “Okay, here’s one for you. What about the tale that vampires and werewolves are in a centuries-long death match?”

“Depends on who you ask.” Draven shrugged. “Some vampires and wolves get along just fine, while some wolf packs refuse to make peace. Then again, usually those packs don’t get along with any other factions either.”

She swallowed slowly, processing his words. Setting her fork down, she leaned against the couch. “I haven’t scratched the surface, have I?”

Draven smiled just before taking a bite of macaroni salad. “Nope. This is only the beginning.”

## Chapter Nine

“Something’s been bugging me since this morning,” Ally said. “Well, two things, really.”

“Let’s hear them.” He’d just finished with his food and was now sitting back, leaning against the couch as Ally picked at her meal.

“Okay, well, this one is really because of last night. I thought vampires were supposed to be cold. After you drank, you know, my blood last night, I noticed that you warmed up. And you weren’t all that cold to begin with.”

“That one is only partially right. Vampires are warm-blooded as long as we’re not hungry. If we’re blood-starved, our bodies weaken and we start to get colder. The healthier we are, the warmer we are.”

Ally nodded, more to herself than him. She figured that made sense, vampires lived on blood—well, blood and food it seemed—so it stood to reason that their bodies’ temperatures would rise or fall depending on how much was in their systems. “Is it true that you can’t go out in the sunlight?” she asked suddenly. “Or were you just playing on myth?”

“No, that’s true. Vampires were created to be night creatures, instead of worshipping the sun like humans and some other factions do. We can handle only a little bit of light, so we usually wait until the sun has set before we go out. And no, I know what you’re thinking. I don’t sparkle in the sun,” he said with a sideways grin, flashing her a dimple and a fang.

Ally laughed. “Oh come on! I actually have a vampire boyfriend, and he doesn’t even sparkle? What the crap!”

Draven snorted. “Not unless you consider sparkling going up in flames.”

She shook her head, her face suddenly serious. “That’s really true?”

“Yeah, it’s not pretty. We don’t last for very long under the sun.”

“Is that hard?” she asked. “I mean, being limited that way?”

“Sometimes,” Draven admitted. “Like earlier, when I woke and you were missing. I could sense you from our blood-bond, but I couldn’t leave your house. I could have flashed closer to where

you were, but I'd have run the risk of being out in the sunlight. Everyone has limits. There are creatures out there that can't go outside without the sun being out."

"How?" Ally asked. "How is that even possible? And why don't people know about all this? Why is it hidden from us?"

"That's simple. Humans are the most innocent race in existence—at least, that I know of. Different creatures were created by different gods, or even groups of gods, and humans were created as the most precious. Of course, there are gods who don't see it that way and wouldn't have any problem wiping all of you out, but the majority of the gods have seen how humans have survived, even without the special abilities all the other races have."

"And that's why everything is hidden from us?"

"Yes. If everyone knew what was out there, then humans wouldn't be as innocent as they are now. Trust me, humans have been let in on the secrets before and it turned into a worldwide war. Humans fought demons, humans turned on each other, unsure of who was demon and who wasn't."

"That sounds awful."

"It was. And that's why it's been mandated to keep it secret, why you have to keep it secret from others."

"I will." Ally nodded. "But who mandated it?"

"The council," he answered. "There's a circle of beings who keep everything in balance. I've never met them, and I haven't heard of them intervening for a—"

"*Dammit!*" she said. "Sorry. Ugh, I can't believe I did that."

Draven's gaze dropped to the Katsu sauce that had dripped onto Ally's chest. Flustered, she dabbed at the sticky liquid that was now disappearing under her shirt. "I'm so clumsy. I'm really sorry I interrupted your story."

"I'm not. Can I help you with that?" he asked huskily.

"No, it's okay, I can go..." Ally saw Draven's eyes light up as he looked at her chest. "Oh."

He was on her the next instant, kneeling over her. He dipped his head down, keeping his eyes focused on hers. His tongue flicked out, tracing up the line of sauce that had sluiced down her chest. His eyes glowed, the pupils lighting up as bright as

they had the night before in the shower. Only now she knew it was real. His jaw clenched as he pulled away. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm sorry."

Ally shook her head in response. "Don't stop."

He came at her again. A small growl escaped his chest as he lifted her shirt. With her bra bared, he lapped between her breasts until the sauce was licked clean, each slow caress of his tongue causing Ally's breath to hitch.

Draven lowered himself, his weight settling deliciously on top of her. His hands roamed as he kissed her on her lips, up and down her neck, and traveled back down to her chest. Ally's mind went blank other than thoughts of what she wanted so desperately to happen. And those thoughts didn't come only from her angle. She was sensing his desire as well, the intensity of their connection igniting like wildfire.

"Do you want this?" Draven asked between kisses.

"Oh, God yes," Ally replied. Oh, she was so on board with this plan. When Draven had said earlier that they couldn't be together, she'd gotten more upset than she thought she would. Of course, there was some undeniable attraction to him that she couldn't overcome.

He lifted her, and before she knew it they were in her bedroom and he was laying her down on the bed, his body covering hers. Her excitement grew from the delicious mix of having the softness of her bed under her and the hardness of Draven on top of her.

He chuckled and pulled back from her. Giving her a half-smile, he clucked his tongue and said, "We'll have to get you out of those clothes."

"Mmm-hmmm." Ally nodded slowly.

The lights went off instantly and her fireplace burst to life, causing a warm, flickering glow to light the room.

"How in the—"

"Perks of being a vampire." He smiled.

That was so cool. She couldn't imagine having gifts like that, but she didn't want to focus on that right now, so she pulled his head down to hers and took him in a mind-blowing kiss.

Lying under his delicious weight, Ally's hands traveled down his body and gripped the hem of his shirt.



Slowly, she pulled it up his body, the fabric catching between their intertwined bodies. Her breathing became heavy as every rope of muscle was uncovered, her fingers trailing over his hot skin. When his chest was bared, she ran her fingertips, her hands, anything she could, over the hard ridges of his body. She wrapped her arms around him, soaking up his heat.

Draven lightly ran his fingertips up and down her skin, sending shivers and goose bumps throughout her body. She reveled in the intimate, soothing feeling of his hands traveling over her. They were so warm and so strong, but he was lovingly gentle with each caress.

Ally leaned up, causing their bodies to crush even closer together. She couldn't deny the desires Draven lit within her. This man not only calmed her, but he also instilled other needs, carnal needs, within her.

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Draven was going mad from need. She was so beautiful, lying under him, her body soft and warm. But what had his jaw clenched tight was the scent of her arousal. Never had his body needed and wanted anyone so desperately.

"Take me."

His stomach muscles tightened at the sound of her purred plea. He couldn't deny his female what she wanted, and he couldn't shake the need to see her naked again.

*Mine.*

She really felt like his, and that realization scared him. The Fates had been so cruel to him before.

Ally was already becoming precious to him, even though they'd just met. If she disappeared? He didn't know what he'd do. He wanted her, needed her.

*Mine.*

*Caalia.*

The endearment surprised him. He hardly ever thought of his ancient tongue anymore, seeing how it had been nearly a century since he'd spoken it. Caalia, meaning beloved, was exactly how he thought of Ally. The little female was staking a piece of his heart. He'd met her only twenty-four hours ago and already she had become more important to him than anyone or anything else.

Draven slid his hands under her tank top. He hissed at the

sight of her perky breasts enticingly cupped in her black lace bra. He could hear her breathing slow and could smell her arousal as he worked to undress her. She needed his touch, his warmth, his love, and he needed the same from her in return. It had been so long since he'd taken a female, and he was more than ready to slake his need with Ally. Ever since he'd first seen her, his body had ached to please her, and his Instinct demanded he claim her now.

He placed his hands on her hips and held her close to him before he slid off the bed and stood. After setting her down on her feet, Draven bent down and slowly pulled her pants down her creamy legs. He glanced at the apex of her thighs and spotted a small, black lace thong. Gods, he could have come undone at the sight of it. This beautiful, gentle creature looked so innocent, and yet here she was wearing such an inviting little patch of cloth that only barely covered the place he ached to be. His Ally really was a naughty little sex kitten.

He gently peeled the lacey covering away from her sex and slid it down her legs. Her sex was smooth, and he had to fight back the urge to taste her then and there. He looked up her body and reached between her breasts to unclasp her bra. Once it had fallen to the floor, he smiled at the sight of her. His fangs elongated, so he quickly closed his mouth.

She couldn't know how much power she had over him. If his fangs kept extending every time she was near, she'd soon figure out what those fangs meant.

But the other part of him that was extending...he couldn't cover that up. His body ached for her like he'd never ached before. He needed to feel her, needed to taste her.

Draven ditched his pants and boxers. He may have dropped them a little too quickly since Ally snickered at his haste.

He carried her into the bathroom and stepped into the tub with her still in his arms as he willed the water to turn on. After gently setting her down on her feet, he poured bubble bath, and then let the tub fill with bubbles.

Draven's attention was completely on Ally, but he'd noted earlier the candles that were decorating the various surfaces in the room. Willing them to light, he turned Ally around so she faced away from him and eased them down into the warm water, positioning her to lie directly in front of him. Once the garden tub

was full, he willed the water to shut off as he massaged her bare shoulders.

She was so soft. It had been so long since he'd touched a female that he'd forgotten how soft they were. She moaned as he ran his hands over her shoulders and his cock jumped in response, volunteering to be the one to make her moan like that.

Ally's head lolled forward as Draven massaged her back and shoulders. Her skin was so soft and firm, he couldn't help but be gentle. When she was deeply relaxed, she laid back against his chest, her back resting comfortably against him. Draven leaned his cheek against her head and wrapped his arms around her, placing his hands on her stomach. They lay together like that for only seconds, before Ally released a sigh. He couldn't stop himself from savoring the soft feel of her body. He slowly inched his hands up her body until his palms cupped her breasts.

"Ahh, yessss," Ally moaned as his thumbs flicked at her hardening nipples.

As his fingers and palms gave her pleasure, Draven wanted his mouth on her breasts. He wanted to knead them between his lips and flick her puckered nipples with his tongue. Surprisingly, his fangs grew even longer at the thought, more so as her body arched above him, her breasts lifting into his palms.

He slid his right hand slowly down her stomach and pulled her body up so they settled even closer together. Then he ran his hand farther down her body, past her hips. He couldn't hold back the low, slow growl that escaped his chest when his hand found her slick, hairless bump at the apex of her thighs. Curling his fingers down to touch her core, he slowly stroked.

Massaging her. Tickling her.

*Oh, God.* She was growing wetter for him by the second.

He bent his head down closer to hers and grazed his fangs against the sensitive flesh of her neck. The grazing turned into kissing, sucking, and licking as he worked his mouth over her shoulder, neck and ears.

Ally arched her back again and moaned in ecstasy. Shifting her ass to one side, she ran her hand down his body, reaching his erection. Wrapping her hand around him, she stroked his shaft.

Draven's hips bucked from her touch. It had been so long since he'd felt another grip his cock, and she wasn't shy about it.

Her hands felt incredible on him. His reaction seemed to urge her on because she stroked faster. He slipped his finger into her hot, wet core.

So tight. So wet.

They both shuddered and rocked their hips back and forth.

Draven was going mad from the feel of her soft butt grinding against him. The feel of her wet, supple skin nearly drove him over the edge. Gods, how he wanted this female.

No. Want wasn't nearly a strong enough word. He needed her. He needed to pleasure her, but he didn't know how long he could hold off from coming himself. He needed to be inside her, to feel her slick sheath around his shaft.

He wondered if her lithe little body could accept his length. She was so small compared to him. She looked only a little over five feet tall, more than a foot shorter than he was. He didn't want to hurt her, but he needed to feel her body engulf him, stroke him. He needed to feel her orgasm around him.

Ally leaned up on her arms and flipped herself over so she lay facing him, bracing herself so her hips hover inches above his own. She stared into his eyes as she stroked his shaft again. The glow in her eyes grew more intense.

"You want this?" he asked.

*Gods, please let her want this.* Draven would have died if she denied him now. He needed her with every fiber of his being.

Ally answered him by crushing their mouths together and gripping his erection. She caressed his length again and again.

Draven pulled away from the kiss momentarily. "Oh, God...*Caalia*." He returned to her lips and ran his tongue in and out of her mouth at the same time he plunged his finger in and out of her sex. He'd never felt a woman more ready for him. Had they not been in the tub, she'd have been dripping all over him. He closed his eyes and envisioned that.

Oh, fuck yeah. He wanted her dripping all over him.

Draven couldn't ignore his need any longer, so he stood and took her into his arms and then carried her to her room. As much as he'd wanted to take her in the tub, there wasn't enough room to do what he wanted to her. He didn't just want to fuck her. He wanted to do something he'd never done with another. He wanted to make love to her.

As he carried her to the bed, he willed the lights off so they could make love by the light of the fire. He pulled back her sheets and laid her gently on the bed. Ally sprawled out on the bed with her legs spread as he crawled over her and settled his weight between her legs.

After kissing her mouth and neck, he worked his way down her collarbone to her chest. He lavished attention on her left breast as he took it into his mouth while kneading the other in his hand.

Ally knotted her hands in his hair while he worked her body, her fingers curling tightly, urging him closer as he nipped and sucked. When another moan escaped her, she pulled his head from her breast and took his mouth in a scorching kiss. While they teased each other with their tongues, her fingertips brushed lightly over his stomach. Draven pulled Ally's knees up and wrapped them around his hips. She was a vision of beauty lying there naked. Her dampened hair splayed out over her pillow and breasts, and her body shuddering in anticipation. He grabbed his shaft and touched the tip to the creamy folds of her sex.

"Draven...*please!*" she cried.

He smiled at her throaty request. She truly wanted him as much as he wanted her. And as wet as she was at her core, he could only hope he wouldn't hurt her if he entered her slowly.

His Instinct demanded he make her his, truly his, but he couldn't bind them without her knowing what she was getting herself into. He would wait to claim her as his mate. The choice had to be hers.

But truthfully, Draven knew there was no letting her go. He'd been a fool to think he could leave her behind and let her live her own life. They were already bound together in some way. And even if she weren't fated to him, he would show her how much he cared for her. He wanted her to love him.

Ally continued to moan and run her hands over his body. He loved seeing her writhe under him, sweating and panting. "Do you want me inside you?" He continued to run his tip up and down, rubbing himself in the sweet juices of her folds.

"Yes! *God yes*, Draven!" she pleaded, breathing raggedly. "Take me!"

He pushed the tip of his shaft into her. She was so tight, and she felt so good that his head dropped from the sheer pleasure

of it. He withdrew slowly and pushed a little deeper into her, timing his thrusts so he didn't hurt her. They both moaned, he from the feel of her warm, wet sheath, and she from the sensation of him filling her.

Ally began rocking her hips back and forth, coaxing him deeper. When he was in to the hilt, he looked down to where they were joined together. Not only was she able to take his full length, but she also seemed to revel in the feel of him, and the humming sensation that he'd been feeling now spreading from where they were joined.

He pulled out a little, and she groaned in complaint.

Draven thrust back into her, pushing her farther up the bed. Ally's nails dug into his back and she cried out his name.

Oh, yes. She needed to be his. He loved the sounds she made as he pounded into her. He never wanted to stop.

Draven reached one hand behind her neck so he could make eye contact with her. "You're mine, Ally," he whispered.

"Yes, Draven. I'm yours."

Leaning down, he nuzzled her neck and grazed her with his fangs. The sharp tips pierced her skin. The initial cry that escaped her changed to a pleased moan as he drew on her lifeblood.

He groaned against her skin, the taste of her blood more ambrosial than any he'd tasted before. How could he have even considered leaving her after his first taste? Draven's thoughts cleared as Ally's teeth grazed his skin. Before he realized what she was doing, she bit down on this neck. And gods, didn't he love the feeling of those blunt teeth. He loved the pressure of her bite mixed with the suction of her tongue and mouth, the vibration from her moans.

Draven had never felt pleasure the way he did with Ally. He felt as though he were in heaven. Her taste, scent, and the feel of her soft body were more than he'd ever hoped to experience. More than he'd ever imagined. He pounded into her harder and harder, their bodies slapping together. Sweat beaded on both of them from their exertions.

Draven pulled his fangs from Ally's neck and began licking at her raw flesh. She licked his neck as well, though he'd heal on his own. Draven couldn't take his eyes from hers as her own glowed with passion. His hips moved faster, pistoning his shaft in

and out of her.

He moved onto his knees and sat up straight, his hands gripping her breasts. Thrusting into her faster and harder, he was forced to hold her in place.

“Draven...I’m...Oh, God. Draven, yes!” she screamed. She bucked and writhed under his body as she came around him, stroking him toward climax.

He ran one hand down and held tight to her waist as his sack tightened. He slammed himself into her as forcefully as he dared while she cried out in ecstasy. His head rolled back, and he roared as his seed spilled into her. Her body milked him until there was nothing left but tremors.

Draven lost all his strength and collapsed onto Ally. They both lay in bed, shuttering and breathing heavily, exhausted from their sexual phenomenon.

He realized, after minutes of catching his breath, that he was likely crushing her, so he rolled off of her and lay on his side. Pulling her into him, he wrapped an arm and a leg around her. No, there was no leaving this little female. She was his.

“We’ll need to get a bigger bed,” he said.

Ally laughed and snuggled into him. He took it as a good sign that she didn’t contradict him. He loved her, and he only hoped she felt the same.

## Chapter Ten

“Dammit, Draven! Answer your godsdamned phone. I’ve been trying to call you all night, and I’m sick of being ignored. If you don’t call me back, I’m going to come looking for you.” Ethan slid his phone shut and cursed. “What good is a cell phone if you don’t use it?” he mumbled to himself.

Raine poked her head into his room. “You haven’t had any luck finding him yet?”

“No, I’ve tried all day.”

“Give him a little longer. Maybe he’s resting. You did say he was injured, and without taking a vein, he always takes longer to heal. I think it’s time for you to rest as well. You haven’t slept since yesterday—”

Ethan’s phone began ringing. He looked down and found that it was Draven calling him back. He slid his phone open. “Where the hell are you?” he snapped.

“*Well, hello to you too.*”

“I’ve been calling you all day. Why the fuck haven’t you answered?”

“*I’ve been...busy.*”

“Right. Well, we have a mandatory meeting tonight, so you’ll need to come in early. And no more going out on your own, brother. Mom and dad put us on the buddy system for a reason.”

“*Did something happen? What did I miss?*”

“You’ll find out tonight.”

Ethan stopped speaking as he heard a woman in the background on Draven’s end. His brows furrowed when he heard Draven cover the mouthpiece of his phone.

“*Shhh, it’s okay, Caalia. It’s just my brother. Don’t get up.*”

Ethan’s mouth dropped at what he’d just heard. *Beloved? What the hell?*

Draven came back to the phone. “*Alright, I’ll be there by sun up.*”

He ended the call, and Ethan pulled his cell away from his ear. He just stared at his phone, blinking in disbelief. Draven had only ever been a fan of one-night stands, and that had been *decades* ago. He’d never allowed himself to actually fall for



someone, and he'd never go for someone who wasn't the female he'd searched high and low for.

Raine cocked an eyebrow at him. "What's up?"

"I think Draven's...in love."

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Ally looked over her shoulder as Draven hung up his phone. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, my brother was just worried about me since I didn't go home last night."

"Oh." She nodded.

They were still both blissfully naked after their lovemaking session earlier. Neither one wanted to get out of the warm, cozy covers.

Until Ally's phone beeped.

She hopped out of bed and ran out into the living room to grab her cell from her purse. She was actually glad Draven had closed her blinds and curtains earlier. Otherwise, she'd be giving someone a peep show right about now.

She looked down at the phone's display before she slid her phone open and dialed to access her voicemail.

*"Hi, Miss Stanford, this is Detective Andrews. I wanted to see if you could provide contact information for Mr. Phanes Genoi? I understand he was your father's business partner. I've phoned his office, but they won't give his personal information out, so I was wondering if you could get into contact with him and have him give me a call. Again, I'm really sorry for your loss. Thanks."*

She turned to walk back to her room, but her foot caught on the coffee table. "Ow." She kept herself from falling, but her jammed toes throbbed in pain. As she reached her room, her gaze landed on Draven as he lay in her bed with his arms behind his head, a wide smile across his face. As he caught sight of her frown, his smile vanished.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh." Ally crawled into bed. "Detective Andrews left a voicemail a couple of hours ago and wanted Phanes' phone number. It sounds like they want to pull him in for questioning or something."

Draven's eyebrows furrowed. "I thought your uncle said he was going to call them and take care of everything."

“I thought so too,” she said as she dialed Phanes’ phone number.

It rang four times before his voicemail picked up. Ally waited for the beep. “Hi Phanes, the detectives on the case want you to give them a call. Call me back if you get this, and I’ll give you their number. Love you.”

She hung up the phone and set it on her bed before turning toward Draven. “I want to go see it.”

“See what?” he asked.

“I want to go see the house. I need to.”

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Thrash made his way up the staircase of the Guardian’s mansion. He was sporting a limp and wanted to get out of view of anyone before they found him injured. He didn’t want to be viewed as weak, and therefore wouldn’t allow anyone to see him in this condition. And he sure as fuck didn’t want to be babied.

He just wanted to get to his room and rest before their meeting tonight.

He had gone out early tonight, patrolling for Collectives, when he’d spotted Draven. Only after running into Draven and his human female, he’d received a text message asking him to meet up with Raider and check out the situation at a certain address.

What he had walked in on made him sick.

The Collective had ambushed a pack of ligers, a hybrid species of were-tigers and were-lions. They’d killed males and females of all ages, including their children.

Well, most of them anyway.

Thrash had sensed living supernatural beings still inside, and rather than waiting for Raider to meet up with him, he’d decided to go in to investigate alone.

He found five Collective demons in a back room—three Abassies, a Lycan, and a type of demon he’d never seen before. The Abassies were busy draining three female ligers of their blood. The females had no fight left in them. They had been drained to near death already, and they were all pregnant. Thrash’s vision went red at the sight, and he immediately lashed out at the first two demons he reached.

Thank the gods the Collective hadn’t known he was coming. He was able to behead the no-name demon and one of the

Abassies before the lycan had turned on him. While the two remaining Abassies made off with the three pregnant females, Thrash battled it out with the other wolf.

The gray wolf was immense in size, nearly matching Thrash's six foot seven. And boy, was he an angry fucker. That bastard had to have been on some type of drug. Either that or he had somehow developed rabies, which was unheard of for lycans.

He was foaming at the mouth, which was a disconcerting sight while in his human form. Thrash could easily tell that the other wolf had already shifted into his first phase. His eyes glowed a reflective silver, his teeth had grown into sharp canines, and he was tracking Thrash's movements with hyper-awareness. The lycan peeled back his lips, revealing his sharpened canines while he snapped and clawed at him.

Thrash allowed his Instinct to take over so he could shift into his first phase. In a split second he was able to anticipate the other wolf's moves. While they both still looked human, other than a few accented features, they battled each other as wolves, biting, snapping, growling, and clawing at each other. Each tried to gain the upper hand. Thrash avoided being bitten by the other wolf as best he could. He had no idea what was causing the rabid symptoms in the other wolf, and he had no intention of getting infected himself.

When the wolf launched himself at Thrash, he had barely avoided being bitten. That was when the son of a bitch lashed out with his claws, creating large gashes in Thrash's left calf.

Back in the mansion, Thrash growled at the memories of the earlier fight.

He. Was. Fucking. Pissed.

He finally reached the top of the stairs, grateful he only had to go down four doors to reach his room. He passed Ethan's room and glanced in as he passed the door.

Ethan's eyes widened when Thrash passed his door.

"Oh, fuck. What happened?"

Just. Fucking. Great. Ethan was going to think he was weak because of this damned gash. Oh, and even better, Ethan just ran out of his room and met up with him in the hallway.

"It's nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing, my man. It looks like we need

to get you to the vet.”

*Ha. Ha.* Thrash was completely unamused, and he made that perfectly clear as he glowered at Ethan.

“What happened?” Ethan prodded.

Thrash ground his teeth. He didn’t explain himself to anyone, and he was in no mood to go over it right now. He was trying to reign in his temper, trying not to lash out at him. He actually liked the kid, not that he’d ever tell him, but that didn’t stop his temper from rising sometimes. And right now, after his Instinct had taken over for the fight, he was in a dangerous position. He’d fuck Ethan up royally. “I’m not going into it now. Now leave me the fuck alone.”

Thrash limped his way to his room and slammed the door shut. No one should be around him right now. Not even Blaze would be safe in the mood he was in.

He quickly shucked his clothes and started up the shower. The whole situation kept replaying in his mind as he soaped up his body. What bugged him the most about the pregnant females was that he’d seen his own mother brutally murdered when she was pregnant. Those images had slammed into the forefront of his mind today. He wasn’t sure if the situation would have been different had he waited for one of the other Guardians to show. Or would they have missed the Collective altogether if he had? Or what if he’d gone back and asked Draven to tag along?

“Fuck me,” Thrash muttered to himself as he shut off the water. He hated these images, hated when they wouldn’t get out of his mind. Whenever he got like this, he was afraid he’d lose his fucking mind. He’d done what he thought was best at the time. And the situation could have either been better, or it could have been worse if he’d reacted differently. Who the fuck knew which way it would have turned out?

After he rubbed his towel over his hair, he grabbed some gauze out of his medicine cabinet and wrapped it around his leg. If he could get enough rest, the wound should heal itself quickly. Then he’d go to the meeting and inform the other Guardians of what happened tonight.

He had three regrets for what happened today. Number one: he didn’t get to the liger family in time to save their lives. Number two: he didn’t save the pregnant females from abduction. And

number three: he didn't get to kill that lycan fucker.

A human SWAT team had shown up at the location because they'd been tipped off about a domestic disturbance. While they wouldn't realize this was a Supe problem, they sure as hell would have witnessed the lycan death-match going on in the back room if Thrash and the other wolf wouldn't have hightailed it out of there.

Neither would have handled jail well. Wolves didn't like cages all that much. So while neither wolf wanted to give up on their fight, they'd had to call a momentary truce to stay out of human view and get the fuck out of there.

Thrash opened the door to the balcony off his room. After wrapping his towel around his waist, he went to lie on the floor of the balcony. He fell asleep under the moon, soaking up its light and letting it heal him.

## Chapter Eleven

Ally had insisted on going to her family's home until she was blue in the face. In fact, she may have actually started turning blue, but Draven kept refusing. As it was, Ally had been known to be persistent, and she'd soon figured out a way to get him to go with her. It had been simple really. All she'd had to say was that she'd go without him.

So, there they were, driving toward the place they'd first met, the place where her entire life had changed.

"I don't understand why you want to go back," Draven said.

He'd already repeated this many times since she first said she wanted to go. "I already told you. It's just something I need to do. I feel like I need to see it with a clear head. I didn't have one that night."

Draven simply raised an eyebrow at her comment, though she didn't know what exactly that was supposed to mean.

They continued driving, passing subdivision after subdivision, the residents still tucked in their beds. It was crazy how things in life completely changed a person. Normally, she'd be asleep like the rest of the people, but because of what happened with her family and because of meeting Draven, everything about her had changed.

Ally let out a sigh as they turned down the road that led to her family's home. As hard as she tried not to show how nervous she really was, her fingers still gripped the wheel tighter. Draven reached over and took her right hand from the wheel, stroking it with his fingers. She let him hold it, grateful for the calming gesture.

They rounded the corner. Ally sucked in a breath as she got her first glimpse of the house she'd grown up in. The car slowed, and slowed some more, until they were directly in front of the house, parking at the curb.

The house was in worse condition than she'd imagined. Ally turned off the ignition and looked at the house. Much of the second story had been destroyed. The front window was busted out. In a flash of memory, she remembered the Christmas tree sailing through it at the same time she'd been thrown through the

door. Behind the shattered glass, there were only strips of the curtains that her mother had once taken such pride in. They'd been her first sewing project. Ally remembered the sight of her mom happy-dancing in the living room when she'd finally completed the set of curtains. She'd had to unpick her work a lot of the time, but in the end, she'd nailed it. Dad had even bought her roses for a job well done.

Ally opened the driver's side door and slid off her seat. As she shut the door, she slowly walked around the front of the car, her eyes fixated on the house the entire time. Draven fell into step with her, letting her take everything in.

She walked up the driveway and rounded the hedge of bushes that framed the grass. Yep, there was the Christmas tree lying in the front yard. She reached the front steps.

"Are you sure?" Draven asked.

"Yeah. I need to."

Ally ducked under the police caution tape and stepped inside. The place smelled like smoke instead of the homey smell of candles her mom had always burned. What was left of the hardwood floors was charred and covered with ash. It was obvious a bunch of people had already come through here, the soot pushed around by footprints. Ally stepped past the living room, heading straight for the dining room. A few charred trusses remained, but the ceiling and second floor of the house were gone. Above them was the darkness of the night, which was only starting to show the signs that dawn was fast approaching. A few birds were singing, flying back and forth between the trees around the house. Ally turned and looked down at the floor where her mom and the munchers had been, and her mind gave her the unwelcome sight of their lifeless bodies.

"You alright?" Draven asked.

She gave him a nod and smile, but even she didn't believe either one of them. Tears filled her eyes, and she tried desperately to hold them back. She looked over to where her dad had been, and her body surged forward. He'd been lying next to the dining room table, the one that was now in chunks and pieces scattered in every direction by the explosion. The floor directly below where the table had been was completely gone, only showing the floorboards underneath, so that meant that the bomb had been even closer than

she'd realized. If only she'd thought quicker, maybe she could have gotten it out of there in time.

Draven tugged on her hand and pulled her to him. "Ally, don't blame yourself."

A tear managed to break free as she looked up into his eyes. "How can I not? This is all my fault."

"None of this is your fault," Draven said with a growl. "This is a sick prank by the Collective that you and your family got caught up in. Why in the gods' names would you blame yourself?"

"If I'd only gotten here sooner—"

"You'd be dead, too," Draven interrupted. "Think about that. If you'd been any sooner you'd be dead, too. You couldn't have saved them."

Ally swallowed, seeing the truth in his words. She wouldn't have been able to change the outcome of what happened to her mom, dad, and brothers, but that didn't make the pain any less.

"I know, you're—"

"Ally stop," Draven said, his tone dire as he stared at the open sky above.

"What?"

He pointed up, his eyes never leaving their target. "Look."

Ally's eyes followed to where he pointed, and she spotted it. A bird, frozen in the air, mid-flight between the two trees. The birds had all fallen silent. She could no longer hear their gentle singing. In fact, there were no sounds at all. No leaves rustled in the wind. Not a single thing made a sound other than Draven and Ally breathing.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know," Draven said.

Ally glanced around as the house started to change. Everything began shifting around them. The floor shook, and the remaining walls screamed in protest as the house continued to quake. The shaking became faster and faster until everything around them was a blur.

"We need to get out of here!" Draven yelled. It was hard to hear him over the screeches and pops.

Everything around them was changing. The ceiling overhead started to fill in, the walls rebuilt themselves. She tried to watch, but the dizzying effect was too much. Draven pulled her to



him in a protective gesture. The whizzing and whirring continued on for what felt like forever. And then, everything was silent yet again.

Both Draven and Ally looked around in astonishment. The house was restored. She took off, running through the rooms, inspecting everything. Dining room, kitchen, living room, and bathrooms were all okay. Upstairs, the bedrooms and bathrooms were all intact. The house was back to normal, structurally anyway. None of their belongings were there. No beds, no couches, no dining room table. No clothes hung in the closets, no curtains on the windows, no rugs on the floor. The house was completely empty. Even outside, their Christmas tree no longer lay dead on the grass.

“W-what happened?” Ally breathed.

Draven met her stare, his brows drawn low. He’d followed her every step through the house, seeing exactly what she’d seen. “I don’t know.”

“But you *have* to know,” she pleaded. “You know everything. Could my family...could they be?”

“I don’t know,” Draven said again. “I’ve never seen anything like this. I don’t have a good feeling about it though. I think we should leave.”

“But what if it’s a good thing?”

Gripping her hand, Draven led her outside. “It’s just as likely not. I don’t know who the hell pulled this off, and we can’t trust it until I do.”

Ally started to argue, but Draven placed a finger on her lips. “No arguing on this one.”

“Thank the goddess! *Ally!*”

She turned to see her best friends, Serin, Cass, and Kat run up the driveway. Serin wrapped her arms around Ally. “We’ve been looking all over for you!” She pulled away, her eyes widening at the sight of Draven. Cass and Kat flanked her, their expressions matching.

“Get away from her!” Serin hissed, pulling Ally away from him.

Draven peeled his lips back from his teeth, his fangs slowly descended.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ally said, attempting to step between

them. “What’s going on?” All three of her best friends kept their eyes locked on Draven, but slowly Serin faced her.

“Ally,” she said, wrapping her arms around her again. “I’m so glad you’re alright. We heard what happened, and—” She paused. “Wait, the house is back to normal.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Just noticed that, did you?” Draven asked.

Kat snorted, but it was more out of disgust than humor. “What’s with the vamp?”

This time Draven’s eyes widened, but he schooled his expression quickly.

Serin, turning cold again, pulled back from Ally. “You need to leave,” she said to him.

“Like hell—”

“Serin,” Ally interrupted. “What’s wrong?”

“Get out of here, vampire!” Serin hissed, ignoring Ally. “And don’t even think about coming back.”

Draven stepped toward Ally, putting an arm around her. His eyes glowed with malice. “Try and make me,” he growled back.

“Guys, what’s going on?” Ally yelled. She gasped as Serin’s statement finally hit her. “How did you know he’s a vampire?”

No one answered. They were too busy glaring at each other.

With some secret decision made, Draven leaned down, whispering, “We’ll be back,” into her ear. Serin gave Cass and Kat a quick nod before following Draven to the backyard.

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“Why won’t any of you tell me what’s going on?”

Her friends didn’t answer, and in the silence, she thought back to what had happened at her family’s house. Serin and Draven had talked for what felt like an eternity, and when they finally returned to the front yard, Draven explained that he needed to fill the other Guardians in on what had happened, both with the attack and with what happened at the house tonight.

“I need you to go home,” he said. “The sun’s almost up, and I need to get back to the Guardians. Maybe one of them can make sense of this.” He looked pained to leave Ally behind, but he gave her a kiss anyway despite Serin shooting daggers at him with

her eyes.

“But I thought you needed to protect me,” Ally argued.

“I am. I need some insight on what’s going on. I can’t fully protect you unless I know what we’re up against. Besides,” he added, “you’ll be fine with your friends.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “But I’m not letting this go. I need to know what’s going on. If the house is back, maybe mom, dad, Trev, and Skye are too.”

“I won’t let this go, Ally. I’ll do whatever I can to find out what’s going on. Now, go home and get some rest. Stay there until I can come back tonight.”

“Need a ride home?”

“No, I’m covered.” Draven brought Ally’s hand to his lips. He kissed her knuckles and then gave her that sensual smile of his. Before she could utter a goodbye, he was out of sight, having run faster than she could track.

Now she sat in her living room with Cass, Kat, and Serin. None of them had told her what was going on or why they’d become so protective of her all of the sudden. They all just sat on the couch, her three friends staring at her as though she’d gone mad.

“Since when have you been sleeping with a vampire?” Serin asked.

Ally was taken back at the coldness in her friend’s voice. “Since it’s none of your business *who* I sleep with!”

“Vampires are dangerous, Ally!” Serin yelled. Cass and Kat remained silent, but their expressions showed they were in complete agreement with Serin on this one.

Ally stood from the couch, glaring down at her best friend. “And how is that you know about vampires? If they’re so dangerous, why didn’t you tell me about them?”

Serin opened her mouth to talk, but nothing came out. Not that it mattered, because Ally didn’t want an answer anymore. She just didn’t want to see the disgusted looks that covered her friends’ faces. She turned on her heels and stalked toward her room, slamming and locking the door. She sat on her bed, going over everything that had happened over the last few days. How had everything gotten so out of control? She didn’t even know who she was anymore. She didn’t know who anyone was anymore.

At least she could find out about herself though.

This was the first time since she'd hit the bank that she'd had some privacy. She needed to know what was inside the box.

Grabbing her purse, she pulled the package out and set it on the bed. Her fingers slid around the intricately decorated box. Admiring the delicate design, she guessed it was Faberge. The base was white with a golden weave, and with small gems embedded where the weaving crossed. It looked so fragile and delicate that she was almost afraid to even touch it. She'd broken so many things in her lifetime, and it was a wonder her parents, the ones who raised her, would even give her something so breakable.

Ally unclasped the lock and opened the lid of the box. Pulling a tissue-like paper out, she unfolded it and saw sparkling golden writing scrawled on the sheet.

*Beloved daughter,  
May this gift help you find your way  
home.*

Ally flipped the sheet over to see if there was anything else when her eyes landed on what had been lying under the paper in the box.

Lying in a bed of blue satin was a lovely necklace, gleaming and sparkling as if it were under a million lights. She pulled it from the box and inspected it. It was a large princess cut diamond on a platinum chain. Around the diamond was more platinum inlaid with tiny sapphires. The contrast between the gleaming diamond and the dark sapphires made the piece the most beautiful she'd ever seen.

Ally undid the clasp and slid the beautiful pendant around her neck. Walking over to a mirror, she glanced at herself. She'd never worn anything so unique or expensive in all her life. She only wished Draven was around to see her in it. Really, it made no sense that she had to open this gift alone. She wanted him to see it. She gripped the pendant between her fingers and twisted it this way and that. The lights hit the different surfaces, making the diamond and sapphires gleam like crazy. Her birth parents must have really loved her to give her something so precious. They must be extremely wealthy to afford something like this.

“Thanks, mom and dad...whoever you are.” She let go of the pendant and it fell against her chest. She’d try to get some sleep so that she’d be ready for Draven tonight. Hopefully he’d come with some answers.

Turning toward the bed, something caught her eye. She faced the mirror once more. Looking down at the pendant, she gasped. The diamond had started to glow.

## Chapter Twelve

The Guardians sat around the library, waiting to get things underway. Ferox had called a meeting as soon as Draven had arrived, sensing the urgency in his son's voice, and now that they were all gathered, he nodded at Raine to start off the meeting.

"We've had a breakthrough in our research. Instead of looking at the prophecy as a whole, I've decided to break it down bit by bit. The first part, '*Destiny fused, product of love, carried within a treasure.*' Knowing that the Fates' prophecies are often riddles, we think that the treasure is a person. When a woman is pregnant, she's carrying a child, so it could be the same thing."

"And I'm pretty sure what '*product of love*' means," Blaze said with a laugh.

Raine's eyebrow arched at his comment, but she'd thought it just as funny as the others had. "Thank you, Blaze. That was another point I had thought to mention as well. Likely this means that the essence was conceived and born, possibly here in this realm."

"Who would the treasure be?" Draven asked.

"Not sure," Raine replied. "That could really mean anyone. Treasure could simply mean someone who is treasured. Maybe royalty or of other great importance, or whoever it is could simply be treasured by her mate, or maybe by the Fates. That part is hard to breakdown, but I know we'll figure it out. I think we're on the right track for '*Destiny fused.*' Since this '*being*' was prophesied to exist, it stands to reason that that's why he or she is infused with Destiny." Raine almost laughed, but she held it in as she watched all the males stare at her in confusion. "Listen, we're not positive which race was chosen for such a gift, but we think that he or she was most likely raised as a human to keep from being associated with the Lore. Humans would be completely clueless.

"We need to find him or her before Damion or anybody else does. Whoever it is needs to understand what this war is about and on what side we stand. As you all know, it's prophesied that whichever side they choose will have an immediate advantage. The strength of this being's powers is foretold to be monumental. If I've decoded the timeline of when the prophecy was made—and I'm correct in my theory—then the Fates foresaw that power

before they were born, possibly even before he or she was conceived.”

Blaze rubbed his chin with his fingers. “So you’re telling us that the Fates foresaw two people getting down and dirty?”

“Likely—” Raine responded.

“That’s kinky,” he finished. “My kind of girls.”

“Longshot question here, but do you have any idea what this person looks like?” Ethan asked.

“No,” Raine replied. “We can only guess he or she would appear like any of us, especially if she’s immortal. We have to believe he or she is somewhere in this area, since we’ve all been drawn here for a reason. The Collective has been searching even longer than we have been, and Damion wouldn’t be residing in this area without good reason. We have no idea who else is searching for him or her. For all we know, there could be others. The only thing I can suggest is to look for a man or woman in their twenties.”

“Well, that fucking helps a lot,” Thrash said under his breath. He received a few narrowed brows, but Raine quickly brushed off his comment.

“Anything else, dear?”

“No,” Raine responded to Ferox. “That’s all I have for now. Riley and I have been researching everything we can. And if our theory is right, then that’s a lot to go on.”

The men all nodded in agreement, except for Thrash, who glowered in annoyance. Ferox leaned forward in his chair. “Draven?” he asked, gesturing toward his son.

Draven nodded. “I spent the night with a human female last night.” There were a few smiles and snickers around the room. “Her family was murdered by Collectives.”

The room went silent, the Guardians each taking in the surprising information. Death counts were skyrocketing because of the Collective, and it was a kick to the gut for every one of them, including Raine, to hear of times they’d failed in their duty.

Raider finally broke the silence, but even he was looking at Draven with narrowed eyes. “They’re directly targeting humans now?”

“Not sure why they targeted them though. They put a cloak in place, and I spotted it on my way out last night. Once I made it

past the wards, I saw Q lunge for the woman. I attacked him before he got her.”

“No time to call in for backup,” Raider said, more to himself than anyone.

“No time,” Draven agreed. “I fought them, and she ran inside the house. I killed Clay, but Q ran for it, escaping as I was finishing off his brother.” There were a few delighted expressions on some of the Guardians’ faces. It wasn’t every day one of them took out such a high-ranking Collective. “I had barely removed Clay’s head when the house exploded.”

“That’s what happened to that house?” Raider asked. “I saw it on the news. It didn’t look Lore-related.”

“She’d been in the blast?” Raine asked just after Raider. “And she survived?”

“Yeah. She was banged up, but she survived it.” Draven paused for a minute, clearing his throat. “But what’s really weird is that today we went back to the house, and while we were there it somehow rebuilt right around us. Back to the way it was before the blast.”

The room went silent again as each of the Guardians looked at Draven like he was on crack. Blaze sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know how in the hell that house was rebuilt like that, but we need to figure it out.”

“And what of the rest of her family?” Raine asked. “You mentioned that she lived, but what about the others?”

“They didn’t make it,” Raider said. “It’s been all over the news.”

“We don’t know if any of them came back when the house did. None of their belongings were in the house after it...regenerated,” Draven replied. “I don’t know what the hell happened, but if any of you have ever seen anything like this, I need the details ASAP.”

“Where’s the girl now?” Ferox asked.

“She’s at her house. I left her in capable hands,” Draven replied. “I hope.” Raine watched her son, listening to the angry tone of his voice and his tight posture, and she wondered if Ethan was telling the truth, if Draven really had fallen in love.

“We need to get her under Guardian protection. She needs



to stay with us,” Ferox said. “At least until we figure out what’s going on.”

“Agreed.” Draven nodded. “I’d planned to bring her back with me, but there was a little...hiccup in convincing her friends to let her go off with a vampire.”

“They knew?” Raider asked.

He nodded.

Ferox leaned forward again, linking his hands together. “Humans?”

Draven shook his head. “I’m not sure *what* they are, but I’ll find out. Do any of you know what could regenerate a house?”

Each of the warriors murmured random responses that they’d never heard of such a thing.

“A ripple.”

The Guardians turned to face the deep voice.

In the entryway to the library stood a figure with a tawny bare chest. Only wearing black leather pants and biker boots, he stood tall and proud with his shining black wings folded loosely behind his back.

“Demetrius!” Ferox laughed as he stood from his chair. Walking over, he greeted him by grabbing his forearm. “Nice to see you, man. It’s been too long.”

“It has.” Demetrius smiled back. He faced the others and inclined his head, purposely avoiding eye contact with Raine. “Guardians.”

Everyone stood and bowed to the new arrival. Raine remained silent as she crossed to the far side of the room, otherwise Demetrius wouldn’t take another step inside. “She doesn’t have to do that,” Demetrius said quietly, his jaw clenched.

“You and I both know it’s easier,” Ferox said. “So, what brings you here?”

Demetrius slid him a sideways glance and arched his brow. “What else?”

“More trouble in paradise?”

He laughed at Ferox’s question, but the truth was, the Earth realm used to be something of a paradise, more so than it was today. As the human realm, it had always been more innocent than any of the other realms. But once races started portal-hopping from realm to realm, they’d found this one and started corrupting it.

“Yeah. More trouble in paradise. Why are the biggest problems always in your neck of the woods?”

“Guess that’s why you set us up here, huh?” Ferox smiled. “Have a seat. We were just going over some new things that have come up, and then we’re going to train.” Ferox motioned for Demetrius to sit.

“I got your email about the updates from your last meeting,” Demetrius replied.

Each of the men remained standing and shook hands with him in the same fashion Ferox had, by gripping one another’s forearms.

Draven was the last to shake his hand. “What’s a ripple?” he asked, getting down to business. “What does it mean?”

Demetrius sat down and leaned forward in his seat so as not to bind his wings. Raine noticed that as he’d moved around the room, he’d never given his back to her. Even now, he sat facing her though he refused to meet her gaze. She laughed to herself as she curled up on the couch. Demetrius had never told anyone why he couldn’t be around females, but it was obvious that his phobia was too strong to overcome.

“It’s what brought me here. I felt the time ripple, but it was centralized to this area.”

“What does that mean? What would cause it?”

“That’s the hard part. I don’t know who did it or why. All I know is that I sensed one, so I came to check it out. Occurrences of this magnitude aren’t to be taken lightly, since there’s always something that needs to be sacrificed for it to happen.”

“Great,” Ferox said. “So now we just need to figure out who made—or is going to make—the sacrifice and who in the hell this ripple benefited. I’m going to be honest here. It sounds like we’ve got a lot of research to do on all this shit that’s happened lately.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “Thrash, update us on the distress call sitch. Raid tried to meet up with you, but there were police crawling all over the place.”

“Yeah, I made it there before the police did. The Collective wiped out almost an entire pack of ligers.”

A few of the Guardians’ eyebrows arched. Sending Thrash—a wolf—in to help ligers wasn’t a good idea. Thrash hated cats. Hell, Thrash hated everything.

“When I got there,” he continued, “there were still a few Collectives in the home draining three pregnant females. Two Abassies took off with the females while I fought the others.”

“You should have waited for Raider. He could have assisted you without losing them,” Ferox said.

Raine knew her husband well enough to hear the hidden statement in his words. He was hinting at the same thing she wondered: had Thrash let them take the females on purpose? “If I would’ve waited any longer they all would have been gone. Besides, what the Collective has in their ranks now would have stopped both of us from reaching those females. They’ve recruited a wolf.”

“Fuck.” Ferox brushed his hand through his hair again. “What type of shifter would willingly join the Collective?”

“One that’s not right in the head,” Thrash replied blandly. “He looked rabid. I’ve never seen anything like it in my own kind. Lycans aren’t susceptible to rabies. I don’t know how else to explain what the fuck was wrong with that wolf though.”

Demetrius cleared his throat. “Not that this helps the immediate threat, but I’ve been traveling all over, searching for more warriors to join you. If I can convince the warriors in Chicago that the threat is greater out here, I think I can get them to leave their homes.”

“They still can’t live in one house, huh?” Ferox said.

Demetrius shook his head, looking annoyed. “They’re an independent bunch. That’s all I can say. I’ll email the details to you if I can get them to come out here.”

“Sounds good,” Ferox said. “How long do you plan to stay?”

“Not long. A few hours, tops, before I need to get back to my prospects.”

Ferox nodded. “Okay Guardians, we have a battle to prepare for and a *helluva* lot of research to do on this other shit. The immediate issue right now is that the Collective is hunting for the prophesied one as well. As mentioned last night, we need to take out as many of Damion’s minions as we can. We’re breaking into our groups and training tonight. Raider will go through our plan of action. Tomorrow night, we’re off the streets, and just before dawn, we strike.”

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The Guardians all stood, their excitement to start grappling with each other palpable. Being that they were Immortals, they hardly ever had to work out, though many of them chose to do so to keep themselves agile. With the Collective gathering demons of numerous lineages, they needed to practice battling against any special abilities they could. As they found out tonight, one really never knew what demons the enemy might throw onto the battlefield.

Draven knew he needed to get back to Ally, but his father would have a royal shitfit if he shirked his duties tonight. So, he'd stay and train for a while. He was excited to show off how strong he felt after feeding from Ally. It had been so long since he'd fed directly from the vein, and he'd never felt like this when he'd taken directly from the source before. He wondered if any of the others felt the way he did after feeding from a host.

Draven followed some of the other Guardians down the hall until they reached the in-house gym. Someone flicked on the lights as he walked through the door, illuminating the expansive room. He had always appreciated the in-home gym they had made for the Guardians to share. It was really a thing of beauty, with wrestling mats, punching bags, treadmills, ellipticals, barbells, everything they would ever need. He spotted the stereo and headed over to turn it on.

He was attacked from behind.

Draven slammed into the ground and his face hit the wrestling mat. The attacker was on his back, laughing.

Draven flipped onto his back, sending his attacker flying off of him. He kicked himself up off the floor and in a fraction of a second he landed on his feet, curling his body into a fighting stance.

His father and the other Guardians stood open-jawed, staring at him.

"How did you move so fast?" Ferox asked. "I had you pinned. You've never been able to throw me like that."

A wicked grin spread across Draven's face. "Things change, I guess. I'm feeling pretty good right now."

"You fed," Ethan said, almost accusingly.

"Well, *shiiiiit!*" Ferox laughed. He walked over and clapped

Draven on the back. “Let’s just hope this newly found strength sticks.”

He knew his father had always been proud of him. He also knew that it pained him when Draven refused to drink blood the way vampires were meant to. But he hadn’t expected to see the expression that was on his father’s face at this very moment. He could remember seeing the same glint of the eye that his grandfather had whenever he looked at Ferox, like there was some secret trust being handed down between the two. Now Ferox gave Draven the same look, and for the first time in over a century, Draven felt that maybe his life was finally aligning. As though the events of his entire life were leading him to Ally and the strength she gave him. Maybe with her by his side, he had the strength the vampire race needed in their future king.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Ally, honey, I’m sorry,” Serin said through Ally’s bedroom door. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Ally had only left her bedroom a few times throughout the day, and each time had been because she was starving. She’d go into the kitchen, grab something quick to eat, and go back to her room without saying a word to any of them.

Standing from her bed, she opened her door and glared at her best friend. “I’m still mad at you.”

“I know, but I brought you a present,” she said, producing a bowl of ice cream. “You can only have it if you forgive...” Her voice trailed off as she noticed what Ally was wearing. “Please don’t tell me *that’s* for the vampire.”

Ally stood in the short red dress that she’d changed into so she’d look her best for Draven. She’d gotten frequent bursts of comfort throughout the day and thought that maybe they had come whenever Draven thought about her. She hadn’t been able to get him out of her mind. As Serin stared at her, shaking her head in disgust, Ally grabbed her long, black jacket and put it on. “Ha!”

“Short skirt, long jacket? For a vampire?” she gaped. “I’m not sure we’re even friends anymore.”

Ally approached the door again, her hands outstretched. “Give me the ice cream.”

“No.” Serin held it away from her. “I’m not sure you deserve ice cream either.”

“Fine, I forgive you.”

The sound of glass shattering drew their attention down the hall. They heard screams and growls and Jake howling, which made both of them panic.

“Stay here,” Serin said, shoving the bowl into her hands. “I mean it.” She ran down the hall and came back seconds later. “Go out through here,” she said, sliding the window open. She pushed the screen out of the window and grabbed Ally’s hand. “I’ll be right behind you,” she whispered.

Ally ditched the bowl, and her eyes met Serin’s before she dropped to the ground. As soon as her bare feet hit the snow, they screamed out in pain. Serin tossed her legs over the windowsill, ready to follow her, but someone grabbed her and yanked her back

in.

“Run!” she yelled.

Ally ran. She pumped her legs, as fast as she could though the frozen snow. More sounds erupted behind her as she reached her gate and bolted through the opening. Someone was chasing her. She could hear the footsteps. She didn't know where to go or where to hide, but she had to keep going. Rounding the corner of the house, she headed into her front yard.

And skidded to a stop.

Men clad in what looked like fighting gear stood there, wielding weapons against...Cass and Kat.

Serin appeared behind her, fighting another man.

Ally nearly screamed out. They'd been after her, not her friends. She'd die if anything happened to any of them. But as she watched, she realized that her friends were fighting back, wielding weapons of their own. And they were good.

One of the men turned to see Ally standing there, and just as he charged her, Serin tackled him to the ground.

“Get out of here!” she yelled.

Ally stepped back, tensing to run again, but her back brushed against something big and hard. She whipped her head around and looked up. Her gaze met the same cold eyes she'd seen the night of her family's murder. During one of their conversations, Draven had told her that he'd killed Clay, the shorter demon who had been at her parents' house the other night. He'd also vowed to go after Q's head, since he fled the scene that night.

So this was Q.

He threw his arms around her and held her tight, grasping her around her stomach as she started kicking and screaming. She couldn't break free of his iron grasp even though she continued to struggle.

Serin, Cass, and Kat all tried to reach her, but as hard as they tried, they couldn't get passed the others.

Q held Ally tighter in his arms. Her breathing became shallow as he kept a tight squeeze on her. Knowing that if she didn't break free soon, she'd pass out from suffocation, Ally thrashed about harder. She screamed out when she felt a sharp pain shoot through her shoulder.

Q had just broken her arm.  
Then everything went black.



## Chapter Fourteen

Draven had sparred with his brothers for hours and didn't even feel tired yet. Hell, he didn't even feel winded. He couldn't believe the incredible strength he'd drawn from Ally's blood. As the son of a warrior-class vampire and a Valkyrie, he'd never been a slouch in the strength department, and only his refusal to drink from a live source had hindered his strength. He was done with that now. He had Ally. With her by his side, he could conquer anything. As a 'vampyrice,' as the others called him, he was stronger than purebred vampires.

He thanked the gods that his father didn't submit to his parents' demands.

His father was a king whose entire lineage was made up of warrior-class vampires, bred to be the strength of the race. Draven's grandparents, Drök and Leelian, had tried to force Ferox to marry another vampire, but he held out, refusing to marry. Until he found Raine.

Once they'd wed, Raine and Ferox had ruled the vampire race together. Due to the strength from both sides of his family, Draven and Ethan were nearly unstoppable.

Nearly.

He knew nothing was completely unstoppable. The mightiest of creatures could be slain, so he was under no delusions to think he was mightier than all others.

His father had approached him first when they'd split into groups. Ferox had wanted to see if Draven could match his strength and ability long term, and Draven wanted to teach his father a lesson after attacking his back earlier. Draven had overtaken Ferox in size centuries ago. At six-foot-six, their height was the same, but Draven's build was bulkier than his father's. His broad chest and shoulders were the biggest anyone had ever seen in the royal family, or so he'd heard.

Ferox's pure vampire blood, mixed with the strength from taking his Valkyrie bride's vein, had always made him stronger. Until now.

Ferox repeatedly advanced on him, only to have Draven overtake his holds and block his punches and kicks. Every time Ferox would try another maneuver on his son, Draven would be

two steps ahead and have him in a hold instead. After about an hour of sparring with each other, Ferox decided to switch opponents.

Next came Blaze. Blaze was a big half-vampire, half-Salvo—which is a type of fire demon—hybrid. He was the funny guy within the brotherhood of Guardians. His humor and quick wit could make anyone laugh, and he was the only one who could pull Thrash out of one of his moods. Ferox had decided to keep them together on missions most of the time for two reasons. One, they were best friends, and two, Blaze was the only being alive who could calm Thrash. And that was a difficult feat, even for him.

Blaze rushed Draven, aiming to tackle him to the ground, but Draven spun around and grabbed onto Blaze, throwing him to the ground. Blaze laughed as he sucked breath back into his lungs.

Nearly a century ago, Demetrius had brought Blaze to Ferox and his men so that he could be trained on how to be a better warrior. The shock of the previous vampire king and queen's demise at the hand of Ferox's twin brother, Damion, had spread through the Lore community like a wildfire. As a half-vampire, Blaze had felt for Ferox and had sought him out. He'd wanted to pledge himself to the new king, even though he feared being denied. As a half-breed, he'd grown up being feared and ridiculed for what he was. Though he couldn't help who'd fathered him, vampires punished him from being "other." All his life he'd felt useless and unwanted. When Blaze had finally reached them, he had sworn loyalty to the new vampire king and had offered himself as a warrior for their cause. He and Draven had gone out one night patrolling. During their rounds they got ambushed by some corrupt demons. The two men fought diligently, but there were too many demons closing in on them. More and more demons appeared, as if there were an endless supply, hungry for battle.

When there were too many advancing on them, Blaze had sheathed his blades, much to Draven's chagrin. He'd yelled at the other warrior to pull out his swords and to help him continue the battle, but Draven had shut his mouth once he saw what Blaze did next. He had swept a hand through the air, creating a wall of flame around the two of them, creating a barrier between Draven and Blaze and the demons. He held his hand up toward the creatures, razing their bodies.

Only after he let his fire go out did they notice Demetrius standing in the shadows. He slowly stalked toward them, his black onyx eyes piercing them. A slow grin spread across his face and he inclined his head to them. Without a word, his wings shot out of his back and he leapt into the air.

“Ah, fuck.” Blaze grunted. Draven had just slammed his fist into the warrior’s gut. “Jesus Christ, whose blood did you drink?”

Draven smiled and held his hand out, helping the half-vampire, half-Salvo—or as Blaze had coined, Valvo—to his feet. He found that he was easily able to blow off all Blaze’s moves, although he hadn’t thrown any flames at him yet.

Tonight’s workout didn’t really feel like it was working him out at all. He smiled, thinking that might be because Ally worked his body over so much better.

*Ally.*

His smile broadened as he thought of his female. The sun would be going down soon, and then he’d be free to get back to her.

“Getting cocky, boy?” Blaze asked as they continued to throw blows at each other.

“No. Just thinking about a girl.”

“Nice...to know...I can’t...hold...your focus,” Blaze said as he punched Draven repeatedly. Those had been the first real hits Blaze had gotten in, and they’d been enough to cause Draven to bleed from his lip. He flicked his tongue out, tasting his own blood with Ally’s sweet zest mixed in.

When everyone else started slowing, Draven continued to fight as though he’d just started. Finally, Blaze threw his hands up in surrender.

“Gods, Draven,” he said as he caught his breath. “What has gotten into you? I’m ready for someone else to step in and take you down.” Blaze clapped Draven on the shoulder with a laugh. “How about my man Thrash?”

“Gladly,” Thrash said. He stepped in to take Blaze’s place. He was winded and his eyes were still reflecting silver from the grappling he’d just done with Ferox, but boy, did that wolf love to fight.

Thrash was a lycan who almost always had a *mess-with-*

*me-and-I'll-fuck-you-up* look on his face. No one messed with Thrash unless he wanted to be messed with. He was best friends with Blaze, and the two were nearly inseparable. When Thrash got in a pissy mood, it could take hours—even days, sometimes—to get him to come back down to normal. Only Blaze could speed up the process.

Sometimes.

And when Thrash was pissed off, it wasn't safe for anyone to be near him. On rare occasions he could be caught in a mood where he'd be decent, but it seemed to irritate him when he was asked to be nice to humans. He was really only nice to humans when they could give him something he wanted, which was generally sex.

And even then, he wasn't so nice.

He was a use 'em and lose 'em type of wolf. He had a handsome face, so he could get the ladies if he wanted. Although, most women—and men for that matter—were terrified of him unless he turned on his charm. But once he did, it was impossible for them to refuse him. Women practically kissed his feet when he actually smiled at them.

Thrash's fangs descended and his claws came out as they started battling. Draven felt unstoppable. He matched the wolf step for step, which was really saying something. The lycan was an immense six-foot-eleven, standing as the tallest and broadest Guardian, and the way he fought was lethal. Seriously predatorial. But even with all that, he couldn't overpower Draven tonight.

And Draven wasn't about to let him, not after the way he'd acted in front of Ally.

"You're mind isn't in the fight, prince," Thrash said as he rolled to his back and threw Draven over his shoulder. "Thinking about the girl? You going to share her, Draven?" He laughed. "If she could bring you out of being celibate for so long, the little thing must be fun to fuck. She as tight as she looks?"

Draven's eyes widened and his fangs unsheathed as he careened into Thrash, sending the wolf onto his back yet again. He roared and lunged for his neck. Down on his back, Thrash growled, his eyes flashing silver as he bared his own fangs and fought to keep Draven from biting him.

He felt two sets of hands settle on his shoulders as he was

pulled off of Thrash. As they peeled him off, Thrash shifted into his wolf form and snarled.

Which only pissed him off more.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Blaze yelled as he jumped in front of Thrash. “Come on buddy, let’s go.”

Thrash and Draven stared at each other, Draven crouched in a fighting position and Thrash in wolf form with his ears pulled back. Both were growling and baring their fangs until Blaze started pulling Thrash away. As the large wolf disappeared from view, Draven started to relax, but he was nowhere near being calm.

“What the hell was that about?” Raider asked.

“Nothing,” Draven growled. He was still pissed about what had just gone down and was in no mood to explain.

“You know better than to piss off a wolf, Draven,” Ferox said.

“Let Thrash’s anger pass,” Demetrius said. “It’s not often he’s bested. In the meantime you can work your anger out on me.”

Draven had started to calm, but he really needed to hit something, so he agreed. Truth was, he hated fighting against Demetrius. He was a lethal bastard. He’d trained and trained with the guy before they’d started the brotherhood of Guardians. He had no idea where the guy had learned all of his fighting techniques, but it seemed the guy was never out of maneuvers.

When Demetrius stepped forward to throw a punch at Draven, he blocked the blow only to have Demetrius’ wings shoot out and knock him down. Draven stood back up and charged him with lightning speed. The two men collided, and Draven sent him to the ground, his ass hitting the matted floor.

Demetrius stood, laughing. “How in the gods’ names have you gotten even better since we fought last?”

Just when Draven was about to head-butt him, he froze, gripping his chest as he rolled off of him. Demetrius’ eyes went wide and he shot to his feet.

“*Fuck!* I didn’t even hit him,” he said, throwing his hands up in surrender.

Ferox ran over and knelt next to his son. “What’s wrong?”

Lying on the floor, Draven kept his hand over his heart, his breathing labored. “I think I better stop for the night. My chest hurts.” He rolled onto his knees and stood up carefully, still

rubbing his chest. "I need to go."

Draven walked out of the gym and headed for the front door. His brothers had all told him to stay at the mansion for the night, but he'd argued with them because he needed to be with Ally. Now he felt that need more than ever.

Something was wrong. He could feel it. And it had to do with Ally.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Welcome to my home, my dear. I apologize that I’ve kept you waiting in my office so long.”

Ally looked up at the man from the same chair she’d been forced into when she’d gotten there. Her breath caught at the sight of her captor. He was finely dressed in a tailored pinstriped suit and had bowed to her as he walked into the room.

She didn’t know how she’d gotten there. One second she was struggling against Q in her yard, and the next she was sitting in this chair. She figured she’d been drugged since she had no recollection of traveling here after being attacked. Although she couldn’t remember sleeping, she figured she’d been here a while because her arm didn’t hurt as much. When she had struggled with Q earlier she had heard and felt it snap under his hold. Thankfully, the pain was not as bad as it had been earlier.

“I’m quite pleased to meet you, Miss Stanford. My name is Damion, and this is my home.” He gestured around the room before he sat across the desk from her. “Do you know why I’ve brought you here, my dear?” He spoke to her in a gentle, non-threatening way, but Ally sensed he was anything but gentle. The man’s aura screamed evil and dangerous. When she just shook her head, he continued. “You will be making a very important decision shortly...one that affects the entire world, which, coincidentally, affects me.”

He reached his arms across the table to grab one of Ally’s hands, but she quickly pulled it from his reach. “Do you know who you are, Ally?”

She swallowed hard and shook her head. “I don’t know who you think I am.”

Before she knew what was happening, Damion had launched himself over the desk, gripped her arms tightly and pulled her out of the chair. Her eyes teared up from the pain of his grip. He held her there, unmoving, as his eyes wandered down past her face to her chest.

The glittering chain caught his attention. It was only barely visible because of the jacket she still wore. He reached out, pulling it out from under her collar. When the illuminated diamond appeared, he drew in a breath and his eyes went wide.

Awestruck, he gazed at her and said, “It *is* you. I had my doubts, but...gods, *it’s you.*”

Ally shook her head, not sure what he was talking about. She couldn’t explain the glowing necklace and didn’t know what it meant.

Damion’s awe-filled expression turned angry as he curled his lip and growled. “You *do* know who you are.”

“I’m sorry, but I...I don’t.” Tears streamed her face. “I don’t know who you think I am.”

“Do not lie to me, you *fucking* bitch!” Damion picked her up and roared as he threw her a few feet through the air until she slammed into the wall.

Ally sucked in a breath as a shot of pain rushed through her head. She cradled her broken arm, which now hurt again, against her body and rubbed her head with her other hand. She sat on the floor, staring at Damion, not quite sure what to do. She was pissed at herself for crying, but she couldn’t control herself.

Damion rushed over and stood her up. Grabbing her arm, he pulled her down the hall. The growls that came from him made Ally fear for her life.

Unsure of what he planned to do to her next, she fought against his hold as he dragged her through the house.

“I spent a lot of time and money decorating a room in honor of you, so you’d better enjoy it. I’ll be back to get you for breakfast.”

He tossed her in a room and slammed the door behind him. She then heard locks sliding into place.

Ally ran to the door only to find that all the locks were on the outside of the door.

“Dammit! Let me out!” she screamed as she pounded on the door with her fist.

No one answered.

She was alone.

Aggravated, she looked around the room and found there were no windows and no other doors. There was no way out other than the locked door.

Ally stood in the middle of the room, crying, for what felt like an eternity. Her arm hurt, was most likely broken—again—and her head hurt from ramming into a wall. Not to mention the



facts that she'd been kidnapped and found out that her whole life had been a lie. Her parents weren't even her parents, her brothers not even her brothers. Everything seemed to be coming at her all at once, and she couldn't hold in her emotions any longer.

She rubbed at the tears on her cheeks as she sat down on the bed. She looked around the room and saw how lovely it really was. If she weren't being held against her will, she might have actually been able to enjoy the place.

There had to be some sort of mistake. She was nobody and certainly nothing special. She didn't want to find out what Damion would do when he found out he had the wrong person. He'd probably kill her.

Ally continued gazing around the room and examining the small details that made this room quite unique. The wallpapering was dark, and yet it had swirly patterns in it that made it beautiful, even feminine. The bed was large and had bulky posts at each corner.

She pulled her legs up onto the bed and positioned some pillows so she could lean comfortably against the headboard. The pillows were comfy as she lay back on them, and it was then that she realized how tired she was. She probably shouldn't sleep, but she felt like a weight was pulling her under due to the head injury that jackass had just given her.

She didn't feel safe here at all, but seeing how she didn't have any choice, she figured she should at least try to rest. Being kidnapped would take a lot out of anyone.

Ally settled down further in the bed and her breathing steadied. She fell asleep with the only soothing, comforting thoughts she could think of: her family and Draven.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Good afternoon, Alaina. I trust you slept well.”

Ally slowly opened her eyes and peered at Damion as he entered the room with a tray of food. She flipped over on her back and sat up as he set the tray over her lap. As she pushed herself up into an upright position, she realized that her arm no longer hurt. She glanced down at it and noticed that it was completely healed.

*How in the hell?*

“I will feed you now, *Alaina*.”

*Alaina? Dad called me that before he died.*

She shook her head, both from confusion and to deny his request. “No. I can feed myself.”

Damion’s lips pulled back in a sneer. “As you wish.” His gaze traveled over her body as Ally popped a strawberry into her mouth. Her mouth watered as she savored the flavor. She was famished and the strawberries tasted utterly amazing. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she let her gaze roam around the room, only allowing small peeks at her captor.

He was a good-looking man—or vampire, rather—if one could see past the bright red eyes and his raging temper. For some reason his eyes would be a chocolate brown color one minute and red swirls the next. She much preferred the chocolate color. At least then he was pretty attractive and could pass as human.

What threw her for a loop was how much he resembled Draven. Could they be related? She really hoped he really wasn’t one of the brothers Draven had described last night. Although, come to think of it, Thrash was one of his so-called brothers and he was terrifying with a capital T.

Damion had a scar that ran down his face, starting right below his left eye and curving down his cheek, only stopping an inch away from his ear. He had a warrior’s build, although he wasn’t as stacked as Draven.

She dodged his probing eyes for a few minutes as she ate more strawberries. When she looked up at him, she noticed his fangs elongate before her eyes.

Yup. Definitely a vampire.

*Shit.*

It immediately occurred to her what he was thinking. Based

on her experience with Draven, fangs come out for feeding and sex. She was not on board for either of those with Damion.

“When can I leave?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “You’re not leaving. You and I are to be mated. You will be queen to my empire.”

Ally’s eyes widened. This guy was *so* not joking around here. He was as serious as a heart attack.

“Here, let us go for a walk. I will take you on a tour of your new home so you will be more comfortable.”

Anger flooded her. She’d never been able to stand pushy men. She’d dealt with enough power-hungry men in her lifetime and she wasn’t about to let this guy push her around.

“No. I’m not *mating* you and I’m not going anywhere with you, either. Just...leave me alone! I’d rather die here in my cell than to be with *you*.”

Ally felt a chill rush through the room, although she couldn’t actually feel a breeze. It was almost as though the air itself dropped ten degrees within an instant.

She continued to stare Damion in the eye. His eyes began to glow red as he took in the disgust on her face. Damion’s lips peeled back from his fangs, and she heard a growl come from his chest as he slapped her across the face. He leapt from the bed and threw her tray, sending all her food flying. Before she knew it, he had left her room, slamming the door and locking her in. Again.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she brought her hand up to her cheek, which stung like hell. She could even taste blood where her teeth had cut into the inside of her cheek. Frightened and hurt, she dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. How she wished Draven were there.

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Damion stormed down the hallway until he reached his master suite. He slammed the door behind him and willed his lights on.

Oh, how that girl infuriated him. She was a good little liar, even though he saw right through her. Of course she knew who she was. Her attitude fit the part perfectly.

He had to give her credit, though. She hadn’t broken once in her story that she didn’t know who she was.

The tears, the sobs, all of it was a good act, but he knew

better.

His master would be only too pleased that he'd finally captured her, and as she was promised to him to use as he saw fit, he'd make sure she knew who the boss was.

Damion loved playing the part.

He'd always wondered how different his life would have been had he been born the first twin, the heir to the crown. He would now be king of the vampires if that had been the case.

His sissy brother wouldn't have lasted long, that's for sure. He would have gotten everything: the crown, the castle, and the girl. By now he would have countless children running around singing praises to their father.

Not that he liked children. Dirty little buggers.

But, if one wanted heirs, then one had to have children.

Just as Ferox had proven. The bastard and his mate had produced heirs before Ferox had even been crowned, which made things a bit more difficult for Damion as he vied for the crown.

Now he had his sights higher. He no longer wanted only the measly crown. With the help of the girl, what he had in store would earn him the crown anyway.

And if he had his way, he'd also have Ferox's head.

## Chapter Seventeen

Draven reached Ally's house and knew without a doubt that she wasn't there. Jake greeted him, now treating him like a friend rather than an intruder, but his tail was down, and sorrow-filled eyes stared up at Draven.

Something happened here. The furniture was thrown about, the door ajar. Ally's bedroom window was wide open, with the screen on the snow below. There was something wrong with his female, and even though they shared a blood-bond, he couldn't sense her exact location. He could feel that she wasn't too far away, but the signal was scrambled. Draven paced her living room, sending her texts, calling her, leaving voicemails.

He speed-dialed the Guardian's emergency line. Ethan picked up on the third ring. "Who's out?" Draven asked quickly.

"Dad and Raider are on patrols. Thrash and Blaze headed to Pandora's."

"Thanks." Draven hung up the phone and flashed to his Navigator. Starting the ignition, he drove toward town, hoping he'd get a read on where Ally was. The drive to Pandora's felt like it took forever, and finding a parking spot was worse. Pulling into a spot a few blocks away, he walked slowly toward the club, keeping a normal pace so that humans wouldn't suspect anything.

Draven walked over to the bouncer and nodded at the guy. He had just started working there and had been sent to the area by Demetrius. "Guardian," the bouncer said as he inclined his head, his Australian accent thick.

"Lex," Draven greeted. "They in there?"

"Yeah, a couple of 'em are."

Draven nodded and walked through the doorway. Stalking across the dance floor, he bypassed tables and gyrating bodies. He knew where his brothers would be and headed straight toward the booth.

"Didn't think we'd see you here tonight," Thrash said as he downed another shot. "Thought you'd shack it up with Red all night."

Draven's jaw clenched. He didn't know why he'd expect anything more from the wolf. Thrash didn't apologize for his bad behavior.

Ever.

Hell, Thrash never felt sorry for being an ornery son of a bitch.

Draven's eyes glowed. "She's missing. *You* haven't seen her, have you?"

"No. But even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. I'd keep her all to myself." Thrash smiled wickedly, but it faltered when Draven growled. "Easy, vampire. I haven't seen her since you two were feeling each other up on the sidewalk."

Draven's fangs had already extended, begging for another showdown with Thrash. But with the look on Blaze's face, he truly believed Thrash hadn't seen Ally.

As much as he wanted to fight the wolf right now, he wouldn't go toe-to-toe with him needlessly. Thrash didn't like being touched. Only women he planned to screw were able to touch him, and even then, he was in control the entire time.

As if on cue, a cute little redhead came up carrying drinks to Thrash and Blaze. As she started setting drinks down on the table, Thrash grabbed her around the waist and pulled her down on his lap. With half-hooded eyes he pulled her into him and groped her as if he was going to take her right there in the booth. Based on the way she was responding to him, she wouldn't have minded in the least. Only a few seconds ticked by before she was summoned to another table. As she went to stand up, Thrash put a fifty in her hand and spanked her ass as she walked off.

"So tight," he said with a growl.

"You gonna sit down, brother?" Blaze asked Draven.

"Didn't you hear what I said? Ally's missing. Her house was ransacked." He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated that he still couldn't sense her location. "I can't get a bead on my female. Just...Keep an ear out," he said as he walked away.

Blaze shot back the rest of his drink and fell into step with him. "*Your* female? When the hell did that happen? I thought she was just some human."

"Oh, right, like Thrash didn't tell you about her," Draven said.

"Well, yeah, he did mention something, but I didn't realize she was actually *your female*."

Thrash walked next to Blaze, flanking Draven as they made

their way to the exit. Even though he wasn't happy with the wolf at the moment, he wasn't about to turn down help right now.

The Collective was after her, and there was no doubt in his mind that they held her captive at one of their hideouts. But which one?

## Chapter Eighteen

“Ugh! I hate waiting! This. Is. Ridiculous!” Serin paced around the room, practically tearing her hair out.

“I know. We need to get back out there,” Cass added.

Kat was pacing as well. “This is bullshit!” She kicked a chair, sending it skidding across the floor.

“And what right do you think you have to damage my furniture?”

All three women froze and bowed their heads. “Mistress.”

She stood proudly in the doorway with her curled hair flowing free. The brown and red tints gleamed in the candlelight. Her satin maroon dress was tight in the bodice but flowed freely below her waist. She looked as stunning. She always did. The room was dark other than the candles that adorned the walls and tables, their light flickering off the onyx tile floor. The entire room was decorated in blacks and dark reds, creating an elegantly gothic look.

She walked across the room, her heels clapping loudly against the tile. She stopped once she stood before them. “I asked you a question, Katya. You will answer it.”

Kat closed her eyes in irritation and bowed again. She had no choice but to do as her mistress ordered. “I’m sorry, mistress. It’s just that we need to get back out there.”

Their mistress narrowed her eyes on Kat before snapping her fingers. The chair that had slid across the floor was now right back where it had been before.

Turning away, she crossed the room and sat on a chaise. “Not until you tell me what’s happened. The three of you have failed your mission.”

“You know what’s happened!” Serin snapped. “It’s why you sent us after her in the first place.”

“You knew we would fail. At least one of us is usually around her, making up reasons why we need to be near her,” Cass added.

“Calm yourselves, I am not displeased with you. You’ve done well in your mission so far. Until today, that is. Now they have her, and I can see nothing. I fear the unknown as much as you do. So many possible futures lie ahead of us all now.”



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Alaina was sleeping in her bed as Damion snuck inside. He set down a tray of fruits and bread his servants had prepared and inched his way over to her. She looked so peaceful, a beauty lying in his bed for the taking.

Damion stripped out of his clothes and rolled into bed. She stirred as his body spooned hers, a whispered moan escaping her.

And then she woke up. Her body froze against him, her eyes slowly peering over her shoulder.

With a smile, Damion shoved his pelvis into her, his cock ready to take what was his. She screamed, rolling away, but he caught her before she got too far. Pulling her to him, he arched his hips into her once more, a groan escaping him at the feel of her soft ass against his hard erection.

She struggled against him, trying with all her might to get away. He forced her onto her back and rolled on top of her, pinning her beneath him.

Her eyes widened and she screamed again. Her hand shot out, slamming into his nose.

Damion roared in anger before bringing both her wrists together. He held them tightly with one of his hands while continuing to swirl his hips around, trying to warm her up. Even though he didn't sense an ounce of arousal in her, he could smell her anger and fear. And, oh, didn't that just turn him on even more.

He didn't want a timid little creature to be his mate. He wanted a firecracker that could give as good as she could take. If a woman were to be by his side, he'd need someone tough enough to instill fear in others. With the way this female acted toward him—with pure hatred—he knew he could create the perfect mate for him.

Her first lesson would be tonight.

He would take her, even against her will if need be. Soon she would learn to love him, and her hatred that she felt now would be turned against the Guardians. That was only a small part of his plan, anyway. If he kept her by his side, willingly or not, then ultimately the Guardians would be destroyed and the Collective could continue their mission.

Damion slid his free hand up her arm and continued to the collar of her jacket. He ripped the fabric apart. She didn't need it

anyway. Underneath, she wore a bright red dress, the color of blood. He had to admit, the color suited her. With her struggling underneath him, his cock was straining to feel what she felt like on the inside. He needed her naked right now. In fact, she'd be naked from now on. Running his hands up under the hem of her dress, he wrenched the fabric up. He'd accomplished getting it high enough that it wrapped around her neck.

Almost off.

Looking down at her bra and her flat stomach, he hissed. She was truly breathtaking. If he hadn't already been hard, the sight of her in that state would have sent his cock straight into springboard action. The only thing that would have made this moment better was if she weren't screaming. But as it was, she was wailing like a banshee. No matter, though. Within a few short moments, he'd have her screaming in a different way. Soon she would be clutching to him instead of pushing him away. She only thought she didn't want this, but he knew she would gladly accept him once his cock was inside her, once his fangs were in her flesh.

She continued to fight and kick, but with her hands bound, she was truly no match. It was a bit more difficult than he would have liked—with her thrashing and all—but he did want a resilient female. His eyes followed wherever his hand explored. With her legs bared, he slowly moved his hand up her thigh, reaching her curvy hips. His mouth began watering as he realized he would feel her there any moment.

Damion continued his exploration further up her body until he reached her breasts. He palmed one of them and nipped the other with his fangs through her bra, ignoring her tear-filled cry. Keeping his hand on her breast, he placed his lips to her chest and began kissing and licking up to her collarbone.

He froze on top of her, focusing on a mark that had previously healed, but that a vampire could spot easily enough.

"You've been bitten," he growled.

The girl looked up at him, her eyes widened in terror. He didn't need her to answer him, he knew well enough whose mark was upon her neck.

Damion laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Hmm...oh well." It would be too easy to cover his nephew's bite with his own. Soon, Alaina would belong to him. He shoved his knees

between hers and spread her legs wide. With Alaina squirming and screaming again, he placed his free hand on her thigh, under the thin strap of her thong. He kissed his way up her body to her neck and, holding onto her underwear, he wrenched his hand backward.

“No!” she screamed as he ripped her thong from her body.

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Gersemi lay on her chaise as she watched her birds eating seed inside their cage. It had been such a peaceful day. No banquets. No parties. Just a relaxing day at home.

She enjoyed being around others. At least the parties got her out of her quarters where she was always alone. But what she really craved was being with someone special, someone who didn't expect her to be something she wasn't.

Someone to love.

But she'd been alone for so long now she didn't even know if she was capable of the feeling.

She truly was alone.

Yes. She did love their banquets for the company, but sometimes she felt there were just too many. If not for her being bored with everyone at the temple, she'd enjoy it more.

Another bonus to not having a banquet today was that without the hustling and bustling of all the servants prepping for a large feast, they actually had time to pamper her today.

“It's time to bring Alaina home, Gersemi. She has been away for *far* too long. Will you finally tell me where she's been hidden away?”

Gersemi barely paid attention to the man who'd entered her room so rudely. He hadn't even given her servants time to announce his arrival. The only thing she did to acknowledge him was a quick nod of her head.

The man stood there, scowling at her nonchalance. Finally, he spoke again. “I apologize for my intrusion, my lady. Please forgive my rudeness at entering your quarters without invitation and without being announced.”

Gersemi rolled over on her chaise and sat up, staring at him. “It's all right Vé,” she responded. “Now, what may I do for you?”

Vé looked annoyed as she pretended not to know what he was talking about. “It's time for her to come home, Gersemi. She

is my niece, and I wish to meet her, not to mention how eager the others are to make her acquaintance as well.” Vé stepped closer and lowered himself on his haunches in front of her. “If I am this excited to meet her, then your heart must be doing back-flips in your chest. Give your heart a break, Gersemi. Bring her home.”

“Oh, alright.” Gersemi laughed. Vé had always been a kind brother-in-law. He’d looked out for her welfare and they’d often pondered what her child was like. “It really is time to bring her home. I felt her put on the pendant, so I know she is starting to uncover information about herself. I also felt her adoptive family perish. She would be grieving for them now, so I planned to wait. But since everyone is so expectant, I think I may summon her home sooner.”

## Chapter Nineteen

“No! Stop!” Ally screamed. The lace dug in to her skin before tearing apart. Her face, neck and hair were soaked from her shed tears. She couldn’t handle this. She couldn’t. One of her biggest fears in life was being raped, and now it was about to happen. She felt so weak because she wasn’t able to stop him. She only wished she knew what she could do to make him stop. Her breathing was so ragged she started hyperventilating. Fear and anger rushed through her body, the terror too much for her to handle.

Damion’s fangs were long and sharp as he opened his mouth and angled for her neck. She screamed again as he was about to sink his teeth into the flesh below her ear, the same spot where Draven had bitten her tenderly and lovingly last night. Damion growled as he readied to strike.

A roar sounded from outside the room just before the door crashed open and splintered apart. Damion scrambled off the bed and crouched in front of her, blocking her view from whoever crashed into the room. Damion let out a ferocious growl as he stood in an attack stance.

Ally looked up at the man who had just saved her from being raped.

“Draven!” she cried.

The room erupted in a round of snarls as two more large men ran into the room behind Draven.

My god, they were all *huge*. One of them was the wolf she’d met earlier, but she couldn’t fear him at the moment. He was on Draven’s side.

Ally drew her gaze away to the only person that mattered. Her heart was racing at the sight of Draven.

His eyes were filled with sorrow as their gazes locked. So much passed between them in those seconds. Her face was full of tears, and she was practically naked. Draven removed his coat and tossed it to her, and she gladly draped it over herself. He turned with glowing eyes and bared his fangs at her captor.

Ally’s fear washed from her body as she realized there were three of them against Damion. Based on their sizes, Damion was in serious trouble. She also noted there was something very

primal about Draven. He appeared to be acting purely on animal instincts. Having him anywhere nearby made her much more at ease. Of course, she wouldn't feel safe until she got the hell out of this place.

“What have you done to my female, you *fucking sonofabitch*?” Draven growled.

Damion laughed at him in a menacing way. “*Your* female? Well, I don't know about that, but you do have the fucking part right.” He took a step toward Draven. “I was taking my future mate. Of course, I might have been nicer to her had she not worn your bite. She's been promised to me, and as such, I was fucking her the way I would if she were already mine.”

“She's mine!” Draven roared, and the force of it rumbled through the floor and walls. Ally had never seen a more powerful sight, and she thanked God she wasn't on the receiving end of his fury. His muscles were pulsing and his fangs were extending as pure hatred rolled out of him.

“Holy fuck,” the two men flanking Draven said under their breath. They stared at him with wide eyes, clearly surprised by his rage.

Draven lunged at her captor, ramming his shoulder into Damion's stomach and hurtling him toward the wall. Ally righted her dress and threw on his jacket. She made sure her pendant was still on and made sure it slid under her dress. Then she remained on the bed, unsure of what to do.

She watched the two men duke it out in front of her. Pictures were falling off the walls as they slammed into them, and even the nightstand had broken into pieces when Draven had barreled Damion into it. Damion grabbed a splinter of wood from the broken nightstand as Draven pulled a dagger from his harness.

Ally was trying to decide if she should make a break for it since Damion was distracted, but ultimately she didn't want to leave Draven behind. He'd come for her, and she would stay with him through this.

The other two men who had arrived with Draven whirled around as they heard footsteps behind them.

Ally realized that even had she wanted to bolt, she wouldn't have made it far with Damion's men waiting in the wings.

The two men ran out of the room and she could hear more fights break out in the hall. The sounds of more growling, punching, things splintering and what sounded like someone falling down the stairs met her ears. She only hoped the good guys were winning.

Just as Ally heard Draven roar again, she whirled around to see a—

*What the hell is that thing?*

A black-robed being stood between Ally and Damion, but he appeared to be staring at her. She assumed the being was a man because of its size, but she couldn't tell for sure. The black robe covered its entire body, and it looked a little too much like Darth Vader for her taste. Its robe swirled around its body as if defying gravity.

The creature continued to stare at Ally. She could literally feel its eyes on her, even though she couldn't see its face. The robed being slowly lifted its arm out to her as if to touch her. She froze, unable to move and unable to look away from this presence. She was transfixed until Damion charged Draven and threw him across the room. Ally tore her eyes away from the creature to look at Draven. Her heart sank as she saw him injured and she desperately wanted to make sure he was alright. When she looked over at Damion, she saw that the evil bastard had blood all over his body and appeared to have a broken arm.

Draven was winning.

That made her feel a lot better.

Just as she saw Draven launch himself toward Damion, the robed being touched Damion's shoulder and they both just disappeared. They literally *poofed* out of the room. Black smoke swirled around the area of where their bodies had just been.

Ally's eyes widened at the phenomenon. He'd disappeared just like Draven had earlier. She shook her head, deciding to figure out that magic trick later. Right now, she needed to make sure her man was okay. She hopped off the bed and ran over to him.

He held his arms out for her as she reached him. After scooping her up into his arms he buried his face in her hair. Ally latched onto him tightly and cried into his chest.

Draven stood there—panting, bloodied and beaten—and started kissing every inch of her face. She pressed her lips to his

skin wherever she could.

They both halted when someone cleared his throat. Draven looked over at the two men leaning against the wall. “Oh.” He stood, helping Ally to her feet, ensuring his jacket covered her. The one Ally hadn’t met before walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. He had pitch-black hair with red-tipped spikes. There was a deadly air about him, just like Draven and Thrash, though his face was somewhat friendly as he looked down at her. Almost as if he was surprised by her presence. “I take it this is your female?”

“Yes,” Ally answered for him.

He smiled, his fangs peeking out from behind his lips as a flame flickered to life in his palm. “I’m Blaze.”

She looked at the small fire then back up at him. Sure, this was normal. “Okay.”

Blaze laughed and closed his fist, extinguishing the ball of fire. “Alright, let’s head out. I already called Ethan for a pickup, and I’m ready to torch the place.”

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Draven held Ally in his lap the entire way back to the mansion. Blaze sat in the backseat with them, but courteously kept his eyes focused outside. Ethan drove while Thrash rode shotgun. They each remained quiet and kept their eyes averted to anywhere but Draven and Ally.

His brothers must have sensed that Draven would go medieval on any one of them if they so much as looked at Ally while she was in this state. The three of them who had gone into the manor had seen what Damion had done to her. She wore his jacket now, but seeing her stripped down to her bra was a visual he—and likely his brother—couldn’t shake. He thanked the gods that neither of them was ignorant enough to say anything about it.

Or he’d have to kill them.

Draven felt Ally begin to calm after the traumatizing events she’d just experienced. Their blood-bond must be helping her calm since he didn’t need to put her in a trance again, which he hadn’t wanted to do anyway. The more times humans were entranced the more their minds started slipping. Countless humans had been sent off to the nut house because they’d been scrubbed or entranced too many times. Some had even gone because they found out that



“mythical” creatures were in fact real.

Keeping one arm looped around her shoulder and the other holding her hand, he held her tight against his body.

Draven knew he'd nearly been too late. At least he'd hoped he hadn't been too late. He wasn't entirely sure how far things had gotten, and he wasn't ready to bring it up yet.

He might be ready to bring it up when he had Damion's head. Maybe not even then.

As he thought about all the things that could have happened, his anger ignited within him again. He needed to avenge her, needed to make sure Damion couldn't get his filthy hands on anyone else ever again. Just thinking of seeing Damion's naked body writhing on top of Ally's caused Draven to growl.

She tensed and pulled back from him just as his brothers turned with questioning looks.

“Ally,” Draven said, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “I'm sorry. I failed you.”

She put her head on his chest and looped her arms around him. “No you didn't. I'm just glad you came, Draven. You're the only thing I could focus on. You kept me from breaking.” They were silent for a few more minutes, until she sighed. “I don't want to be weak anymore. I want to be able to defend myself.”

Draven winced. He was her protector. She shouldn't feel that she needed to protect herself. He should have stuck with his instincts and stayed by her side, no matter what her “friends” had said.

“And I want to kill Q,” she concluded.

That earned her looks from all the brothers in the SUV. They'd all turned and faced her, except for Ethan who was looking at her through the rear-view mirror.

“*What?* Ally, no—”

“Will you train me?” she asked.

“You don't need to train. I just need to keep a better eye out from now on.”

“No, Draven. He was one of the monsters that killed my family. He kidnapped me and served me up on a platter to Damion. I need to do this.”

The visions wouldn't get out of Draven's head, not only his point of view, but Ally's as well. He could see and feel her reliving

her experience, which only made his blood boil more.

What was even more disconcerting to him was that every Instinct within him demanded that he claim his female, to make sure that all who came across her knew that she belonged to him and him alone. If *anyone* ignored his marking, he would have their heads.

His anger subsided as he heard Ally sigh and felt her cuddle in to him. He was yet again grateful for the blood-bond they shared. He might not have found her without it, and even with it the task had been hard enough with the veil that Damion had on his manor.

Draven didn't want to lose her again. He never wanted to be away from her. That overwhelming need to claim her returned.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

He really did need her, and it wasn't just because he had a feeling she was meant to be his mate. He'd started caring for her when he'd first met her. His heart sang when she was near. She made him strong. He...loved her.

He actually *loved* her.

He should have known, what with his temper flying the way it did when she was in danger. Only Fated mates could ignite passion like that.

When he'd seen Damion all over her earlier, he'd lost his mind. Everything in him had screamed at him to protect her. He'd never before felt the animalistic nature take over as it had tonight. One part screamed at him to hold her, to comfort her. The other part demanded that he rip Damion's throat out for messing with his female.

The Navigator moved through the mansion's security gate, and Ethan parked in front of the front door. Draven helped Ally out of the SUV and led her inside.

\*\*\*\*

Ally couldn't believe the magnitude of the place. With a foyer this size, the house must be gigantic. It was beautifully decorated, everything in dark tones. The walls varied from a light tan to dark brown. The floor was covered in dark tiles, and mahogany furniture was artistically placed. It was probably the most beautiful home she'd ever seen. Draven pulled her through the foyer into a library. He looked back at her with a tender smile

as they walked through the doorway. “Jake’s already here.”

She was surprised to hear that. She hadn’t even thought about Jake, or anything else for that matter, after what happened tonight. She’d been too focused on pushing terrifying thoughts out of her head. When she’d thought about it earlier in the car, Draven had almost gone into a frenzy as he read her thoughts. So she’d pushed them from her mind as well as she could. She’d soldier on to protect her man. She’d deal with her emotions later.

Draven pulled her down to sit next to him on a couch in a sitting area with other chairs and couches. Just as she got settled, Jake jumped up on the couch and curled up on her lap, his eyes peering at her as his tail hesitantly wagged.

“I had Ethan pick him up after I realized you’d been kidnapped,” Draven said.

“Hey Jake,” she whispered as she petted him behind his ears. She looked up at Draven. “Thank you.”

She focused on Jake, whispering calming words to him—and maybe a little to herself—when Draven stood from the couch.

“Ally, there are some people I’d like you to meet.”

She set Jake down on the floor and took Draven’s outstretched hand. Making sure his jacket was still in place, she turned toward the people he was introducing her to. When she faced them she saw...

*Oh, my God.* There were five *huge* men and one average-sized one. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, staring at her. Each one of them stood tall and proud. No doubt they were all warriors like Draven. There was also no missing the incredibly gorgeous woman standing with them. She was much taller than Ally was, but still managed to look like a child standing next to all those men.

She immediately felt like she was an outsider. In no way did she fit in with this crowd. She was *way* too plain.

Draven pulled her close to his side and started gesturing toward them. “Ally, these are my brothers. You’ve met Blaze and...you know Thrash.”

Oh yeah. Ally remembered Thrash quite well, and nervousness spread in her stomach as she remembered what had happened on the street. It was only slightly lessened by the fact that he’d helped rescue her. Blaze she remembered because he was

at Damion's place as well. He'd managed to throw fire from his hands.

"The one who picked us up is Ethan. These two gents right here are Raider and Riley. And, this is Ferox and Raine. My parents." As Draven had listed the guy's names, some politely nodded at her. Others cocked an eyebrow, smiled, and gave her the how-you-doin' nod. Ethan had tipped his baseball cap and raked his gaze down her body and back up. When he bowed at her, she caught him sliding his gaze up her body as he straightened back up.

No one missed the growl that escaped Draven's chest when Ethan pulled that move. A few of the men's eyes widened, while grins spread on the faces of the others.

Raine took a step forward and took Ally's hand in both of hers. She gave them a gentle squeeze. "Welcome." She smiled at Ally and took a step back as Draven's father came forward.

She smiled back at Raine until she focused her attention on the man stepping toward her. She tensed at the sight of him.

*No!*

He was her captor—Damion. Ally stepped into Draven, tensing to run like hell. He held her tight and whispered in her ear, "He's not who you think, *Caalia*."

The men all gave each other grins as they looked at one another, and she realized that whatever he'd said to her was a big deal. After seeing their reactions, she wondered now more than ever what it meant. Ally forced herself to look at the man again. Now that she did, she saw that there were a few differences, and this man didn't have a scar down his face.

"Be at ease, Ally. I am not my brother," he said.

Draven bent down close to her ear again. "Damion is my father's twin."

She looked up at Draven. "That monster is your uncle?"

"He is."

It was obvious he wasn't happy about that fact, but it was what it was.

Her body relaxed. Only after that did Ferox take her hand in his and kiss the back of it. Then he returned to stand by Raine, the two sharing a look that showed just how in love they were.

"She's had a rough couple of days. I'm going to take her

up to my room,” Draven said.

The others nodded at them and scattered. Some men sat down in chairs or couches, while others went over to a bar and poured drinks. Raine and Ferox walked hand in hand over to beautiful thrones. There was no other way to describe them. Yeah, they sat in thrones. Ally made a personal note to go over that one with Draven later.

Draven led her up a large curved staircase. “So that’s everyone?” she asked.

“Yep, that’s everyone. Well, almost. Gregory will have a shit when he realizes he wasn’t awake when you arrived.”

“Gregory?”

“You’ll meet him later.” Draven smiled. “He’ll probably bring you gifts.”

“What about that wolf? Do I need to worry about Jake?”

“We don’t have to like him, but he’ll be nice to your dog,” Draven assured her.

“Has he had his shots?” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm from rolling out of her where Thrash was concerned. She didn’t trust him farther than she could throw him, which wasn’t far at all. In fact, if she tried to pick him up she was certain he’d fall and squish her to death.

She could hear everyone but Thrash snickering at her questions.

Draven stopped mid-step and peered down into the sitting room.

“See, they already get along just fine.”

Ally turned around to see that Jake was on Thrash’s lap, having his belly scratched. Surprised at the friendly exchange, she drew her attention to the others, noticing that they were all staring at her.

Within an instant they had each found something to do and the room was busy again. Draven laughed. “See, don’t worry. Thrash won’t hurt him.”

He grabbed her hand again and led her the rest of the way up the stairs before leading her down a long hallway.

*This place must be freaking huge,* Ally thought.

After they passed a few doors, he finally stopped at one and opened it. The room was large with dark furniture and dark décor

filling the space. The bed was a tall four-poster with a canopy and fabric hanging off the edges, draping the bed in a translucent sheen. A large fireplace was to the side of the bed, the flames already licking up the logs as if they'd been waiting for Draven's return. She noticed right away that it was a wood-burning fireplace instead of a gas one. She'd always thought actual logs burning was more romantic.

A section of the bedroom contained leather couches and a huge plasma TV along with video game systems and stereo equipment. On the opposite wall, Ally spied a doorway and what looked like a tub in the distance behind it. She walked over to the doorway and found a lovely tiled bathroom with a massive Jacuzzi-Garden tub. The bathroom had a separate shower and a large granite counter top with two black porcelain sinks. Both the bathroom and the bedroom were exquisite. She knew this whole space was designed specifically for Draven. This was exactly the décor for her powerful, irresistible vampire.

Ally turned around and saw Draven leaning in the doorway, arms folded and legs crossed at the ankles. He had a half-smile on his face as though he knew she was in heaven. "You like it?" he asked.

"Oh yes, it's perfect."

"I like seeing you in my room." He slid that sideways grin at her again, melting her heart. "You okay staying in my room with me?"

Ally's eyes saddened, and she looked at the floor. "Can I be perfectly honest?"

Draven's jaw clenched, his eyes fixed on her as he nodded once. She took a step toward him. "I don't ever want to be apart from you again."

His shock turned into a drop-dead-gorgeous smile. That mug of his could make any woman stutter, but when he turned on that smile?

Game. Over.

She flushed and her heart pounded as he turned to shut the door. He slowly stalked toward her and she heard the locks click into place.

Ally lifted a brow and looked at the door and then at him. "I meant to ask you about that."

“I can work locks and switches with my mind,” he said with a shrug. He continued to prowl toward her. “Among other things.”

Draven reached her and placed his hands on each side of her neck, bending down to touch his lips to hers. Ally rolled up on her tippy-toes and took his mouth even harder.

“I know what you’re thinking about,” Draven whispered against her cheek.

“Oh?” She wanted to lose herself in him. She wanted to forget about all the things that happened to her, and just revel in the man she was falling in love with.

“You’re thinking how bad you want to get naked.” He brushed his lips against her neck and up to her ear, sucking on her lobe.

“Uh-huh.” Coherent words were no longer possible when he did stuff like that.

“And take a *long* bath in my tub.”

Ally pulled away and laughed. “Among other things.” How could he know her so well? She really wanted to wash the grimy feeling of Damion’s hands off of her, but at the same time, warmth had spread through her from being near Draven. “Actually, that would be great. I’d like to wash a lot of stuff off of me.”

He winced at her words. Then he pecked her cheek and led her to the bathroom. He started the water and plugged the drain so the tub could start to fill. “I’ll be right back with some stuff for your bath. Here’s a robe and wash cloth.”

He left the room and shut the door before Ally wiggled out of his trench coat and slid the dress off her body. Once she’d shimmied out of it, she dropped her strapless bra. She looked at herself in the mirror and realized she still had her necklace on. It still glowed vibrantly against her skin. Just as it had when she first put it on, and just as it had when Damion found it. She unclasped it and pulled it off her neck, setting it gently on the counter, its illumination fading.

There was a quiet knock on the door.

“Can I come in, *Caalia*?”

She walked over to the door and slowly opened it. Draven swept his eyes over her naked body. She thought she heard him growl before he walked past her and placed some shampoo,

conditioner, body wash, bubble bath, and a loofah on the tub surround.

“Gregory beat me to it. He’d already started making a welcome basket for you with all this stuff. I’m pretty sure he has a stash somewhere, just waiting for company.” Draven laughed. “Take as long as you want, I’ll be back in a few minutes if you need me.” He grabbed her hands and pulled them up to him, and then gently kissed her wrists, which were slightly bruised from Damion’s hold, before he headed out of the room.

Ally couldn’t breathe from the onslaught of emotions she felt, not only her own, but also the ones she picked up from Draven. She shut the door and turned to throw some bubble bath under the tap.

Slowly stepping into the tub, she sat down and leaned her back against the tub surround. The hot water felt amazing as it engulfed her body. She sighed and closed her eyes, letting her worries soak away in the giant bathtub.



## Chapter Twenty

“Most of the manor is lost, sire. But we extinguished the flames before they reached your wing. The building has been cloaked so it won’t draw attention of human officials.”

Damion turned away from the demon who’d just supplied the report and faced Q. “How did the Guardians get into the manor in the first place?”

The three men walked into the manor, inspecting the damage. It was lucky that the main entrance and his wing hadn’t been damaged during the Guardians’ raid. The entryway had soot lining the walls and floor, but that wasn’t a problem. He’d have his slaves work round the clock until it was pristine again.

“It looked like someone melted our security system component, most likely the same someone who torched the manor. Luckily the security room wasn’t burned, so I’ll review the tapes and figure out what happened,” Q replied. “Uh...how did you get out of there, sir?”

“Do you question my abilities?”

Q immediately tensed as he realized he’d inadvertently offended his master. Damion had killed for much less. “No, sire. I was merely curious if we have any other weak links in our security systems.”

“It is none of your concern how I escaped the ambush,” Damion replied. “It looks like some of our local demons will have to train in the caverns while we rebuild. Q, I’m putting you in charge of transporting them.”

“No problem, sir. I’m on it.”

“Very good. I expect a report shortly. Oh, and be sure that some demons take care of this mess. I want it cleaned up before I return from dinner.” Damion turned and walked from the manor.

Q turned toward the other demon. “Go and find Alex. Have him send some of the fastest demons so we can get this cleaned up.”

The demon nodded and dashed off quickly, heading for one of the Collective’s hideouts. Q sat down in a chair and started punching buttons on their security system’s console. It had been melted so badly nothing was bringing it to life.

“What the hell happened?”

Q shot out of his chair and turned to face the man who'd spoke. "Clay?" he said. "What the hell? You're...dead."

"Yeah. I was." Clay nodded. "But I'm back."

\*\*\*\*

"That is one *fine* woman," Thrash said as he leaned over the pool table.

"Yeah, true. She's a tough little one, too," Blaze said. He faced a few of the other Guardians. "When we crashed in on her and Damion, she didn't try to even run away. The look on her face said that she was staying to make sure *Draven* was okay. She even stared down some black-robed creature. That thing was some scary fuckin' shit." He threw his cigar in his mouth as he walked around the table to ready his shot. "The evil coming out of that thing had my balls scrambling for retreat, and she just *stared* at the damned thing."

Thrash chuckled and took a swig of scotch.

Apparently he'd loosened up a little, as Thrash was typically never this relaxed.

Ferox listened in while watching the others play pool. "What the hell would Damion want with her? You think the Collective saw her with Draven and decided to mess with him?"

"I think the Collective decided they wanted her even before I found her. It was her family they slaughtered a few nights ago before that ripple-thing happened."

As Draven descended the stairs, Raider walked over from the bar where he'd been slamming drinks with Ferox. "I still don't get it. Why her? Why her family? What reason would they have for targeting human families now?"

"Not sure, and I'm also not so sure Ally is purely human, either." After taking in the astonished expressions the other men gave him, he continued, "I'm going to her place to pick up some things for her, and I'll need to get her car here, too. I don't want those bastards having anything on her."

The men looked at each other for a brief moment before Raider said, "Blaze, Thrash, and I will go with you to get her stuff, and I'll drive her car back."

"Actually, I need to go soak up some moonlight. I'm still healing from last night," Thrash interjected.

That was perfectly fine with Draven. He didn't want that

bastard anywhere near Ally's house or her things. "Alright, thanks, guys." Blaze and Raider followed Draven out the front door and headed for his Navigator.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Ally reclined in the tub, relaxing and trying to clear her mind. She felt extremely comfortable and at ease in this house. There were at least seven muscular men living there who could protect her against anything. Well, six if she didn't count Thrash as a protector. He was probably her biggest problem within the Guardian walls.

But the most comforting part is that she was near Draven.

Ally opened her eyes and looked down at her hands.

Pruney.

She unplugged the drain, stood up and pulled on the towel robe Draven had left for her. It felt so soft and luxurious against her skin that she snuggled right into it. Walking over to the counter, she grabbed her pendant from the counter. After she clasped the necklace around her neck, she looked in the mirror and watched as it illuminated again.

Why the hell did it only glow when it was on her?

Why did it *glow*?

Confused by the piece of jewelry, she slid the pendant under the robe. Her hair was soaking wet, so she grabbed another towel and started to dry it. She heard a knock on the bedroom door and answered it while teasing her hair. Her grip tightened on the knob.

"Thrash," she said nervously.

"Red." Thrash inclined his head to her, and then he looked down at her robe before looking into her eyes again. "He won't stop telling me about you."

"Draven?"

He lifted her dog into view, angling him toward her. "No, Jake. He's obsessed, always wanting to know where you are, what you're doing. It's annoying, really."

"Oh, uh, thanks," Ally responded. Thrash was practically growling every word at her, clearly annoyed that Jake was somehow constantly telling him about her.

She reached out to take Jake from Thrash's arms, but he pushed his way into the room instead.

Warning bells signaled as she found that they were alone together.

Thrash set Jake down on the bed before he turned around to look down at Ally. He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “Do you feel for Draven the way he does for you?”

Ally nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re not just using him as a good fuck?”

Ally blanched at his vulgar insinuation. “No.”

“Pity.” Thrash inclined his head to her again before walking toward the door.

As he was leaving, Raine poked her head in. “Hello, honey,” she said to Ally.

“Oh. Hi Raine,” Ally replied with a smile. “Would you like to come in?”

*Please come in*, she thought. Aside from the fact that she was terrified of Thrash, it felt completely wrong to be alone in Draven’s room with another man. Another male. Whatever.

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to come with me down to the entertainment room. Maybe paint some toenails and do a little chatting?”

Thrash mumbled something under his breath and pulled a hasty retreat.

Raine popped an eyebrow up after he left. “Did he try anything?”

“No.” Oddly enough.

“Okay then. Want to come downstairs with me? I don’t know about you, but I could use some girlie time.”

“Sure. But I don’t have anything clean to change into.”

Raine laughed and grabbed her hand. She started hauling her down the hallway toward the stairs, with Ally struggling to keep up. “No one will bother you. Once I dig out the nail polish, all those big scary boys run away.” She turned and looked at her with a half-smile. “I’ve trapped them plenty of times and painted their toenails,” she added with a laugh.

“Even Thrash?”

“Yep. I only got him once though. He was so drunk he didn’t even know what happened until I had all his nails painted. He woke up one pissed-off puppy that day.”

Ally considered that while being pulled down the stairs and through the main foyer. She couldn’t imagine all those big, bulky men getting their toenails painted by little Raine. She didn’t look

like she could bully them into anything they didn't want to do. She doubted *anyone* could bully them into something they didn't want to do. Then she wondered briefly how many times Draven had his toenails painted. She pushed that mental picture out of her mind as Raine sat her down on the couch in the entertainment room.

Raine smiled down at her and held her finger to her lips, hinting to Ally to stay quiet, and then she walked out of the room. She sat in silence in the dark room, watching Ethan and Riley playing Rainbow Six on the PlayStation 3. The men hadn't seen or heard her enter the room. The surround sound was turned up high, so they had to yell in order to banter with each other as they played.

Ally recognized the video game they were playing. She'd played it with Trevor when he'd gotten it for his birthday a few months ago. She silently laughed to herself as she watched them getting killed over and over. She'd played enough times she could've passed this level with her eyes closed.

Besides, weren't these guys supposed to be stealthy warriors?

Raine whisked into the room and flipped the lights on. Headed straight for the boys, she said, "Okay, I think 'Pretty in Pink' would look good on you. Or maybe 'Mauvelous Mauve.'"

Ethan and Riley paused the game and tensed as they looked over at her. She shook the nail polish and smiled. "Shit," they both muttered.

After dropping their controllers they launched themselves off the couch. They started running for the door before they'd spotted Ally and came to a grinding halt.

Raine busted up laughing as the two men looked at Ally in embarrassment. Here these two men were supposed to be vicious, fearless warriors, and they were running away from a petite woman with nail polish.

Ally rolled on the couch, laughing at the look of them with their hands up in surrender while they tried to make a hasty retreat. She sobered immediately as she saw Ethan's feral gaze fixed on her and roaming over her body.

Even though she had a robe on, that man somehow made her feel like she was sitting there naked specifically for his pleasure. He'd had the same look on his face when they'd met

earlier.

She looked over at Riley, who had also been staring at her. He wasn't as big or tall as the other warriors. Coming in at probably just under six feet tall, he wasn't much taller than Raine. His thin body was finely toned. She could see his muscular build under his tight t-shirt and the workout pants he wore. When Ally's eyes met his, he turned beet red and headed right for the door. He made it out of the room without saying one word.

After he left the room, Raine walked past Ethan and sat Indian-style on the couch.

She pulled Ally's legs up onto her lap. "I think 'Pretty in Pink' is your color."

She heard a low rumbling sound coming from Ethan. When she glanced over at him again she saw that he was staring at her bare thigh. The robe had ridden up when she pulled her feet up. She could see the glow in Ethan's eyes, it was the same as the glow in Draven's when he was aroused.

Ally quickly pulled her robe down her leg as far as it would go as she continued to stare at Ethan. He smiled and licked his descended fangs. He inclined his head to her and then left the room, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"He's just thrown off that there's another woman in the house. You'll have to excuse his manners. You'll learn my boys' little quirks," Raine said as she started painting Ally's toenails.

She relaxed against the couch as Raine worked on her toes. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the luxury of being pampered.

"Ally, I wanted to talk to you about what happened...with Damion."

Her eyes snapped open. "What?"

"Sorry. I didn't want to throw that one at you. I just thought maybe you'd like to talk about it." She waited for a few seconds. "Did he...*force* you?"

"Oh, no." Ally shook her head. "He tried to, but Draven stopped him before anything happened. *Thank God.*"

Raine sighed in relief. "I am so glad he didn't." She switched to Ally's other foot. "He actually tried to force himself on me once. A long time ago. None of the boys know about it. Only Ferox does."

Ally sat up straight and stared at her. She placed her hand

on Raine's shoulder. "My God. What happened?" She paused. "If it's not too much to ask."

Raine gave her a half smile. "Of course it isn't. I met both Damion and Ferox during a tournament that is held every couple of centuries. Some of the officials from different factions decided to call a truce and start these games to build unity within the Lore community. I met them just after my first event. They were adorable and competed against each other for my attention. They looked the same, but they were two *completely* different men. Ferox was noble and strong. He had a loving heart, while Damion acted like a spoiled brat. Their parents were the vampire king and queen at the time, and Damion acted as though the crown was owed to him, even though he was the younger of the two.

"My heart immediately melted for Ferox, there was an attraction that I couldn't deny. I don't know how to explain it, but every time we touched, it was like a spark ran through me. Ferox felt the same phenomenon running through him. It was as though we were meant to be together. As time passed, Damion grew to resent the fact that I spent more time with his brother. Ferox and I spent many a night sneaking off to be with each other. We had to keep our courtship secret because the mixing of factions was unheard of back then. Even though we were trying to create peace among the races, it was heavily frowned upon to have a mixed-race relationship."

Raine paused her ministrations, staring off with an absent-minded grin on her face that made Ally wonder if she was actually reliving it all. "Who would have known that it would make us all come together?" She laughed. "Ferox and I weren't the only ones that met our Fated during the games."

She smiled at Ally and set to work on her toes again. "Most of my sisters would have gladly beheaded Ferox if they'd seen the way he looked at me. And his parents wanted him to marry a vampire. One night, Ferox and I were supposed to meet up, but Damion showed up instead. He had disguised himself as Ferox, both in what he wore and how he acted. I didn't actually pick up on the fact for a while because he knew how to act the part well. Things started up quickly, and before I knew it, I was lying under his body. I finally realized I wasn't with Ferox from the lack of spark that would have normally run through me. I started to



struggle against him, but I couldn't break free. You must understand Valkyries aren't weak, but I couldn't throw him in the position I was in. I struggled, trying to gain some ground. When I finally felt like I was breaking loose, he grabbed my breasts. I remember tears gathering in my eyes as he gripped them. He was so rough, and it—"

"It felt like he was going to rip them right off," Ally whispered.

Yes. She knew exactly what Raine had felt that night.

She nodded. "I continued to struggle, but he had my wrists bound in one of his hands, and my struggles seemed to entice him even more. He would have taken me, but I focused on my Instinct and summoned the lightning to strike him. That's the only thing that saved me from being marked by him that night."

Ally looked at Raine, both confused and heartbroken for what she had experienced. What Damion did to her sounded so similar to what she had experienced tonight.

"I'm so sorry that he did that to you."

Raine waved her hand dismissively. "It's been centuries. I only mentioned it so you would know that I'm here for you."

"Thanks." Ally sat silently as Raine focused on applying the second coat. "This is off topic, but what are 'Instincts?'"

"Instincts are what each of us in the Lore refers to as our gift or our power. For example, I can control weather, just like other Valkyries can." Raine cocked her head to the side and looked at her. "Do you know anything about Valkyries, Ally?"

"Not really. I mean, I remember some things from school, but I doubt that my teacher had any idea you really existed."

Raine snorted and set to painting Ally's nails again. "I suspect you're right. I didn't even know they taught such things in human schools."

"It was really just a couple of weeks in English class. They covered gods and random Lore creatures. Nothing really extensive. All I really remember is being told that you were created by Odin to be his army."

"That's more or less accurate. My race was created by our deities, Freyja and Odin. Odin has always had a soft spot for humans, especially human females. He would send his servants in to witness wars, selecting the strongest warriors—whether male or

female—as they died on the battlefields. Odin and Freyja had a sort of contract, you could say. The men taken from the battlefields would serve Freyja in Folkvang, while the women would serve Odin in Valhalla.

“If the fallen warrior was female, Odin would decide if she was strong or beautiful enough to take on as a consort. If she were worthy she would become pregnant with a daughter, at which point Freyja would bless the unborn baby with beauty as well as other attributes. You see, Odin and Freyja are both gods of war, so to be a daughter of one and be blessed by another...you can imagine how much we like to battle.” Raine smiled, still focusing on Ally’s toenails.

“Our mothers were kept in Valhalla so they could keep producing Odin’s daughters until their bodies grew too old and they died. Truthfully, they were hardly given another thought. They would birth a child and that child was immediately taken away, and the mothers’ bodies were prepared for Odin if he so chose to use them again.”

“What was your mom like?”

“I actually never met her, but I heard she was as fierce as they come. It was rumored that she was even my father’s favorite maiden while she was alive.”

“That’s so sad,” Ally said. “That you never got to meet her and that she was used that way, I mean.”

“Don’t be.” Raine waved her hand dismissively. “The child bearers never wanted for anything. They lived as concubines, I guess you could say.”

“Did your mother have more children?”

“I’m not sure. Although many of us look alike, it’s hard to be certain who shares the same mother. We’re all sisters anyway, so it hardly matters.”

Ally watched the different expressions cross her face. Of course it mattered to her. It was more important than she was letting on.

Raine cleared her throat. “Did you know that the first generation of Valkyries had wings?”

Interested, Ally shifted on the couch, leaning forward as Raine started to work on her fingernails. “No.”

“Odin sent his first daughters out onto the battlefield once

they were old enough, and they took over the duty of gathering fallen warriors. They just rode in on the lightning bolts that they controlled and popped right onto the battlefield.”

Ally smiled at the thought. She could only imagine what Raine would look like if she had wings and dove from the sky on lightning bolts, sort of like a dark angel of death wielding a bottle of nail polish and a brush. She couldn't help but be captivated by this piece of history she'd only thought was imaginary. The fact that it was real and that normal people didn't even know about made it all the more interesting. And the fact that Raine was the daughter of Odin...well, that was something else. How often did you meet a daughter of a freaking god?

“Odin no longer allows the Valkyries to leave Valhalla. With modern wars being controlled by technology instead of strength, he no longer has use for humans. He doesn't even allow us to join in Lore battles unless his realms are in danger, and that's been centuries. So, as it is, my sisters are trapped in Valhalla.”

“That's ridiculous. How can he force anyone to stay?”

“He's our god, Ally. He controls everything.”

“What about Freyja's men?”

“The Berserkers? They remain with Freyja in Folkvang. Of course, I think they're happy to do it. The times I met our goddess, she was wise and kind. She didn't seem to be as controlling as my father.”

“So, if your sisters are trapped in Valhalla, how did you make it out?” Ally asked.

“Ferox,” Raine said. “When I went home after the tournament, Ferox found a way into Valhalla without being detected. Being apart from him was too hard, so one night I followed him. I've never been back. I fear I am the reason for their imprisonment now.”

“What about the ones with wings? Surely he can't keep them there. Couldn't *they* leave?”

“Odin killed his original daughters. His oldest daughter became pregnant during one of Freyja's visits. She and one of the Berserkers had had an affair. Odin had demanded the child be aborted, but his daughter refused. All of my winged sisters turned on him then, fighting for the unborn child, but Odin exterminated them. From then on, Odin and Freyja put a different type of

blessing on all future daughters, a blessing to them, but a curse to us. None of us were to ever bare children.”

“But you have Draven and Ethan, so that didn’t work.”

“I’m not exactly sure how that happened. Truthfully, I wonder if it was how the blessing was intended. Freyja may very well have willed that a Berserker and a Valkyrie were never to breed together, since that was the most likely mating. When I grew old enough to fight, there were hardly any battles we were entitled to participate in, so I rarely left my realm. It was only by chance of fate that my father allowed me to attend the tournaments. I was one of the most skilled fighters, and he wanted to ensure that other races knew of his army’s strength and skill. He handpicked a few of us and allowed us to go.”

“Wow. This is so crazy. I had no idea any of this existed,” Ally said, shaking her head. She looked down and inspected Raine’s handiwork. Bending over, she grabbed Raine’s feet and pulled them into her lap. “Your turn.”

Raine’s eyes lit up. “You don’t know how long it’s been since I’ve been able to do anything girly.” She trailed off at that thought with sadness in her eyes.

“Why?”

“Since my sisters can’t leave Valhalla, I can’t see them.”

“If you miss them so much, why don’t you ever go visit your home?”

“I can’t.” Raine shrugged. “When I chose to leave the realm with Ferox, my father banished me from Valhalla.”

Ally painted Raine’s toenails, lost in thought. She muttered an apology, but she felt like it was lacking. How else could she respond when after Raine had told her she could never go home again?

Raine clearly didn’t like the direction of her own thoughts and had turned the conversation onto a different topic. Their little chat became carefree. Ally continued painting her nails, glad to see that ‘Mauvelous Mauve’ really did look good with her complexion. She realized that she actually felt comfortable with Raine, even though the woman in front of her was apparently a killing machine. She could sense a friendship building with the fierce warriorress. Raine was so easy to hang out with, even her best friend Serin wouldn’t want to do something like this. She was too boy hungry.

“Perfect,” Raine said with a smile. “We’ll have to do this again in a few days, maybe an entire makeover. My hair will need an update by then.”

Ally looked at her perfect hair and then arched an eyebrow. “Raine, your hair looks great. You really don’t need to change anything.”

“Oh, it won’t in a few days. My hair and nails grow crazy fast—it’s a Valkyrie thing.”

She ignored Ally’s questioning look and continued on. “Well, let’s get you back upstairs. I think my son may have a conniption if I keep you any longer. He’s up in his room waiting for us to finish up.”

“How did you—”

“Oh, I saw him peek his head in,” she replied.

Ally stood from the couch and offered a good night to Raine before heading back to Draven’s room. She was still wearing the bathrobe and couldn’t wait to pull it off and climb into bed. She opened the door to their room and her jaw dropped.

All her stuff was in there. Draven was hanging her clothes in the walk-in closet, and her personal care items were on the bed. She looked down as Jake ran over to her. The little white and brown fluff-ball stood on his hind legs and did his happy dance, just as glad to see her as she was to see him. She picked him up and gave him a hug. “Hey Jakers,” she whispered, setting him back down. “Did Draven go get your doggy bed and your toys?”

“Yeah. I went to your house to pick up some stuff. You can’t go home anymore, so I figured you could stay here for a while. We brought your car here, too.”

Ally was relieved she wouldn’t have to go home alone. She wouldn’t have felt safe there anyway, knowing that the bad guys knew where she lived. Hell, they probably already even knew where she worked.

If she even had a job anymore. She’d have to call her boss and apologize for not showing up for her shift today. She smiled and walked over to Draven. Throwing her arms around him, she held him tight. “Thank you for taking care of me and getting my things, just—” She sighed. “—thank you for everything.”

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The peace Draven felt in her warmed his heart. She truly

felt safe and he was thankful the mansion was impenetrable. She needed to feel protected after all she'd been through.

“Why did I sense fear coming from you earlier?”

Ally cocked an eyebrow. “How did you know? Thrash was in here, and he just scares me a little.”

Draven narrowed his gaze. “If you don't want to stay here, I can take you somewhere safe. Somewhere far away from here.”

“It doesn't matter where we are, as long as I'm with you. Being with you makes me feel safe.”

He took a deep breath and sighed, glad to hear her say that. She must have truly meant that she didn't want to be apart from him.

“I love you.”

Draven's smile disappeared, his mind running rampant on her admission.

*Did I just hear her right?*

“Oh, crap! I didn't mean to say that out loud. It's just...I don't know how you feel about me, and I didn't want to say it to you until you'd said it to me, but then it just popped right out of my mouth before I could stop it.” His gaze locked on to hers as he held tight to her shoulders. “What did you say?”

Ally flushed. “I...um...I said that I love you.”

Draven crushed her to him and took her mouth with his. He slid his hands down her back until he reached the bottom of her thigh-length robe. With one fluid movement, she was in his arms while he cradled her ass in his palms. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and he broke away from the kiss and whispered a curse.

“I love you, Ally. I knew you were mine from the moment I saw you. You're mine, *Caalia*.”

Breathless, she asked, “What does *Caalia* mean, anyway?”

“Beloved.”

Her eyes teared up. “I *am* yours, Draven, as long as you'll have me.” She looped her hand around the back of his head and pulled him into a rough kiss. Draven penetrated her mouth with his tongue, pushing past her open lips. His female was already panting with need. She was swirling her tongue around and sliding it in and out of his mouth as well. He started toward the bed with her ass cupped in his hands, kneading her soft flesh. When they reached the bed he placed her on her back, but Ally kept her legs wrapped

around him, an open invitation to what he wanted to do to her. With their mouths still linked, Draven brought his hands around the front of her robe and untied the sash. He drew back from the kiss and opened her robe.

He knelt down beside her, pulling his shirt off over his head as he stared down at Ally's beautiful body. She was perfection, a goddess worthy of praise, worthy of sacrifice, and he'd gladly devote his life to her.

Her pink nipples transformed into tight buds as the chill reached her breasts. He dipped his head down and took one into his mouth. Ally moaned and bucked as he swirled his tongue around and suckled at her tip. He continued to tease her there as he unbuttoned his pants and carefully slid them and his boxers from his legs, toeing off his socks.

"God...Draven," she said, panting from his loving touch. The scent of her arousal hit his nose and Draven slid further down her body, kissing her, massaging her as he went. When he reached the junction between her thighs, he looped her legs up over his shoulders so he could take her with his mouth. He sucked in a hiss at the sight of her glistening sex. Everything male and everything vampire within him demanded he take his female. His fangs had already come out to play. After he spread her open with his fingers, he dipped his head down and licked at her core. Ally yelped and her body jumped as he continued to lick her sensitive flesh.

Draven moaned at the sweet, honey taste of her sex. Had anything ever tasted so good? He'd been craving this taste even more than he craved her blood.

He shifted his head between her legs, penetrating her with his tongue. Ally's hands gripped his hair, pulling him in closer. Her hips rocked as she rode his delving tongue, pleased laughs escaping her as he growled against her skin.

She dropped her legs from his shoulders, splaying them wide around his body. The change in position urged him on as he continued to lick and suck. Unable to control himself, he grinded against the bed, shadow humping the mattress, imagining his cock was buried deep inside her, and yet loving the fact that his tongue was.

Ally's legs tightened around him, straightening as her moans grew louder. He could feel her body nearing climax. Draven

pulled back, grazing his fangs over her thighs. “Oh god, Draven.”

She could barely talk, her voice a mixture of an exhalation and a female growl. He dove in once more, letting his fangs poke her lips as his tongue shot back in, lapping at the moisture that had pooled there. Ally cried out as her body latched onto his tongue, sucking it, tightening as she orgasmed. He pistoned in and out, his Instinct driving him to keep her in this state. She moaned over and over, her body writhing.

Draven nearly lost it as he watched Ally climax. Once her tremors began to slow, he licked at her again before crawling up her body, positioning himself over her with his fists to the sides of her head. Her exhausted gaze met his, and what he saw in her face only solidified the fact that they were meant to be together. There was love in her eyes.

Love for him.

He bent down and kissed her. With her legs still spread wide, he thrust his shaft into her wet folds, driving himself in to his hilt. Ally arched up, moaning hoarsely as she grabbed onto his shoulders, raking them with her nails.

Gods, it felt good.

He rode her hard, sliding her body farther up the bed with each buck of his hips. He stared down into Ally’s eyes, whispering words to her tenderly. Words she’d understand, words she couldn’t. Everything he uttered came straight from his heart. Leaning down, he angled his head to the side, so he could take her neck, so she could take his.

“I love you, Ally,” he growled.

“I love you, too.”

He could see her eyes fixated on his neck, knew that she craved his taste as though she were a vampire herself, craved it as only his Fated could. “Bite me, *Caalia*. Take blood from me so we are one.” He turned his head to her neck and grazed her with his fangs. “Do you know what I’m asking, Ally?”

“Yes,” she moaned. “I want us to be together, Draven.”

His heart pounded, flooding with so much love for his little human. “You’ll marry me?”

“God, yes.”

Draven bent down once more and punctured her skin. Her blood rushed into his mouth as he sucked. Ally screamed out and



took a few ragged breaths, her arms clutching him closer. Within an instant, her pain turned to pleasure.

Opening her mouth, she bit down hard until his blood ran. She licked and sucked at him, taking what he had to offer. His blood pumped into her mouth as he pumped into body. She took from him, and he from her. They were connected. They were one. And nothing could have felt better than this intimate moment.

Draven and Ally were both moaning and panting from pleasure. He pounded into her harder and harder as they drew on each other's blood, their bodies slapping together. Ally withdrew her mouth as her body clenched, readying for another release. Just as she screamed out his name again, Draven threw his head back and roared as they reached their climax together.

He pumped her harder and harder until his seed was spilled. When his cock began twitching and he was spent, he collapsed on top of her. He'd never thought sex could be that phenomenal. Never, in all his centuries, had he felt pleasure the way he did with his female.

After a few minutes of heavy breathing, he rolled off of her and pulled her to him.

Ally sighed in contentment as her cheek rested against his chest. He wound his arms around her, listening to her breaths slow. Within minutes, she'd drifted off to sleep. Draven couldn't take his eyes off her as she rested peacefully.

She truly loved him.

Draven wanted to yell it from the rooftop.

She. Was. *His*.

He couldn't keep it in any longer. He needed to tell someone that he was in love and had finally found his mate. He scooted out of bed and after failing to find where he threw his pants, he went to his closet and pulled out another pair. He slid them on and went back over to the bed to kiss Ally's forehead.

As he pulled away from her, he noticed something glowing from under her hair.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“We can’t ambush the Collective at this point. They’d be expecting it after the attack on the manor, which we now believe could also be the Collective’s headquarters,” Raider said.

Ferox sat back in his chair and folded his arms. “We’re waiting for Draven before the meeting starts, Raid.”

“Uh, he’ll be a while. He’s...busy. As if no one *heard*,” Blaze said with a laugh.

The other Guardians in the room chuckled as well.

“Fine, then. We need to come up with a new plan of attack. We also need to hunt for the prophesied one,” Ferox said over the laughter. “Dear?”

Raine squeezed Ferox’s hand. “Riley and I have continued researching, and while we still can’t figure out what the prophesied one is or why he or she is so important, we’ve also been trying to pinpoint his or her exact whereabouts. From what we’ve found so far, I believe—”

“It’s Ally,” Draven interrupted. He stood at the top of the stairs as the others looked up at him. “The essence is Ally.”

“Why do you think it’s her?” Raider asked as Draven rushed down the stairs.

“She’s wearing a pendant. I’ve never seen it before so I don’t know how long she’s had it, but it glows whenever she’s touching it, almost like it recognizes her as something special.”

Raine and the Guardians looked around at each other.

“That doesn’t mean it’s her, son,” Ferox said.

“Wait a minute, it makes sense. She would have been brought here right after—or maybe even before—she was born, so of course she would think herself to be human,” Raine chimed in.

“Not to mention the fact that the Collective has been tight on her tail. They targeted her family, and after they succeeded in nabbing her—”

“It was all because of her.” Raine nodded, looking between Draven and Ferox. “They were a lot closer than we were. I can’t believe I missed it.”

“Mystery solved then,” Blaze said, jumping up from his seat to pour himself a drink.

Raider shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Awe, come on, don’t be such a Negative Nanc—”

Loud chatter filled the room as everyone talked over each other. Some of them said it was too easy. Others followed Blaze’s example by pouring celebratory drinks.

Draven wasn’t so happy.

“What’s up?” Ferox asked as he noticed Draven’s tightened jaw.

“Yeah, brother. That female is all over you, so she’ll definitely choose our side,” Blaze said.

Draven glared at him. “That female isn’t a tool to be used. We won’t *use* her.” The room fell silent as all the warriors stopped what they were doing. Some even set their bottles of liquor down as they gawked at him.

“If we even understand the prophecy correctly, it basically said whichever side came into possession of the essence would have an advantage in the war. She is a woman, *not* a tool. We won’t force her to our side. Ally’s free to choose.”

“Choose what?”

Everyone turned to see Ally at the top of the stairs.

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“Would everyone stop yelling down the stairs? I’m getting a kinked neck,” Ethan said, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand jokingly.

Every one of Draven’s brothers and Raine were sitting around the library, deep in discussion. Or, they had been before she’d opened her mouth. Now they all gawked up at her, and she wondered what exactly they’d been talking about.

Draven ran up the stairs and took Ally’s hand. “Why are you awake?”

“I felt your anger.”

His eyes softened. “Oh, baby, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting you can feel my emotions too.” He kissed her cheek and led her down to join the others. When they tore their gazes away from each other, Ally realized that everyone was standing.

One by one, she met their eyes, becoming more flabbergasted that they were acting so strangely.

*And...now they are bowing to me. Okaaaay, sure, happens every day.*

“Umm. Thank you?” she said quietly as she curtsied back.

What the hell else was she supposed to do?

“Ally, honey. If it would not offend you, I have a personal question. Were you by any chance adopted?” Raine asked.

If it would not offend her? Just a few hours ago Raine and Ally had been chatting it up and painting each other’s toenails, and now Raine sounded so formal. “Why are you acting so weird all of a sudden?” No doubt about it, they had been talking about her. She turned to Draven. “And what’s my choice?”

“Please Ally, this is important,” Raine said as she grabbed one of her hands. “Were you adopted?”

Ally thought of the letter from her parents and dropped her gaze to the floor. Draven wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him, offering her support through their blood-bond. The words in her mother’s handwriting flashed through her mind. *We only hid your true identity from you to keep you safe.*

*Please know that we’ve always loved you as our own daughter.*

“May I see it?” Raine asked as she reached for Ally’s necklace. When Ally nodded, Raine gently unclasped the necklace.

The pendant’s glow faded as it left her skin, and the Guardians stared at it as if mesmerized. Raine handed it back, and Draven re-clasped it around her neck.

“Yes, I was adopted,” she said. A tear formed in one of her eyes, threatening to glide down her cheek.

Raine, Draven, and the other men asked her question after question, trying to figure out who and what she was, but Ally wasn’t in the mood to figure that out just now. Raine bringing up her adoption brought everything right back. Her family may or may not be alive. Her world was turned upside down right now, and she only wanted to be with Draven.

When she couldn’t take any more questions, she decided she wanted some time alone. With only a look from Draven, the Guardians stopped asking questions and let them leave the library without another word.

Draven took her back to their room and tucked her into bed. He slid under the covers as well, cuddling with her. Gripping the pendant in her hand, she stared out into the darkened room.

“You know what you are, right?” she asked.

“A vampire.”

“No, I mean you’re a Guardian. Like this cool superhero.”

Draven laughed and pulled her to him, spooning her. “Not really. We just try to protect as many beings as we can from the Collective and from anyone else who tries to cause harm to this realm.”

Ally lay there in silence, just relaxing in Draven’s heat. He was tense, but she couldn’t pinpoint the cause. Ever since she’d seen him downstairs talking to his family, his jaw had never slackened. She thought he might be reacting to her emotions, since their bond was so strong, but his own anger was what woke her earlier.

“Draven?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

“So what am I?”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“It’s time to get everyone moved to the caverns,” Q said to a few of the Collective guards.

He’d received a text message from one of his brothers informing him that they had tightened down the security of that facility. They assured him it was ready to accept more demons.

Q hadn’t had a chance to inspect their work himself. Not only had he needed to figure out what to do with Clay, but also Damion had had him hopping ever since the ambush at the manor.

“Okay, we’ll get moving as quickly as possible,” one of the guards replied.

“Remember that the others will be on their way as well, so you’ll need to make room for a lot of demons. Oh, and be sure to inform Kiaskari and Luther that I want full details on their mission tonight. If I can’t be there for the deets myself, then I’ll send another Abassy.”

“Yes, sir.” The guards nodded before walking down the hallway, away from Q.

He watched them leave, thankful for a few minutes reprieve from the demands of the last few days. The Collective had acquired access to a series of caves in the middle of a national park. With only a trance or two aimed at the right humans, they’d been granted unlimited access to the park itself, no questions asked. The idea had come from one of Damion’s acquaintances, another powerhouse demon who ran some operation that Damion had just invested millions in, supposedly some new evolutionary idea that had his master chomping at the bit. Acquiring the caves was a strategic move, a way to remain hidden from the Guardians while being able to come and go from multiple points of entry with ease.

A text came through and Q checked his phone. Another message updating him on the status of the caves.

Q typed a quick message in reply. He only hoped it was up to Damion’s standards, otherwise his balls would be on the fucking chopping block.

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White, warm fog. Ally tried to walk, but it was so thick she had to keep her arms out in front of her. It smelled amazing

though, sweet like fruit, almost flowery. As she walked forward, with her hands outstretched in front of her, a three-tiered fountain with three golden benches surrounding it appeared in front of her. The sight was beautiful.

She sat on one of the benches and peered around at her odd surroundings. She'd never had a dream like this one before. It was as though she was in some type of void, as if she and the fountain were the only things that existed here.

As she turned back around to face the fountain, Draven appeared in front of her.

He cocked his head to the side and smiled before he reached out to her. "Take my hand?"

Ally placed her hand in his. He pulled her from the bench and led her through the fog, constantly staring at her with a strange smile on his face. He was careful to never walk in front of her. Instead he stayed next to her side.

Following his gaze, she looked down at herself and saw that she was wearing a beautiful satin dress. Loving this dream already, she looked up at Draven, who was now wearing a robe designed similarly to her dress.

"Are we getting married *now*?"

His eyebrows popped up and he blushed. "Of course not, my lady."

He led her through an open gate. After they were far enough inside, the gates closed, seemingly of their own volition.

"My Alaina."

Ally stopped.

Just as she looked around for the beautiful, chiming voice that whispered the name, the fog seemed to clear from the area. Draven released her hand before he bowed and backed away from her, fading away in the retreating fog.

She found herself in a beautiful foyer. She hadn't even realized they had entered a building. Everything was white: white tiles, white walls, white furniture. The walls were trimmed with gold molding that reached up to the twenty-foot ceiling. Large chandeliers hung overhead, and vases filled with vibrant flowers graced every table in sight. As she continued to gaze around, she stopped when she spotted a lovely woman sitting in a tall-backed throne. She sat tall and proud as she smiled down at Ally.

She looked graceful, delicate, and yet powerful at the same time. She was thin, but her elegant dress flattered her curves. Her golden blonde hair was pulled up with intricate braids winding around her head. As Ally walked closer to the woman, she noticed how alike they were. Of course, this woman was much more beautiful, but there was a likeness just the same. As she slowly took the steps toward her, the woman stood and held her hands out toward Ally. "Alaina."

Ally continued to walk toward the woman, noticing that she really looked more like her mother. Maybe her family really was dead, and now she was seeing what her mom looked like in heaven. She definitely looked younger than her mom, but some people believed that angels were preserved in their prime.

"Mom?"

A wide grin spread across the woman's face. "Yes, child. I am your mother."

Ally lunged forward and wrapped her arms around her. She'd never gotten to say goodbye, and this dream was her chance.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you, mom." Tears streamed down her face.

Pulling away from Ally, her mother asked, "Whatever are you talking about, Alaina?"

"I couldn't save you from those monsters that killed you or from the explosion. Where are Trev and Sky? And dad? Where is dad?"

"Oh." Sorrow filled her mother's face. "I'm sorry for the pain your human family suffered, Alaina. But I am not your adopted mother. I am the mother who gave you life."

"Why do you keep calling me Alaina? And I...I really was adopted?"

"Sit, child." Her mother gestured toward another throne. Why were so many people sitting in thrones lately, anyway?

"We have much to discuss," she added.

After they sat down in the thrones overlooking the foyer, her mother looked over at her with an awe-filled face. "You are so lovely. More radiant than I could have ever hoped."

Ally, not sure what to think of that comment coming from the most beautiful creature ever to walk the Earth, simply nodded and smiled. "Thank you."



She looked away from the woman. Peering out in the large expanse of the foyer, she spotted a man staring at them. Not only was he staring at them, but he also looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Lady Gersemi?" he said, staring at the woman next to Ally. He walked up to her and bowed. "I apologize for the interruption, my lady." He took her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles.

Gersemi smiled and bowed her head at the handsome man. "Think nothing of it Dellinger. I'd like you to meet Alaina, my daughter." She gestured toward Ally.

Ally knew shock covered her face as the drop-dead gorgeous man took her hand. "You are a thousand times lovelier than I ever imagined. It is my privilege to make your acquaintance." He kissed her hand and stared deep into her eyes. Ally couldn't help raking her gaze over him.

He was an extremely attractive man. His nicely combed chocolate brown hair was long on top and fell to his ears. He had warm brown eyes that still held steady as he gazed at her. She felt like nothing existed but her while he looked at her like that, which was exactly how she felt when Draven looked at her. His skin was a beautiful tan color, and his build was yummy.

She really shouldn't have been thinking that.

She was with Draven, so she shouldn't be dreaming of anyone else, but this man had a perfect 'v' shape to his upper body that anyone would appreciate. He wore a pair of silky pants and a shirt that was unbuttoned, allowing her to see his hard chest and washboard stomach.

He chuckled when he saw her stare at his stomach and took a step away from her. "I apologize for my manners. I am Dellinger." He raked his gaze over Ally, just as she'd done to him. He lingered on her body, as if he were drinking her in. He half-smiled at her and took another step back. "If you'll excuse me, I am on my way to repast."

Sure enough, he bowed again.

Ally couldn't help but smile as she nodded at Dellinger. He continued to smile at her as he backed down the stairs. Never removing his eyes from Ally, he made his way from the foyer, finally turning away when he reached the corridor.

"You already have an admirer, my daughter," Gersemi

said. Her slight chuckle sounded like bells. “I suppose it’s to be expected. You are making your first appearance, and you’re the youngest goddess to grace our temple.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Draven lay on his back with his right arm slung over his eyes. He smiled at the familiar ache in his groin that only Ally could sate. He rolled over and reached to pull her body to his.

Or he would have if she was in his bed.

He lifted his head and looked around the room. Not seeing her anywhere, he decided that maybe she got hungry and went downstairs. He stretched and rolled out of bed, then took a quick shower. He didn't really want to wash her scent off of him. Honestly, he wanted her scent all over him all the time. Oh, how unfortunate it would be to lure her into bed to reapply it.

After a quick shampoo and scrub, he was done. He'd quickly dried himself off and pulled on some clothes.

Draven looked down at Jake, who was staring at him as he came out of the bathroom. The dog cocked his head at Draven. "Outside?"

The Shih Tzu got all excited and bolted for the door. Jake reached the door and wagged his tail uncontrollably, waiting for Draven to get with the program. He reached the door and opened it a crack. When there was enough room for the dog to sneak through the opening, Jake hauled ass down the hall.

Draven chuckled, loving the dog's personality, as he headed down the hall after him. The Guardians had never owned a dog before, as Thrash didn't quite count, but Ally's dog seemed to fit right in with the warriors.

Before he reached the stairs, Draven ran into Ethan. "Hey, brother. You see my girl?"

"Nah, not since last night."

"Alright, thanks."

Just as Draven clapped him on the back and turned to head downstairs, Ethan asked, "She's the one, huh? You, uh...You bonded with her?"

A wide grin spread across Draven's face. "Yeah. She's definitely the one."

Ethan smiled. "*Man*. Congratulations, brother."

Draven nodded, clapping his brother on the back before heading for the stairs. When he reached the lower level of the foyer, he looked around for the other Guardians, but it appeared

everyone was either gone or asleep. It made sense everyone would be in bed. It was sunny out, and in their line of work they were up all night every night.

He headed for the kitchen, but when he went through the French doors, Ally was still nowhere in sight. Gregory, the Guardians' trusted butler, had just shut the back door after letting Jake outside to run around the grounds.

"Good morning, Gregory."

The butler turned around and beamed. "Ah, what brings you down here so early, my lord?"

"I was just wondering if you've seen Ally down here this morning."

"No, master. I have not had the pleasure of making Miss Stanford's acquaintance as yet."

"Thanks, Gregory." Draven turned and headed for the door.

He didn't feel any pain in his chest, so he didn't think she was in danger, but the fact that he didn't know where his female was made him tense as hell.

Draven bolted out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs. He ran down the hall until he reached Raider's door. After he'd pounded on it for a few seconds, the door cracked open and a sleepy-eyed Raider stared at him.

"What the fuck crawled up your ass? What're you thinking waking me up like that?" he asked, rubbing his head and eyes.

"I need to see the security tapes from last night to this morning."

Raider sleepily cocked an eyebrow at him, but he opened the door more, allowing Draven into his room. Once Draven was inside, he turned and walked to his desk. After logging into his computer, he pulled up the program to view the video files. "What exactly are we looking for?"

"Either Ally was kidnapped out from under me, or she ran off. Jake's still here so I doubt it was the latter."

Raider chuckled. "*Fuuuck*. We just found her and you lost her already? Your dad's gonna be fucking *piiiissed*."

Draven stared at him, unamused as he teased about the situation. "I don't really care what he thinks right now. I just need to know what happened."

Raider shook his head. "Are you sure she's not just outside

or something?”

“That’s what I need to find out.”

The two men fast-forwarded through the security videos, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

After reviewing the tapes, Draven’s frustration leaked out as he hit the desk. “I know we’ve taken precautions and nothing should be able to trace in here, but is it possible that someone traced into my room?”

“You’re still alive and uninjured, and none of the alarms went off. If someone dared trace into the mansion, they wouldn’t have done it for the fun of it. They would have done it to kill one of us. Besides, you would’ve sensed it, especially if that someone came here for your female.”

Draven nodded. Raider had a point. If someone wanted in bad enough he would likely be dead. Unless he wasn’t the target and Ally was.

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Ferox stood in front of the other Guardians. They had all been yanked out of bed, and many were still yawning and rubbing their eyes. Although all of them were pissed about the wake up, the grumpiest of all was Thrash. Everyone knew never to wake a sleeping wolf—it was one of the easiest ways to lose an important appendage or possibly a vital organ.

“Ally is missing,” he began.

“Again? Anyone else think she’s doing this on purpose?” Thrash asked, glaring pointedly at Draven.

Ferox barely flicked his gaze at him before continuing. “Since the sun is out and we don’t have time for Raine to call in enough cloud cover for us night-crawlers to go out, I need Riley and Thrash to go to Ally’s home and scope it out and see if she’s been there. And if she has, I need you to track where she’s gone.

“Raid has already reviewed the security tapes. No one was seen coming in or leaving, so we’re not sure how she disappeared. If she isn’t found at her place and there’s no sign she’s been there, we have no choice but to attack the Collective tonight. As far as we know, they’re the only ones who know about her. We’ll split up and hit the places we were going to last night.

“Ethan, you’ll go to the warehouse on Sixth Street and wait for Thrash to meet up with you. It’s not a large space, so you

should be able to handle it fairly easily. Once you're together, ambush whoever is in that building.

"Raid, you're on park detail. I know you've kept track of where the demon entry points are for their sub-level meetings. You'll take Draven and Blaze along with you to scope it out ahead of time. Draven, I need you to follow Raid's orders." When Draven opened his mouth to argue, Ferox quickly added, "She's your female. You're not thinking rationally, so you'll wait until you have Raid's okay before you penetrate any of their access points.

"Riley, I think it's time for your first mission. After you go scope out Ally's pad with the others, you'll meet up with me at Damion's manor. Since we just hit it, I doubt there will be many to fight against, most likely we'll be on reconnaissance. We should be able to get in, search, and get out. If Damion's there, I'll face him myself."

With the last word, he glared at Draven. After Raider and Draven had spent hours combing the security tapes for every camera onsite, Draven had finally woken his father with the news of Ally's disappearance. They two had argued over possible rescue missions until the others had been woken and the meeting started. His father felt that Damion was his own responsibility since they were brothers, though Draven wanted to take the bastard out himself. Every Instinct in his body screamed at him to rip him apart for hurting his female, but he couldn't overstep his father's ruling. Not only was Ferox the leader of the Guardians, but he was also king of the vampire race. He would have only been able to overthrow his father's decision if he and Ally were already mated.

Ferox continued. "Raine is here if anyone needs a pickup. She'll stand by for assistance, and you all have her cell number. If you're injured, call her. Explosives are not to be used unless you've cleared the area and are one *thousand* percent sure Ally is nowhere near. And gentlemen?" Ferox made eye contact with each and every Guardian. "This is definitely a time to use your *special* talents. Right now, finding Ally is our primary objective. Use your Instincts to find her, even if it wears you down for days. Suit up. Gear up. Get ready for attack."

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Q headed down the cold, wet stairs of the Collective's

Training Facility in the caverns.

The Collective recently acquired a witch after the manor had been torched and had forced her to put a magical barrier in place. The barrier protected against anyone tracing directly into any of the Collective's properties, so even he could only reach the outer walls before he had to materialize and work his way through the security doors.

As Q made his way down the long passageways, he could already hear the new captures screaming at the top of their lungs. He reached the containment facility and entered in the pass code that would allow the doors to open.

After passing through the security door, he slowly walked through the open area that had a direct view into each of the cells. He stalked past the four closest holding cells, each room holding a pregnant liger.

"Nice work, Kiaskari," he said to the liger who was sitting at a table outside their cells. "Damion will be pleased that you accomplished your mission." He sat down across the table from Kiaskari as Luther strolled in through another door.

Both Kiaskari and Luther were sweating and panting, their instincts only a hair away from unleashing.

Which was just what their master wanted.

"I'm glad you're here, Luther. Have a seat. I want you two to tell me about the ambush. Damion wants to know how it went down and how human police were tipped off."

The liger and the wolf spared a quick glance at each other before Kiaskari spoke.

"Just as I thought, no one suspected anything when I returned to my den. It was hard to keep myself under control during the celebration of my return, but finally everyone settled down." Kiaskari rubbed some of the sweat from his brow before continuing. "I called in the others right before I went for the Kikosi. Since they were my pack's warriors, I had to take them out first."

Q sat back in his chair, taking in Kiaskari's account of what went down that night. The Kikosi had been his biggest obstacle, and ultimately, what he'd feared most. They were the warrior-class amongst the liger clan, their own personal bouncers in case the clan ever went under attack.

A lot of good they did.

Kiaskari nodded at the wolf. “Luther and the others made it in the den in record time and ambushed the Kikosi before turning on the others. I made sure they knew which ones were our targets for capture.”

“And what of your mate?” Q asked.

“She’s in this cell.” Kiaskari pointed to the door right next to where he sat. “She’s at full strength because I decided not to drain any of her blood. I took her alone and left the others to handle the other three females.”

Luther leaned his elbows on the table. “That’s where I come in. We were almost done draining the females enough so that they were too weak to fight. As we were getting ready to leave, we were attacked by another wolf.”

Q’s eyebrows popped up. “And do you know this wolf?”

“I don’t, but he had to be a Guardian. A wolf would never go into a liger’s den without a really fucking good reason.”

“Thrash is one of the Guardians they would send during the day. No doubt it was him,” Q said.

“That fucker bit me a few times. So as long as our master doesn’t have a problem with it, that bastard is mine.”

A grin spread across Q’s face as he stared at the wolf. This was too perfect. Damion would love that such a powerful creature would have a personal vendetta against one of the Guardians. They’d just need to make sure to prep him before he went up against Thrash again. “Then I think you better go in for more training.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

“*What?*” Ally gaped at her mother.

“Manners, daughter. I know you were raised by humans, but you *must* learn respect.”

“I’m sorry. I meant to say what do you mean by *goddess?*”

“You know nothing of your heritage? Your human parents never told you?” She tsked and shook her head before placing a hand delicately over Ally’s. “I am Gersemi, goddess of treasure. I was wed to the god of creation, Vili. After decades and decades of trying, I finally conceived of a precious babe. You.”

Gersemi patted Ally on the knee before pulling her hand away. She gave her a loving smile that turned sad. “Come, let’s walk.”

She rose from her throne, descending the stairs before slowly strolling through the vast foyer. Ally stood as well, falling into step by her side.

“Right before you were born our temple was attacked. We lost many gods and goddesses, not to mention many, many young ones. Vili disappeared during the attack and couldn’t be found anywhere. I feared for your life and mine, so I snuck out of Unitas, our temple, and hid on the Earth realm until you were born.”

“Why there? Why Earth?”

“Humans are most like us. They were created to be reflections of the gods, only without power.”

“But why leave me behind?” Ally asked, her gaze narrowing. “If you wanted to keep me safe, why would you leave me behind? How did you even know you could trust mom and dad?”

Gersemi stopped walking and faced her. “You were such a powerful baby, even before you were born. I harnessed your gifts from the womb and created a mother and father to care for you until it was safe for your return. I couldn’t stay with you myself, or they would have come looking for us.”

Ally closed her eyes, shaking her head in confusion. “Mom and dad weren’t even human? You *created* them?”

“We did. You and I. William and Vanessa were created to look similar to Vili and me. I knew I could trust them to raise you and take care of you because that was their whole purpose in life.”

She reached up, placing her hands on Ally's shoulders. "I had always planned to return, but as time went by I learned that you might have been placed in danger had I brought you home. So I waited until the time felt right."

Gersemi looked at the chain around Ally's neck, her fingers sliding over the tiny chain. "Your father created pendants for us both. I begged William and Vanessa to never let yours part from you, and then I returned to the temple."

She dropped her hands and turned away, walking through the large, open doorway that led them into the fog. "I was only gone for a few days. But when I returned to Unitas, I found that many of the others had died during the attack, and the survivors were still recuperating from their injuries. Others were still missing. Luckily, our warriors won that day, and with the help of the other pantheons, they saved the rest of us from being overrun."

"Why would other pantheons help you? Aren't you all at war?"

"Heavens no." Gersemi laughed. "Well, I wouldn't call it *war*. There is rivalry amongst the pantheons, but we try to look past that here. You see, this temple was created so that different gods, and even demigods, could come together and live in harmony. That is why it is called Unitas, Latin for 'unity.' Many major gods and goddesses still live in their own temples, though. Olympians still live on Mt. Olympus, the Aesir reside in Asgard, Vanir in Vanaheimr, and so on. We stay here and live in peace with one another, so as not to create strife between the different pantheons.

Ally nodded along, worrying her lip as she wondered if she'd be able to remember all of the histories she'd been privy to over the last few days.

"When I returned from Earth, our beautiful home was ruined. Sorrow filled what was once our joyous temple. No one felt safe in the beginning, and many of the deities left to find new homes or returned to their own realms. Fortunately, our temple has been re-built, and joy has spread. And now that you have returned to us, my daughter, we are complete again."

Gersemi turned, apparently having no trouble seeing through the dense fog. Ally stayed by her side, focusing on where they were going. Her mother seemed genuinely pleased that she

was here, the words “returned” and “complete” ringing through her mind. She wondered briefly if she’d ever be able to go home, and if she’d ever see her tall, dark vampire again.

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“Any luck?”

Raider hung up his cell phone and slid it into his jacket pocket. Draven knew without a doubt that no one had found Ally. He’d heard both sides of the phone conversation. Thrash and Riley hadn’t found evidence that she’d returned home, but they had picked up on other scents and told Raider that someone else was looking for her.

Raider shook his head. “Sorry, brother.” He clapped Blaze and Draven on their backs as the three of them kept their gazes locked on their target. “Alright guys, we’re going in through these entrances.” He pointed out the access points. “I’ve pre-wired some explosives that can be set when our areas are cleared. We go in quietly, search for Ally, and place the explosives. Then we come out. Simple as that. I’ve got the remote here. Once we meet up, we blow it. We clear? Keep quiet so that we can blow the piece of shit from the inside. Hopefully, it will wipe most of these bastards out, and those who survive should be trapped in their underground tunnels. Oh, and Ethan’s team has checked in with me. Thrash met up with them just a few minutes ago, and they are infiltrating the warehouse now. Okay guys, let’s move.”

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Riley stuck to the shadows as he made his way to the rendezvous point. When he spotted Ferox, he ran over to hide behind the bushes with him.

“I take it Ally wasn’t at her home?” Ferox asked.

“Nope. But others had been there. I hope someone didn’t get to her first.”

“Shit, that’s all we’d need.” Ferox ran a hand through his hair and flicked his gaze toward the manor. “Well, let’s get this over with. I’ve been watching the place for activity. It doesn’t look like there are any demons in there. We should be able to handle this. Are you ready for your first recon mission?”

Riley nodded, but he was clearly nervous. Not officially inducted as a Guardian, he was still “in training.” He was the only one living in the Guardians’ mansion whose Instinct hadn’t kicked

in yet. No one knew what he was or where he came from, only that Demetrius had brought him to the mansion as a toddler. "I'm ready."

"You'll do fine, son." Ferox smiled at him before they both ran toward the manor.

Ferox quietly opened the door and looked around the entryway. It was quiet and he couldn't sense anyone near, so they crept inside, leading Riley. As they inspected different rooms together, they kept a look out in every direction.

Ferox opened a door that led into an office. Damion's, if he had to guess. Walking over to the bookcase, a particular book caught his eye. He pulled it from the case and stared down at the bright red cover, recognizing exactly what it was. He opened the book, reading the inscription "To Damion, Love Ferox," that was written in their native language. He'd given his twin brother this journal centuries ago when they'd still lived in the Castle Drök on their home realm of Vampur.

He was surprised his hard-assed brother had actually kept it.

"What do you plan to take from me now, Ferox?"

Both Riley and Ferox jumped at the sound of Damion's voice. Ferox looked up at the top of the stairway and saw his brother, standing proud and tall. And, as always, he was wearing a finely tailored suit.

Ferox himself couldn't stand suits unless absolutely necessary. They were too damned itchy and constricting.

Damion's malicious grin spread wide across his face as he descended the stairs. "First, you take my female. Oh no, wait. This would be *twice* now you've stolen a female from me. Do you really believe I should give you anything else?"

Ferox continued to stare at his brother. The only thing that finally pried his eyes away from Damion was Riley hollering in pain. He whirled around and saw Q slamming his fist into his son's face.

Despite the size difference, Riley quickly got a hold of the situation and started fighting back. His fear showed as he'd never been in an actual fight before.

As Ferox turned back to Damion, his feet were kicked out from under him, and Damion was on top of him in an instant. Both

sets of men threw punches and rolled around the room.

He vaguely heard the other fight end. Someone had won, leaving the other man dead or unconscious. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to Riley. Worry overcame him as he thought of his adoptive son having possibly lost the battle with Q.

He had to focus on his own fight right now, though. He was having a tough time overcoming his brother, but that was always the problem. They were too evenly matched, ever since they were children. As twins, they were built the same, and it had almost always been a tie when they fought.

Ferox pulled his arm back to strike his brother's face when he felt another set of hands holding his arms back. Damion unleashed his fury on him as his arms were being held, pounding his face over and over with relentless blows of his fists. When Ferox fell to the floor, he was kicked repeatedly in the stomach, chest, and face. Over and over they kicked, punched, and bit his body, making him feel like hamburger meat.

Who needs vital organs, anyway?

He took a few more kicks to the ribs and spit out a few teeth, but he continued to block what he could. His body was beat, and he was sore all over. That was before he felt fangs ravage his neck. As his blood was being drained, his breathing slowed.

He couldn't defend himself anymore. They had complete control over him, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Then, there was nothing.

No one was touching him. His eyes had swollen shut, and all he had to focus on was his breathing. He couldn't allow himself to go unconscious, as that surely meant a death sentence. As his breath sawed in and out of him, he heard muffled voices. His ears dripped blood, so he couldn't make out what they were saying. He thought he heard retreating footsteps, and then there was only silence.

He lay there for what felt like eternity listening to his heart hammer and the air saw in and out of him. He let his mind wander to thoughts of Raine, his beautiful Raine. He needed to get back to her, but the only shot he had was if he could manage to get up.

A strong smell invaded his nose. Gasoline. But why would he smell...

Oh gods, no.

The answer came to him just as he felt extreme heat fill the air. Without being able to see or hear, he rolled from his back to his knees and crawled through the room. He bit back a yell as the fire singed his skin. Despite the pain and his body's shaking, he continued to crawl around the room, feeling for Riley and for an exit.

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"When can I go back home?"

Gersemi looked over at Ally with worried eyes. They had returned to the thrones in the foyer after she had led Ally on a short tour of the fog-ridden grounds. "Are you not happy here, my daughter?"

"Uh, well. It's just that I have things at home that I need to get back to. I can't leave Jake, my dog, home alone for long. And I have my job..." *I think*. "...and my...fiancé I need to get back to."

Gersemi folded her hands in her lap, letting her shoulders rest against the hard, high-backed throne. "Alaina, you can only go back for a little while to say goodbye to your loved ones. This is your home now. You are safest here. I understand there are dangers within the human realm right now that I cannot allow you to be near. You haven't officially ascended to godhood, and we don't yet know your affinities. You would be unable to protect yourself."

She just stared at her mother in shock. *I have to stay here?* She couldn't stay here. Draven was in her realm, and that's where she was meant to be. "But I love him. I can't leave him."

"Love is a hard thing to give up," she said knowingly. "But in this case it must be done. That realm cannot keep you safe any longer." As Ally's gaze dropped to the floor before her, Gersemi leaned forward. "Is that the young man you envisioned when you were brought to the temple this morning? The man who escorted you to me?"

Ally nodded.

"Ah, yes. He *is* a fine-looking man, but he is not worthy of being...romantically involved with a goddess such as yourself. Break it off with him. It's really the only way. You shall find a god worthy of your love here within the temple, or possibly within one of the other temples, but I'm afraid you can no longer be with your

human man, my dear. Honestly, I find it quite interesting that you found a human warrior worthy enough to earn your complete trust.”

Ally looked at her mother, her brows creasing. “He *is* worthy of my trust, as well as my love, Gersemi. And he loves me in return.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Shit. That was fun,” Blaze said. He bounced from foot to foot as he punched the air. Obviously he was still pumped from the fight and needed to blow off some of his energy. “I mean, I know we didn’t find your girl or anything, but we definitely took out a shit-load of those evil fuckwads.”

“Yeah, not a bad night overall,” Raider chimed in, wincing as he threaded a needle through his skin and stitched his thigh shut. “I could have gone without being carved up like a pumpkin though.”

Draven paced around the room, looking for something to distract him. He’d been pacing ever since they’d arrived back at the mansion ten minutes ago, and nothing had broken his focus.

And Blaze bouncing around was starting to piss him off.

He had hoped one of his brothers had found Ally at one of the Collective sites. Ethan and Thrash had beaten them home, but without Ally.

The Guardians continued talking about what happened during their raids and joking around. Draven wasn’t up for any of it, so he went to find his mom. He hoped she would have some information on the mission his father was on.

He searched the mansion only to find that Raine wasn’t anywhere. Maybe she ran out to meet up with Ferox and Riley. He’d check with her later.

Draven couldn’t stop thinking about his Ally. She really was his, with her soft hair and her soft, smooth skin. She was all Draven had ever wanted. He only wished he’d found her centuries ago rather than wasting so much of his life without her.

Fuck. What would life be like without her now? What if he couldn’t find her?

He growled low in his throat and headed for the stairs. “I’m going up to my room. Let me know the second they come back.”

Draven ran upstairs and went straight to his room. He had to get away from all the chit chat and ball-busting that was going on between his brothers.

He needed to concentrate on Ally.

He stripped down out of his clothes and threw them in a hamper, and then he hopped into the shower. He stood under the



spray of the water, focusing on his female, trying to sense where she was. Thoughts of their first night together flashed through his mind.

He *could* feel her, but he couldn't pinpoint where she was. He'd only ever heard of something like this when one's mate was in a different realm.

But that made no sense. Ally wouldn't know anything of different realms, let alone traveling between them.

He sensed she wasn't in danger because otherwise he'd have felt her fear. And thank the gods he didn't.

He lost track of time as he stood under the spray. Once the water started to run cold, he finally shut it off and stepped out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the door to his bedroom. The only way left to reach her he could think of was in her dreams.

He looked over at the bed and envisioned her lying there.

Wow. He thought he must really be out of it because he was hallucinating that she was actually there.

"Draven."

His hallucination was really good—it sounded just like her.

She hopped down out of his bed and ran toward him.

That's when he caught her scent. That alone told him she was real. Draven closed the distance and scooped her up in his arms.

His mouth was on hers in an instant and his hands were all over her body. "Where...were you...*Caalia*?" he said between kisses. Then he dropped down to her neck to ravish attention there.

"Mmmm. I like how you welcome me home," Ally replied in her sultry, sexy voice. "I might have to disappear more often."

Draven stopped kissing her. "Not funny." He looked down at her, noticing her frown. He held her tight in his arms, and she positioned herself so her face was lying against his chest.

"Where did you go, Ally?"

She pulled back and stared up at his face. "I was only gone a few hours. What's wrong?"

Draven furrowed his brows. "You've been gone for nearly a day. Seriously, where did you go?"

Confusion filled her face. "I'm not really sure how I got there. I was sleeping in your arms, and then the next thing I knew I

was walking through white fog. I even saw you there. You walked with me through the fog until we reached a really big building.”

Draven led her to his bed, pulling her down to sit next to him.

“I met my birth mother. My real one. We were in some temple that had a bunch of fog all around it. I thought it was a dream at first, but then I realized it wasn’t. My mom’s name is Gersemi, and she told me about having to give me up when I was a baby. Apparently she is a goddess, and she said that I am a goddess too. I don’t believe that, but—”

Draven interrupted her fast-paced chatter. “You were taken to a temple of the gods?”

“Yes...I think she said it was called Unitas.”

Fists banged on the door. “Draven get downstairs now. Ferox is injured.”

“I’ll be right down, Blaze!” He released his hold on Ally and pulled on some clothes. After grabbing her hand they ran out of the room to join his family downstairs.

Everyone else was already in the makeshift infirmary. Raine was examining Ferox while he lay unconscious on one of the tables.

Draven looked over to find that Riley was on the next bed, and Raider was bandaging him up. Riley was out cold as well.

“They’ve both been unconscious ever since I found them,” Raine said.

“What happened?” Draven asked.

“I tried calling them both a few times, but when I didn’t get any response from either of them, I put a trace on both their phones. Ferox’s was off the grid, but it did pick up Riley’s so I rushed out to find them.” Raine covered up some stitches with gauze. “I found them lying near each other on the ground, and the manor was on fire. I hadn’t even seen the blaze until I was on site though because someone had a cloak on it. I gave Ferox some blood as soon as I found him.” A tear slid down her cheek as she ran her hand through his hair. “But it’s not enough. We’ll have to monitor them both, and I’ll give Ferox more blood as soon as I’ve regenerated more.”

Draven walked over to his father and sucked in a breath. He was beaten. Badly. Whoever had worked him over had worked him

hard. It looked like someone had taken a knife to him repeatedly. He would have to ingest a hell of a lot of blood before he healed fully.

Damn that fucking Damion.

And damn his father for wanting to protect him.

Draven knew he should have gone there and faced his uncle himself.

Ally stepped through the crowd of men and took Draven's hand, lacing her fingers through his.

He was glad to feel her warmth and love in that touch.

"I'm sorry, Draven," she whispered to him.

When the men heard her voice they instantly snapped to attention.

"Where the hell did she come from?" Thrash asked.

"She was in my room when I came home. And before you give me those fucking glares, no, she wasn't in there the whole time. We couldn't find her because she wasn't in this realm at all. She'd been taken to a temple of the gods."

It was clear his brothers had more to say on that subject, but instead of pushing, they turned their attention back to Raine as she tended their leader. She'd started cleaning the open wound that ran down his face. The severe gash bled horribly. After it was cleaned she started stitching the wound closed.

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"What the fuck happened to them?" Draven asked. He was on edge, his body coiled like a snake about to strike. Ally knew this from tight grip he held on her hand.

Raine faced him, her own worry creasing her forehead. She had blood smeared all over her. "No one knows what happened tonight. All I know is there was a fire, and no one else was on the scene when I got there. I don't know who was in the mansion or what happened to them. I barely got them into the car before the place collapsed. We're lucky to even have them back."

"That wound isn't from a fucking fire. That's a knife wound running down his cheek," Draven said, gesturing to the bandage that lay across nearly half of Ferox's face.

"We'll get the details when they wake up," Raider said. He walked over and clapped Draven on the back. "We'll get our answers soon enough."

“And what about Riley? Will he even wake up? His Instinct hasn’t even kicked in, so he’s nearly as weak as a human.” Rage filled Draven’s voice as he looked at Riley. From what Draven had told her, the kid had been adopted into their family. Raine and Ferox had taken him in as a toddler, and he’d been with them ever since.

Raine put her hands on his shoulders. “I know you’re worried about them both. We all are. But this is no time to panic. No one can predict what will happen to either of them. For now, you should all go and rest. It’s been a long night and I think we’re all tired. I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

She turned back to tend to her husband some more. “Oh, and Ally? Welcome back.” Raine smiled at her. Although that smile didn’t reach her eyes, Ally could see that she was truly glad she was back with them. Worry for her husband and adopted son understandably overshadowed everything else.

Everyone shuffled out of the room and headed upstairs either to their bedrooms or to hang out in the entertainment room to hammer back some drinks. No one took the seriousness of this situation lightly, but times like these could make anyone need a drink.

As Ally and Draven followed some of the other men up the stairs and down the hall, the emotion of what had just happened hit her like a Mack truck.

Ferox, the vampire king, Draven’s father, and the leader of the Guardians, was seriously injured. Although she didn’t know much about a vampire’s healing abilities, she could sense how bad it was based on the others’ reactions. As bad as the fear was for Ferox, she sensed it doubly for the young Riley. He had no extra abilities like the others had. Draven had said himself that Riley was nearly as weak as a human. He was in such bad shape the situation didn’t look good.

And she felt awful for what she knew she had to do next.

They reached Draven’s room, and he shut them in together before gathering her in his arms. He rested his cheek against the top of her head and held her tight.

Ally swallowed hard. “Draven, I am sorry about your dad and Riley, but I can’t stay with you anymore.”

He quickly pulled back and stared down at her, his hands

on her shoulders. “What do you mean?”

Oh, she didn’t want to do this. Forcing herself to stand straight, she steeled herself the hardest thing she’d ever had to do.

“I’m a goddess, Draven. I can’t be with you.”

Draven opened his mouth to respond, but he closed it without a peep. The look in his eyes had Ally’s heart breaking, but she knew she needed to end their relationship. She didn’t deserve his love, especially since her own mother wouldn’t allow her to live here anymore.

“I won’t stay with you. You’re beneath me.” And there it was. Ally bit the inside of her cheek, willing tears not to form in her eyes. It was the only thing she could think of to say so that Draven wouldn’t argue with her, though she didn’t believe it and never would. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Draven briskly nodded his head, his jaw tight.

“I’m going back to the temple now. I’ve come to say goodbye, and that’s that.” As much as it killed her, she pulled out from his hold. She could feel herself being pulled back to the temple.

Just as her form started to fade, Draven stepped forward and reached out. “No, Ally. I love you...”

But it was too late. She was gone. Or at least her body was. Ally could still feel her emotions, and she was breaking inside.

Just like him.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tears cascaded down Ally's cheeks. That had been the hardest lie she'd ever had to tell.

She looked around and found that she was surrounded by white fog again. Letting her knees fold under her, she collapsed to the ground and wept.

She didn't want to leave Draven. She wanted to stay with him. And get married. And have kids.

She was only able to pull herself together and swallow her pain when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and saw him.

Draven.

She jumped to her feet and leapt into his arms. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean any of it. I love you." She latched onto him tightly and sobbed into his chest.

He held her and rubbed his hands up and down her back. "It will be all right, love," he whispered.

"Remove your hands from my daughter," Gersemi said boldly. Her voice was stern enough to make Ally jump. When she turned and looked at her with her brows drawn low, her mother continued. "This servant is becoming obsessed with you, Alaina. I've heard that he speaks of you constantly with the others. He is... *fond* of you."

Ally looked over at him, and all she could see was Draven, the man she loved. He was her life.

"He is not who you think he is, Alaina. He is playing tricks with your mind because you trust your human male so much. You must get him out of your mind."

Ally started sobbing harder. Just when she had Draven back he was taken away. Or rather, if her mother was speaking the truth, this man really wasn't Draven so she hadn't gotten him back at all.

Deep down, she knew he wasn't Draven. She didn't feel that humming feeling as she always did when she was near him.

"I'm sorry you were brought back so quickly, child. I was informed of a threat and needed you to return to me."

Ally ran to Gersemi and embraced her. She continued to sob into her shoulder until her mother softly said, "Alaina, you must stop crying. You are a goddess now, and we do not show our

feelings in front of others. It shows weakness to those who would cause harm against us. Let's get you to your quarters, and we'll speak in private."

She nodded but didn't say anything as Gersemi led her into the temple. She recognized the foyer where she had met her mother just a few hours ago, and then she was led down a corridor. Ally couldn't ignore how beautifully decorated it was, and the distraction was appreciated. The same white tiling and walls with golden trim flowed through the open hallway, the same chandeliers and tables of flowers as well. But what Ally loved most were the candle sconces that clung to the walls. They put off such a beautiful glow they reminded her of her pendant, and they also reminded her of home. She'd always loved to burn candles. There had probably only been a few days she hadn't lit any around her house, so it was nice that at least she had one comfort here at the temple. She needed something she could relate to her human life.

They hadn't walked too far before Gersemi stopped at a doorway and led her into her room.

It was extravagant. She wondered if everyone's room was this beautiful. The coloring wasn't the same as everywhere else she'd seen in the temple so far. It was full of pink and white flowers, and it had rose-colored walls with white trim. The ceiling rose to nearly twenty-feet high with crown molding. After she gawked at the loveliness of the room for a bit, Gersemi spoke again.

"Is it to your liking, Alaina?"

"Uh, yeah. Thank you. It's beautiful." She still had unshed tears in her eyes from her heartache over losing Draven.

"Sit," Gersemi said.

Ally found a cream colored chaise and sat down on it. Her mother took a seat on the couch. She crossed her legs at the ankles and smoothed out her dress before setting her hands in her lap. "Now, what is bothering you so, daughter?"

"There's just so much lately. My family is gone, I don't know what's happened to any of them, I can't be with the man that I love because you've brought me here, his father and brother might die, and I can't be there with him to comfort him. *I love him.*"

Gersemi sighed. "Yes, love can be painful, especially when

you can't be with the one you love. However, keeping you alive is more important, Alaina. As I told you earlier, it's frowned upon for a goddess of your stature to be with a human. Most other deities are beneath your station as it is, but even they are better than what your male is. You need a god who can protect you. Now, cheer up. A banquet is being held in your honor. Today is a day of celebration because you have returned home."

Gersemi stood up and faced the door. "Ladies!" Two servants entered the room. "Would you kindly assist my daughter in getting cleaned up for the evening?"

"Yes, mistress." They both curtsied.

She turned back to Ally. "I've had your closet stocked so you can choose whatever you'd like to wear, and these are my personal servants. They will assist you until we find some new ones."

"Thank you."

Her mother stepped closer to her. "It gets easier. Try to push him out of your mind." She turned on her heels, leaving Ally staring at the two servants who were beaming at her with bright smiles.

She wasn't sure that she wanted to push him from her mind. While they still had their blood-bond, she doubted she'd even succeed. Ally brightened slightly. They still had their bond, which meant that she'd have a piece of him for a time. Maybe long enough that she could find some semblance of happiness here, or a way back to him.

With that, she decided that she would just have to swallow her sadness. Goddess or no goddess, she wouldn't break down.

She found her closet and went in to check out all the clothes her mother had left for her. The gowns were more than beautiful. She'd never seen so many wonderful things in one place before. It seemed nothing in this other world could manage to be ordinary.

"Would you like any help in the bathing chamber, mistress?"

"Oh, umm, no. I'll just grab something and get in the shower. You guys can just hang out."

A shimmering gold object caught Ally's attention, and she walked over to inspect the gown. It was white satin with



shimmering gold embellishments. She grabbed the dress and took it into the bathroom, admiring the beautiful sheen of the dress. After draping it over a chair, she jumped in the shower. At first, she was confused because the soaps were a little different. No Biolage here. Everything was in expensive-looking bottles, and she couldn't read the labels. Once she figured out what soaps went where, she rinsed her body and shut off the water. She wrapped herself in a towel and started to towel-dry her hair.

Ally remained in the bathing chamber, as they called it, while she teased her hair dry. She sat down at a large vanity covered with tons of hair products and makeup. Just what she needed, more labels she couldn't read.

"Are you ready for us to assist you, mistress?"

She looked over and saw the two women enter the room and head straight for her.

"You have received a gift," one of the ladies said.

She handed Ally a box. When she opened it, she found a key inside. There was a note attached to it that read "From Theo."

That's weird. Ally cocked an eyebrow and shrugged. She'd probably meet this Theo tonight sometime.

"We'll prepare you for the ball, mistress," the other servant said.

"Ball? I thought it was a banquet?"

"Yes, my lady. There will be a banquet, but many of the gods are excited to meet you. No one knew to expect you until your mother's announcement, and you've been the talk of the temple ever since. They can't wait to meet you, so they've decided to hold a ball in your honor. I heard that you are expected to find a husband tonight."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Good morning, sweetheart. Gods, I’m so glad you’re awake.” Raine beamed as her husband’s eyes fluttered open.

He looked up at her and smiled the best he could with the bandages running across his face.

“My love, I’m so glad you’re finally here with me,” he said. He reached his hand up and softly cupped her cheek.

“I’m glad you’re well, darling.”

“Where’s—”

“Riley’s still out cold. I think he was worse off than I originally thought. We shouldn’t have taken him out on that mission. I don’t know if he’ll ever dare do it again. How are you feeling?”

“Sore, but alive.”

“Let’s see how this looks.” Raine carefully peeled the gauze from his face, seeing the long line of jagged stitches that kept his wounds closed. “A little better, but not much. If you’re feeling up to it, I’ll go get the others. I know they’d really like to see you. Raid and I decided together that everyone should have the night off, so none of them are out patrolling. We need to know what happened last night.”

Raine walked over to the phone and dialed up to the kitchen. Gregory answered immediately.

“Gregory, its Raine.”

“*Ah, how may I be of service?*”

“Please send the Guardians to the Infirmary. Ferox is awake.”

“*Very good, my lady.*”

Raine hung up the phone and faced her husband.

“Riley hasn’t woken up yet?” he asked.

She frowned at him. “No. Both of you were badly hurt, and we’re just thankful you both made it back more or less in one piece.”

Moments later the Guardians shuffled into the room. Raine waited as Draven and Ethan came in last.

Her oldest son looked as though he’d been hit by a bus. Repeatedly. He’d hardly responded to anyone since Ally was taken from him a second time.

“Ferox, what happened last night?” Raider asked.

He didn’t try to sit up. Instead he just lay where he was, which was good because he needed to preserve his strength. Vampires, along with other Lore creatures, generally healed much quicker than humans. Some wounds would literally heal before one’s eyes, but when there was a horrible one, they needed a great deal of rest in order for their body to restore itself.

And in the case of vampires, they also needed a great deal of blood. Not only was it a form of nourishment for them, but it also helped their bodies regain their superhuman strength. Naturally, Raine planned to let him take her vein once he went over the details of last night’s fight.

“We snuck into the manor. At first it seemed like it was empty, but we stuck with our gut instincts that someone was there. We checked through different rooms, searching for anyone or anything that would help us with our mission. We found Damion’s office and searched it. That’s when Damion appeared at the top of the stairs.

“While he was distracting us, Q snuck up behind us and attacked Riley. Once that fight broke out, my brother attacked me from behind. We were all brawling together on the floor, and pretty soon Riley was knocked out. That boy is just so small compared to Q. Next thing I knew, Q threw a knife to Damion. They pinned me down while Damion slashed me up.”

Raine gripped his hand and gave it a squeeze. He looked up at her adoringly before continuing. “I was in too much pain and I couldn’t see because some blood seeped into my eyes. Then everything went dark.”

He let his head roll back and closed his eyes. It was obvious to everyone in the room that he was drained simply from talking about his experience. If he was that weak he needed to get blood in him.

Raine turned to Raider. “He’s still tired and needs more rest. Until he’s well again, or until Draven’s head is back in the game, I’m placing you in charge of the Guardians. Email Demetrius and give him a heads up. Now, please, I think everyone should probably leave. Let him rest.”

“Yes, my queen. Ferox, if you want, we’ll find Damion and kill that *sonofabitch*. I don’t give a fuck if he’s my cousin. I’ll rip

his throat out,” Raider said.

Ferox sat up immediately. “No! I don’t want anyone going out until I’ve healed. We don’t need more warriors injured. Stay off the streets until Riley and I are back to normal.”

Raider shook his head. “We can’t stay off the streets that long, my lord. There’s too much going on to allow that.”

The other Guardians nodded in agreement.

“I don’t give a fuck what you think, Raider. You will all stay off the streets. That’s an order! Now get the fuck out of my sight!”

All the warriors rushed from the room. Raine shut the door behind them. “You didn’t have to snap at them. They’re all worried about you.”

“Just come here and let me hold you, Raine.”

When she walked back over, he pulled her up on the bed so she could lie right next to him. She set her chin on his shoulder and looked up into his eyes. “Would you like to feed? I wanted to take you to our room first, but you seem drained.”

He stiffened and a wide grin spread across his face before he peered into her eyes. “Let’s go to our room.”

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Ally was awed by the speed at which the servants worked. She looked like royalty in no time flat. She never thought she’d like to have servants before, but honestly, she could get used to this. They had even helped her into her dress, and just as she was smoothing it down her body, she heard a knock on her door.

Gersemi slowly walked into the room and pushed the door shut. When she caught sight of Ally, she smiled and bowed. “Let us join the banquet, Alaina. Everyone is gathering.” Ally bowed back to her, after a whispered reminder from one of her servants. They’d given her tips and tricks on temple life as they’d worked feverishly to get her ready.

Gersemi turned and led her from the room. As they walked down the corridor, Gersemi looked over her shoulder at Ally. “Please, walk beside me daughter. As a goddess, you are inferior to no one.”

Ally sped up a little until she was walking side by side with her mother as they headed through the vast corridor.

“When we enter the room, we shall bow. It is a form of

respect to bow to the other deities when you enter a room. Instead of bowing at each individual god or goddess, you bow once and that is a greeting to everyone already within the room.” She turned to make sure Ally was listening. She must have noticed Ally walking clumsily, because she added, “You must also walk like a goddess, not like a human. Be graceful. Delicate. Walk proud, with your chin up and your shoulders back.”

“Yes, mother.”

Ally’s nerves kept her from asking all the questions that had formed in her mind. Right now, she was nervous to meet all the other deities. What would they be like? Would they like her? Would they be nice to her? Was this going to be like that uncomfortable feeling of switching schools and having all of the other kids looking on expectantly, as if the newcomer might miraculously sprout a tail? She’d never had to go through it herself, but she’d heard horror stories.

“You will also bow when you approach someone, or if they approach you. If you are sitting, you may nod your head. And, darling, you are called Alaina. Not Ally. Alaina is the goddess name you were given at birth.”

Ally nodded as they approached the door to a huge room. There were so many people inside, and she saw a *ton* of food. She didn’t believe for a second that they could eat all the food proudly displayed throughout the room. It looked like Thanksgiving Dinner for a small country. She stared at all the yummy food, not really paying attention as she and Gersemi walked through the doorway and was immediately brought to attention as an old, loud man announced their arrival.

“Goddess Gersemi,” he said. Then he looked at Ally, smiled, and turned back to the crowd, “...and goddess Alaina.”

Once her name was spoken all heads turned toward her and her mother. The room went silent. It would have filled with the sounds of crickets chirping, had there been any in the temple.

Yep, they all looked like they were waiting for her to grow a damned tail. Hell, maybe she could. She was a goddess now, after all.

Ally felt herself blush from head to toe, but she swallowed her shyness and followed her mom’s lead by bowing. The crowd all bowed at once back to her.

She sucked in a nervous breath and, remembering what her mother had just told her, pressed her shoulders back and pulled her chin up. She followed Gersemi through the room as they made their way toward a set of empty thrones.

On their way to them, many of the men and women nearby bowed to Ally. At first, she tried to bow to each of them in return, but she gave up and started nodding to them instead. With all the bowing she'd done she felt like one of those fake birds that bend over to drink water.

They reached a set of three stairs leading up to the thrones. As she looked around the room, she found that each throne had stairs leading up to it. Gersemi climbed the three stairs and sat in a throne before gesturing Ally to sit in one of her own.

Luckily everyone in the room had started speaking again, so she wasn't so nervous that she was still the center of attention.

"This is yours now, dear. Each of the gods and goddesses who reside here sit in their personal thrones during gatherings."

Ally pointed to another throne. "Is that one for my father?"

Gersemi looked over at the empty throne next to her own. "That was for Vili. Many of the deities have spoken of removing it from the temple, but his brother won't allow it."

Just then a man spoke from over Gersemi's shoulder. He was sitting in a throne placed in a separate clump just off from Vili's empty one. He stood and approached them.

"This is Alaina?" he asked Gersemi.

"Yes, Vé. This is my daughter Alaina."

His eyes sparkled as he met Ally's gaze. "She is every bit as beautiful as her mother. I can't even see my brother in her at all."

Gersemi blushed and looked away as he bowed to Ally.

"I am your Uncle Vé, my dear. It is a great pleasure to finally meet you." He took her hand and kissed it before he released it.

"I shall return to my throne. We will catch up later, niece." With that, he walked back over to his throne and continued whatever conversation he had been engrossed in before their arrival.

Ally looked back over at Gersemi. There was so much going on, so many questions traveling through her mind, and since

no one else was in earshot at the moment, she decided to ask her mother. “Does time move slower here? When I went back home Draven said I had been gone for a day, but I was only here a few hours.”

“Yes.” Gersemi laughed. “Time moves differently in every realm. Everything on Earth happens so quickly compared to what happens here at Unitas.”

Ally considered that for a moment. There was so much she didn’t know about the world. Well, worlds, as their seemed to be different realms. She had so much to learn about the universe they lived in.

“Okay, when should we eat? I’m starving,” Ally said. Her stomach decided to embarrass her by growling at that very moment, only backing her statement of how hungry she really was.

Gersemi’s eyes glistened as she stared at her. An uncontrolled laugh escaped her, which she quickly covered with her mouth. “Yes, my dear. It seems you are quite hungry. We are just waiting for your escort to arrive. He asked me for your hand this evening.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ally could only stare at Gersemi in confusion. She hoped to hell that meant something different here than it did on Earth. At home, asking for someone's hand meant marriage, and she wasn't marrying anyone but Draven.

If only she could find a way back to him.

"Goddess Alaina, it does my heart well to see you again. You are more beautiful than the sun itself."

Ally turned her head and saw the gorgeous Dellinger smiling at her as he ascended the three stairs to her throne.

Gersemi let out a playful laugh. "Well, that is saying something, coming from you, young Dellinger." She turned to face Ally. "Dellinger is the god of dawn, the personification of the sun."

"You are most breathtaking," he whispered quietly, as if only wanting her to hear his comment. He took her hand and pressed his warm, soft lips to her knuckles. But afterward, he didn't release her hand. Oh no, he kept his warm hand wrapped gently around hers.

He certainly was charming and handsome. He had a strong jaw with only a little stubble growing, and long eyelashes framed his warm brown eyes.

Ally moved her gaze from his face and silently appreciated how well his suit displayed his strong build. He was stunning with his broad shoulders and huge arms. His suit fit perfectly over his muscular v-shaped frame.

She smiled and bowed her head to him.

"I requested Lady Gersemi allow me to escort you to the ball tonight. I understand, from researching how these requests play out on the Earth realm, that I should have requested that of you formally as well. Would you care to join me, goddess?"

Ally nodded to him. "Umm, yes. Thank you, Dellinger."

He carefully pulled her from her throne and led her down the stairs, all the while holding her hand. When they reached the floor, he crooked out his arm so she could loop hers with his.

Ally looked back at her mother and noticed that Gersemi looked pleased with their pairing. She found it strange her mother was already trying to get her married off. They'd only just met.

She returned her gaze to Dellinger, and couldn't miss the



huge smile on his face. He stood so tall and proud. Was he simply proud to be by her side? Or was it simply because he was the first one to get to play with the shiny new toy?

Together, they walked through the crowd toward one of the tables. More gods and goddesses bowed to them as they glided by. Again, Ally tried to bow to each of them, which was even more difficult as she was being pulled along by Delligr.

He chuckled and leaned in close to her. "Alaina, you really don't need to bow to each of them. You can just make eye contact and nod. And even then, sometimes enough's enough. Pretty soon you'll learn whom you need to bow to and whom you don't." His eyes gleamed as he looked into Ally's eyes and gave her the schoolboy smile. He patted her arm and looked forward again, steering them through the crowd.

"You spoke so formally when we met before. Why change now?"

His smile got even bigger. "You'll learn who is set in the old ways and who is more modern. Gersemi, like many of the older deities, is one who likes everything kept in a formal fashion. She prides herself in the traditional ways."

That made sense.

Ally then noticed they weren't headed for the nearest table. She was being led to the furthest away. As hungry as she was, a part of her grumbled that her tummy would have to wait longer before she fed it, but she was also glad that he was leading her away from the crowd. No one was sitting on that end of the room. Yet.

"I am going to go ask the servants to serve us over here. I'll be right back." He bowed and walked over to some servants nearby. She watched as he politely spoke to them. It was clear they respected him since they all lit up in delight as he spoke.

"Did you receive the key?" a voice asked behind her.

Ally whirled around, and she couldn't control the smile that appeared on her face. "Draven!"

She nearly jumped right into his arms, but as the man in front of her just smiled down at her, she noticed that the smile wasn't quite right. "Oh, you're not Draven. I'm sorry. You look exactly like someone I know." She worried her lip. "What is your name?"

“I am called Theo.”

*So this is Theo.*

“Did you receive the key?” he asked again.

“Yes. Uh, thank you?”

“I hope you will join me in my quarters tonight,” he said. “They’re not quite as lavish as you may be used to, but I assure you, you won’t be concerned with your surroundings while we’re together.”

He tried to pull off a seductive smile, but it wasn’t the same as the real Draven’s. He couldn’t hold a candle to the real deal when it came to temptation. Her vampire was pure seduction. Dark. Delectable. Wholly desirable.

The man before her looked awkward.

“I can make you feel better than you ever did with your human male.”

*Ha! Not bloody likely,* Ally thought. No one could get to her the way Draven could, and she really didn’t want to give anyone else a try.

She burned for Draven and Draven alone.

“Um, no...thank you. I’ll just stay in my own room.”

“I will come to your quarters then.”

Ally took a step back. She was really starting to get pissed off at his pushiness. “You may look like him, but you’re *not* the man I love.”

“I’ll have you changing your mind in no time,” he said. He had a wicked grin on his face that sent chills through Ally’s body, and not in a good way. There was definitely something different about the man in front of her. Before she could respond, he bowed and walked away.

She turned back around just as Delligr approached. “Let’s sit over here. The servants will bring food around to us. All you need to do is let them know which foods you prefer.” He held his hand out and led her to a seat at the end of a table.

Servants immediately started bring food options over to them, and Ally got to pick and choose whatever sounded good to her. Although some of the food was recognizable, some food she’d never seen or heard of before, obviously foods from different realms.

When the servants left, Delligr spoke again. “I hope you

don't mind that we're so far away from everyone else. I wanted to get to know you a little. That's why I brought you all the way over here." Then he glanced over at the crowd and scowled. "But it appears that some of the other gods are planning to join us soon."

Why did he look so upset about that?

Hoping to distract him, she said, "Okay then, what did you want to talk about?"

"You, Alaina. I want to know everything about you."

"Oookay. Anything more specific?"

Dellinger laughed and stared deep into her eyes. They had a penetrating quality to them that made her body stir.

"Tell me about your life so far. What temple did you grow up in? What pantheon raised you?"

"Whoa, umm..." Ally laughed. This was going to be interesting. Gersemi hadn't filled anyone in on any details. "I wasn't raised in a temple, or by other gods. I was raised as a human. I only recently found out I'm a goddess." She shrugged.

His eyes went wide. "You lived on the Earth Realm? And you grew up believing you were nothing more than a human? What about your affinities? Your gifts?"

"I don't have any."

Dellinger nodded slowly as he stared at her. "You haven't ascended yet. That must be why I can't sense you as a goddess. You're definitely beautiful enough to be one, and I can clearly see you are the daughter of Gersemi. But we can usually sense how powerful a deity is, and I haven't been able to pick up on anything from you."

Ally picked at the food on her plate, finally stabbing something unrecognizable with her fork, she asked, "When did you ascend?"

He looked uncomfortable, but he answered anyway. "Most of us are born and it's apparent what our affinities are. Some of us ascend the day that we're born, and some of us ascend when we're children."

"Oh." She *was* a freak. Different. Everyone would think she was strange for not having ascended yet.

Cue tail...now.

"Oh, don't worry. Your mother clearly sent you away to protect you. No one would have been around to bless you into your

godhood. But we should keep that secret between the two of us. If others find out you haven't ascended to godhood yet, they may not approve of your being here. Besides, I want to know what the human realm is like. I always wanted to visit Earth."

"You've never been there?"

"No, I've remained here in Unitas. As one of the protectors of the temple, it's frowned upon for any of us to leave. I've actually only been to one other realm, Vanaheimr."

"Oh, that's too bad that you haven't traveled much." He was a god for gods' sakes! He should at least be able to go wherever he wanted. "Well, my life as a human was simple for the most part. I had a great family, loving parents and brothers. Of course, to them I was Ally, not Alaina. I actually didn't even know Alaina was my birth name until earlier today. I lived with my parents until I was old enough to move out, then I lived on my own for a while." She shrugged and popped some sort of buttery vegetable into her mouth.

Dellingr narrowed his eyebrows. "You lived alone, with no one to protect you?"

Ally swallowed. "Oh, I had a protector alright. His name is Jake, and he's a great dog."

"A dog?" His features lightened. "I've always wanted to own one. They seem like fun little creatures. What kind is he?"

"He's a Shih Tzu. He's my little buddy." Ally chuckled thinking of, and suddenly missing, her dog.

The smile remained spread across his face. "You said they called you Ally?"

"Yes, that's the name I had as a human, before I found out about all this." She waved her hand around. "I guess now only my close friends would know me as that."

"Hmmm. Would you mind if I called you Ally when we're alone? Mind you, it's either that or angel." He smiled.

"Of course. I really could use a friend around here." Ally's smile brightened her entire face. She was glad she could trust someone here already, and she really felt she could trust him.

"We'll keep this our secret then, my little Ally."

## Chapter Thirty

“If anyone wants to go, I’m headed to Pandora’s,” Blaze said.

The Guardians in the room nodded their heads in agreement. They loved to drink. And what was better than that?

Drunk females.

Even Draven nodded, though his motivations were slightly different. He needed a drink to get his mind off Ally, and they’d already polished off the good stuff at the mansion.

They headed out the door and decided to take the Navigator since they could all fit in one vehicle. Ethan climbed in the driver’s seat of Draven’s ride as Draven took the front passenger seat. The others climbed in the SUV before they pulled out of the gates surrounding the mansion.

The drive to Pandora’s was quiet. Everyone was worried about Riley, who still hadn’t woken up, but the greatest tension in the car came from Draven. He couldn’t hide that he was thinking about his female.

Only after the gods had taken Ally away again did they realize both what Ally actually was and what that meant for the prophecy. They now knew it was bigger than anyone had ever thought possible. “Soooo…” Blaze spoke up, breaking the silence, “Your girl’s a goddess, huh?”

Draven let out a sigh and shrugged. “Yeah, guess so.”

“And you’ve been…intimate with her?”

Intimate? What the fuck? This was Blaze talking here. “Yeah.”

Blaze nodded and rubbed his chin with his thumb and pointer finger. “Hmm…gives a whole new meaning to ‘holy fuck.’”

Draven turned around and looked at him with a shocked face. “Fuck. I guess so.” He barked out a laugh at his valvo brother’s comment.

After a moment of unease, the other Guardians laughed and started making fun of each other. Thank the gods Blaze knew how to break the tension. He was the joker within their brotherhood of warriors. He always knew how to calm them and make them think clearly, which was why he worked so well with Thrash.

The rest of the ride to the club had them all laughing and taking jabs at each other. They parked the Navigator around the back of the club and headed into Pandora's Box.

The club was packed tonight. The Guardians looked around the dark room, scoping out the situation. They knew all too well that in their line of work that they had to know their surroundings or else they could easily wind up dead.

There were a lot of humans sitting at tables, hammering back drinks, and there were even more out on the dance floor.

Just the kind of night the boys enjoyed here at Pandora's.

As they walked through the club, most of the people dodged out of their way, creating a clear path for them to the back wall that was lined with tables and booths. A lot of women glanced at them with seductive smiles as they made their way through the crowd.

The Guardians found a large booth and slid around the table. Thrash waited until Blaze had scooted into the booth before he took his place. He always sat on an end. He felt too confined otherwise. The two of them were practically inseparable. They'd been best friends since even before Thrash had been officially inducted as a Guardian.

Raider slid into the booth on the other side, followed by Draven. Ethan took the end.

Once they were all seated, Thrash signaled his preferred waitress. She eagerly teased her red hair and adjusted her clothes to pop a little more cleavage out the top of her dress before scurrying over to their table.

"Hey baby," she said to Thrash. He pulled her up on his lap and wrapped his huge hands around her waist. "What can I get you boys?" She set her tray down on the table and stroked Thrash's arms with her manicured nails.

One by one, the Guardians listed off their drinks. Once she had them all, she slid off Thrash's lap.

"Keep 'em coming, Candy." He slid a folded hundred-dollar bill down the front of her dress.

Candy pulled away and smiled at Thrash, and then she strutted off toward the bar.

"You're not done with that one yet?" Draven asked. He'd never seen the wolf around a female more than once.

“I haven’t *had* that one yet. You interrupted my plans last time.” Thrash gave him the stink eye and then a half-cocked smile.

Good. He was in a good mood tonight. He, along with the other Guardians, never knew where they stood with that bastard. It was a rarity to even see a smile on the wolf’s face. It usually only appeared after bloodshed.

“Well, brothers, move over. I’m going to join that bachelorette party over there,” Blaze said. Once he scooted out of the booth, he turned to them with a smile. “Have a good night, ladies.”

Draven looked over at Ethan and noticed that his attention was drawn to the dance floor. He followed his brother’s gaze and saw a beautiful woman dancing with a man.

She was exactly the type Ethan always went for. Tall. Thin. Thick brown hair.

While she was bump-n-grinding with the human man, her focus was intent on Ethan.

“See you gents tomorrow.” He flashed them a smile and made his way out to the dance floor, stalking toward the brunette. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him.

The man she’d been with was ready to pick a fight with him, but as soon as he saw Ethan’s size, he wisely backed off. Within seconds Ethan and the woman were kissing and groping each other, and on their way to one of the rooms in the back.

Candy came back with a tray full of drinks. She set them down and sidled up to Thrash. He kissed her neck, causing her to giggle at him. “Are you going to stick around tonight, baby?”

“*Nothing* would keep me from you tonight,” he growled. He nuzzled her neck more until she got called to a different table.

Raider rolled his eyes at her as she swung her hips out with each step she took.

“We need to get you laid,” Thrash said, noticing the eye roll.

“I’m fine.”

“Alright man, your loss.” Thrash sat back and took a swig of his Jack and Coke.

Raider ignored Thrash and turned back to Draven. “You okay, my lord?”

“Don’t call me that. And yeah, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine, if you don’t mind me saying, my lord.”

Draven smiled at Raider’s persistence. “I’m just thinking, uncle.”

“What are you going to do about Ally?”

He breathed in slowly and let out a long sigh. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Raider leaned forward and set his elbows on the table. “You can’t just let her go. I know what it’s like to lose your female. Trust me. It’s not something you want to live with forever.”

Draven watched as Thrash threw back a few of the other drinks on the table, pretending he wasn’t listening to their conversation—or maybe *trying* not to—Draven couldn’t tell. He’d never seen the wolf slam so many drinks at a time.

Turning toward his uncle, he nodded. “You’re right. I’m going to get her back.”

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“Did you have any lovers on Earth?”

Ally stiffened at the directness of his question. Yes, she had a lover. In fact, she was still in love with him now.

“I apologize. I don’t mean to pry. I’m just curious about you,” Dellinger added.

Silence stretched out between them as Ally contemplated telling him about her love life. On one hand, she needed a friend she could confide in. On the other, he looked at her as though he wanted to insert himself *into* her love life.

She finally answered. “Yes. I have a lover, but Gersemi said I had to live in Unitas instead.”

Dellinger patted her arm again. “I’m sorry. I truly didn’t mean to pry. It must be difficult to uproot your life and get thrown into something like this.”

When Dellinger’s attention was drawn away from her momentarily, she glanced over and saw that he had a scowl on his face again. She looked out at the other deities in the room and noticed that two men were walking toward them.

Well, walking was an understatement. Strutting was more like it. It was apparent that both of the men had willing females who pined for them. They looked so similar to each other, not



exactly identical, but very much like twins. As they stalked through the room, many of the goddesses' eyes moved to their towering bodies. If Ally had extra-sensitive hearing, she was pretty sure she would have heard panting coming from most of them.

She giggled at the thought.

The two were lethal-looking in this beautiful temple, but neither looked nearly as deadly as any of the Guardians. These two didn't have any grace whatsoever, which was probably what made these proper goddesses swoon over them. As for Ally, she could have done without their macho act as they approached her.

Dellingr's face showed how hurt he was that she was looking over at them. As if he thought she preferred them over him, he rushed through what he wanted to say before the men reached them. "Ally, I hope you'll consider me as a future husband. I feel drawn to you as I have to no other, and I have since the moment I first saw you. I realize it may be too soon after leaving your human man, but I hope you will consider me." He squeezed her hand and gave her his glimmering smile again.

Just as the two men reached them, Dellingr pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

"So...this is Alaina, the awaited daughter of Gersemi," one man said. Ally noticed that he was glaring at Dellingr as though he were angry with him. Then he looked at her with a smile. "Goddess Alaina. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Crius."

"Pleased to meet you, Crius." She held her hand out to shake his. He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he did what everyone else had been doing. He kissed it.

*I'll have to remember that is customary from now on.*

"And I am Cassius. You are *quite* lovely, goddess."

Ally blushed as Cassius took her hand and kissed it as well. Between Draven and his brothers, and Dellingr and the gods, she'd never been around so many magnificent men. She hadn't known this many gorgeous men even *existed*. Apparently men like these didn't exist in the regular human world.

"I hope you're planning to share her tonight, Dellingr. You can't keep the new goddess all to yourself," Crius said.

Ally no longer had any doubt what was going on. With Crius' comment, she knew she was simply the shiny new toy.

“Alaina is here to meet everyone. I am simply her escort for the evening.” Dellingr sneered back at them before he returned a wicked grin to his face. He turned to her. “Cassius and Crius are demigods who decided to live here at Unitas. They felt they were too good to reside on the Earth realm.”

“Of course.” Crius laughed. “No one worth anything came from that realm.”

Her eyebrows popped up. “Really?”

“Yes. They are simple humans. We are gods.”

Ally laughed. She really wanted to argue with him, but she couldn’t claim herself a goddess until the time she ascended.

Dellingr’s smile quirked to the side, obviously recognizing the irritation that was coming off her in waves. “But as I was saying, she is here to meet everyone, no matter what type of deity and regardless of their station.”

“Well, in that case...” Cassius sat down next to Ally, as Crius pulled a chair around to sit in front of her. “Tell us about yourself, goddess.”

Ally got very uncomfortable as three sets of eyes stared at her. Dellingr’s were the kindest pair anchored on her, while the other two gods appeared as though they were captivated by her. “Well, uh, I just got through telling Dellingr about my family and my life.”

“Alaina, instead of repeating what you’ve just told me, would you like to dance?” Dellingr asked with hope in his eyes.

Thank God, er, thank the gods, he was saving her from all this attention. He might just be turning into her guardian angel.

“I’d love to. Thank you.” Ally stood up and linked her arm with Dellingr’s as he led her out to the floor. “Thank you,” she whispered to him again, a smile touching her face.

Dellingr twirled her around once they reached the middle of the floor. He took her left hand in his right one and placed his free hand on her waist. Ally placed hers on his shoulder. Just as a new song started up, they bowed their heads to each other and started twirling around the floor.

Dellingr was a lovely dancer. He led her around the floor with such elegant movement. For such a well-stacked man, he was graceful and delicate with her. He was beautiful.

“I’m sorry about them,” he said as he caught the other two

men's stares. "What Cassius said was rude. I would have defended you on the spot if you had asked it of me."

Ally popped an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

Dellingr stared down into Ally's eyes. "He said you were lovely. Anyone who would merely call you *lovely* obviously can't see. You are exquisite. I know of no others whose beauty compares to yours."

Ally blushed and looked away. She may have snorted, too.

Wow, this god was a charmer.

As they twirled around the dance floor, Ally found that she was very comfortable around Dellingr. It was almost as if she'd known him all her life.

"May I cut in?" She turned her head and saw that Cassius was holding his hand out to her.

"Of course." Dellingr stepped back and the men bowed to each other. When he bowed to Ally there was sadness in his eyes, and he discretely shook his head as he walked away.

Cassius swooped Ally up and started dancing. He was a nice dancer as well, but not nearly as practiced or gentle as Dellingr had been.

"I do apologize for my behavior earlier. It is rare to meet another of our kind. We've all known each other practically all our lives." A smile touched Cassius' face, but Ally sensed he wasn't sincere. She'd known many guys like this in her life. This one was a player.

Though she smiled back at him, and they continued to dance in silence.

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Raine pulled Ferox through the hallway toward their bedroom. They'd been slowly making their way to the room ever since the Guardians left. Her husband only allowed her a few steps at a time before he'd pull her to him to take her mouth.

She couldn't wait to get him into bed. Her body was thrumming with excitement as she imagined all the ways she was going to show her husband just how much she loved him.

They reached the door to their room, and she turned around to face him. He had a wicked grin on his face as he threw himself against her, slamming her back into the door. He'd already done so many times, but she couldn't get enough of the feeling. His hands

were instantly all over her body, and hers were roaming all over his. She reached back and turned the knob. When the door flew open, Ferox lifted her up and charged through the entry, kicking the door shut behind him.

He took her mouth with his and hurried over to the bed. He fell onto the mattress with her underneath him and started undulating his hips into hers.

Between kisses Raine whispered, "You're...so strong." She was surprised at his roughness, especially seeing how weak he'd been downstairs, and considering that his wounds had only begun healing.

"I've missed you, my love. Gods, it's been too long."

Raine inched her face from his and gave him a breathless giggle. "It's always too long when we've been apart, my love." They normally made love multiple times a day, but with him being injured, they hadn't been able to do so. It felt like a lifetime since she'd made love to her vampire, though it had really only been a day.

She rolled them over and pinned him to the bed. He let her hold his wrists together with one of her hands, and she undid his pants. Instead of pulling them right off, she reached into the opening and gripped his sac. He growled and pulled himself up to her, kissing her mouth and continuing his praise down to her neck.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do this," he moaned against her skin. He reached his hand around the base of her neck so they were forced to look at each other.

As she sprung his erection from his pants, he let out a feral growl and struck her neck, slicing through her flesh with his razor sharp fangs.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Draven stalked the grounds of the mansion more pissed off than ever before. He was in such a foul mood that the clouds had rolled in of their own accord, creating a thick covering over the mansion grounds. Gods, if only he could control it that easily. Being the son of a Valkyrie definitely had its benefits, but Raine had never been able to teach how she controlled it herself.

One thought ran through his mind, over and over again. How the fuck was he going to get her back?

To go up against gods was certain suicide. Only a few Lore creatures had ever battled against a deity and won.

And what were his chances if he went against an entire temple of gods? Fucking. *Zero*.

But he didn't care about that. He was going to reach Ally if it was the last thing he ever did. Even if he never got to hold her again, he would make sure he made it to her and let her know how much she meant to him, how much he loved her.

He'd sensed how she felt as she told him that she was too good for him. She hadn't really felt that way, but it still didn't make it any easier to hear. He knew he wasn't good enough for her, but that didn't matter. They loved each other.

Now he had to figure out how to reach that temple. It was one thing trying to visit a temple that belonged to one pantheon, which was nearly impossible in and of itself, but trying to visit a temple that was made up of an alliance of different pantheons would be another thing altogether. Their security would be shit-tight. Besides, visiting the homes of the gods wasn't as easy as bouncing between realms. There were certain channels that had to be taken, and Draven had no clue what those channels were.

Fisting his hand, he punched an oak tree repeatedly. The tree shook angrily under his onslaught.

"Draven."

He looked over his shoulder and saw Raider leaning against another tree.

"Walk with me," Raider said.

Draven let out a slow breath, calming himself. He walked farther from the house, Raider falling into step beside him. Raider had always been something of a confidant, first for Ferox, and then

for Draven. As Ferox's cousin, they'd grown up extremely close, close enough to be brothers. So Raider had always been like an uncle to Draven and Ethan.

"What's going through that head of yours?" Raider asked.

"You know what's going on in there."

"Maybe." He shrugged. "But it will do you good to talk about it out loud."

"I need to get her back. I know I can't live without her. She's everything I've ever dreamed of. I just wish she was human again."

"No, you don't," Raider replied. "You wouldn't want Ally to be anything she isn't, and you looked at her like she was a goddess even before she became one."

He should have known that there was something more to her. But his dumb ass had only been focused on the intense feelings she provoked in him. The need to be with her, the need to claim her.

"How did you do it, Raid?"

"How did I do what?"

"How did you go on after what happened to Aunt Melinda and the kids?"

Raider continued to walk beside Draven, silent as he gathered his thoughts. "It's been hell, and it doesn't get better. What I'm about to tell you, I've never told another living soul, not even Ferox. And I'm only telling you because it's completely normal for a male to feel this way when he loses his mate."

Draven looked at him, waiting for him to explain.

"When I lost Melinda, I didn't think I could survive it. It was like my chest lay open, my heart pried from it. I didn't want to survive. Not without my mate and children."

"How did you then?"

Raider stopped walking, and when Draven stopped as well, he turned to face him. "I tried to kill myself. That day was so bad. First, there were the screams from Drök and Leelian's quarters, and then hearing what was going on in your room. I hadn't been able to sleep that day, so I'd taken the tunnels into the castle. I'd meant to protect all of you, but I'd been too late. By the time the shock wore off, I flashed through the tunnels to my home. After what I saw at the castle, I just needed to hold Melinda. But even

then, I hadn't been fast enough."

Raider's jaw clenched and he was silent for a while. Draven didn't want to interrupt the man. He'd never told him this part of the story. Draven could remember seeing the bodies of his aunt and little cousins, and they'd have been unidentifiable had they not been found in their home.

"Melinda was alive, but she could only let out a whisper. Our children were already dead, and what was left of their bodies was smoking. I had to help Melinda. Her skin was still burning, and she was letting out a constant whispering breath that I realized was her screaming. I carried her to the lake just down the hill. The sun had just set, so it wouldn't burn her anymore."

"What happened?" Draven asked, his voice sounding too loud for the quiet that surrounded them.

"She died on the way there. I wasn't sure exactly what I'd planned to do at the lake, I only knew I needed to get her away from the house. Away from our children. I think a part of me knew even before she died that she wouldn't make it, and that part wanted to put her out of her misery. I'd also made another decision on the way there, that if she did go that I would go with her. So I stepped into the lake."

Draven knew where this was headed. The lake near Castle Drök had been a salt lake, so any injured vampire stayed away. If a wound was minor, putting salt water to it would leave a scar. Have a fatal one, and the salt water would seal the deal.

"Her body sizzled as the water lapped around us," he continued. "When I was in past my waist, I brought my wrist to my mouth, and I opened my vein." Raider pulled back the sleeve of his coat, revealing the massive scar that ran across his left wrist. "I shredded it. I wanted to get my blood out of me as fast as I could, so I kept ripping at my wrist. I kept tugging at it until my veins broke free. I only stopped when I no longer had the strength to keep at it. I had already started feeling dizzy from the blood loss, so I dropped my hand into the water so I wouldn't heal.

"I'd done a pretty good job of it too. My wound was pretty bad, and my blood wasn't clotting in the water. I held onto Melinda with my right arm, praying to the gods that we could be together again. And then everything went black..."

Draven stood, blinking at his uncle and seeing the real pain

he'd gone through for the first time. "So you really planned to kill yourself." Drowning alone wouldn't have killed him, but salt water coupled with blood loss could definitely drain a vampire of his blood. And vampires weren't the only one salt water affected. It kept many other immortals from healing as well, so if Raider stuck an open wound into it, it'd been game over if it was submerged for too long.

Raider nodded. "But it didn't work, obviously. I started to welcome the blackness that I'd fallen into when something grabbed me. I still can't remember what it looked like, but it was like a dark angel pulled me from the water. When I woke up, Melinda's body was lying against me, and we were both in the grass at the edge of the lake. Her parents had just found us there and were screaming for help.

"So you see," Raider said. "I know how it feels to lose your mate, and I know how you're feeling right now. But you still have a chance to get her back."

"You're right." Draven nodded at him before turning back toward the mansion. Hurrying inside, he took the stairs two at a time as he rushed up the staircase. He reached his door and crossed his room before booting up the computer. Talking to Raider had given him an idea on how he could reach the temple, so he thought he'd give it a shot.

Logging into the Guardian's website, he immediately pulled up the chat room. No one was logged on at the moment, so he closed out of that and brought up his email. He typed in Demetrius' email address and started a new message.

*Hey man, it's Draven. I need your help. If you know how to reach Unitas, one of the temples of the gods, call or text my cell. Sooner the better, brother.*

He logged off of his computer and headed downstairs to the library. He hoped to the gods Demetrius read his email soon. He was going to find a way to the temple with or without his help.

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Ally was exhausted. She'd danced with so many men, there was no way in hell she could remember all of their names. She'd lost count of how many times she'd tripped or stepped on people's



toes. She'd even caused a mini domino episode when she'd rammed into another goddess. She had, in turn, sailed into a god who then fell into someone else, and so on.

Not even her clumsiness cared that she was supposed to be an elegant goddess.

She only felt relief when Delligr asked to dance with her again or when he got her over to a chair so she could eat and drink.

He was a godsend.

As if Delligr sensed she was too tired to continue dancing, he said, "You've had quite a night, young goddess. Would you like to go back to your quarters?"

Ally sighed. "Oh, would I." She looped her arm around his as he escorted her from the room. On their way out the deities they passed all bowed to her again. When was she ever going to get used to this bowing thing?

"What's up with Cassius and Crius?" They'd been so cocky all night, and both had seemed seriously shocked that she wasn't falling all over herself for them.

"You mean how conceited they are?"

Ally laughed. "Yes, no one else here seems nearly that bad."

Delligr led her from the room. "It's all just an act. They were born to a human woman and raised as humans. When they got older and stopped aging, I guess their mom finally told them that their father was a god. So from then on, they acted like they were better than everyone else, and since they are demigods, they're allowed to live here at the temple."

"Who is their father?"

Delligr shrugged. "No one knows, and they won't tell anyone. I don't think they know. Crius is the name of another god, but I doubt he is their father."

They continued walking down the hallway, arms looped together. They'd walked down multiple corridors before Ally had even noticed that the temple wasn't as bright as it had been earlier. "Oh. The candles aren't lit anymore," she said, disappointed.

Delligr chuckled. "Yes, I prefer when they are lit as well, but, since we live in a temple where we try to be equals amongst each other, we need to follow certain rules."

"How so?"

“Our servants light all the candles to symbolize our days, and they blow out many of them to symbolize our nights. Since the lighting outside Unitas is always the same, we came up with this way to create day and night instead of using our powers.”

“Why not use the sun and moon?”

“You know how outside the temple everything is just white fog? It’s because we try to keep everything equal among the deities. We’re only able to use our abilities within our own quarters.”

“Well, that’s dumb. You’re gods and goddesses. Why not make things as beautiful as possible?”

“I don’t know who decided that or why. It just keeps us all in check, I guess.”

Ally continued to walk, deep in thought. She had so many questions to ask, but she saw no reason to rush. She had all the time in the world now.

Despite herself, she sighed in relief when they reached her door.

“Ah, your quarters are near mine. I live only three doors down, just across the hallway.” He turned back to her after pointing in the direction of his door. His boyish smile came back to his face again. “I beg you to come to me if you need anything. *Anything* at all.” After a short moment of silence, he reached down and took her hand in his. “Can I see you again tomorrow, angel?”

Ally looked up at Delligr and felt herself blush. “I’d love to see you tomorrow.” Though she knew she didn’t want to see him for the same reasons he wanted to see her. She didn’t feel anything romantic toward him. She was attracted to him, but as far as she was concerned there was nothing more than a possible friendship in their future.

A smile spread across his face, he looked so hopeful that things would work out between them. “Would you accompany me to morning repast?”

Ally found herself grinning back at him. When she nodded, he stepped in close to her. Delligr started dipping his head down toward hers. Her eyes widened as she stared at his lips. She wasn’t ready for this, but his lips were already heading for hers.

He stopped before their lips touched. He shook his head and stepped back. Instead of doing what he’d wanted, he took her

hand again and kissed it as he bowed. "Sweet dreams, my sweet Ally." He turned and walked toward his door.

She stood with her back against her door as she watched Delligr walk away. Her breathing was heavy, and her whole body shook. She didn't know what she would have done had he actually kissed her.

Delligr looked back at her again before he opened his door. The grin on his face was purely sexual. He wanted her.

Ally waved at him before she turned around to open her door, and once she closed herself inside her room, she smacked herself on the forehead. Even though she didn't want him that way, somehow she still felt like a ho.

If she couldn't find a way home, and she were truly forced to remain in Unitas, then she couldn't be with Draven. Although she didn't think she'd ever love someone as much as she loved him, she thought that maybe she could arrange a union of friendship with Delligr. Hell, he'd been her savior since she'd gotten here. He was sweet, and she couldn't deny that his body was a work of art. Draven's body was perfect, and she'd thought it impossible to ever see its match, but Delligr's body was a close second.

"What did you think of the young Delligr?"

Ally looked over to see Gersemi lying on her chaise.

"He's nice."

"He's more than nice. I saw the way he looked at you."

*Yeah, so did I.*

"Can you see anything happening between the two of you?"

Ally rubbed the back of her neck. "Listen, I'm not looking for anything like that. Remember Draven? *I love him.*"

"Oh, phooey." Gersemi sat up on the chaise.

"I do have other questions, though."

That seemed to please her mother, and she leaned back again. "Go ahead, sweetheart."

"What pantheon are you from?"

"I'm Vanir, of the Norse gods."

"So, why did you leave Vanaheimr?"

Gersemi chewed on her lip before answering. "I did it to get away from Vili, but he followed me here. My sister Hnoss still

lives there, and I've often thought of visiting her."

"Why did you have to run away from my dad?"

Gersemi sighed. "Vili and Vé are both Aesir, and they frequently visited from Asgard. Vili showed favor for both Hnoss and me, but we weren't interested in him. Over time, his infatuation leaned toward me. The more he pursued, the more I rejected."

Ally sat down on her bed, curling her legs under her as best as she could with the dress being in the way. Why would her mother have rejected her father? Hadn't she loved him?

"One day, Vili showed up at our home and demanded that I marry him. Of course, I refused. Vili would have none of that, so when I refused him a final time, he gave me an ultimatum. He had his servants bring my father into my home with a sword against his throat. Vili said that either I had to marry him, or he would see my father dead." Gersemi shifted, bending her legs under her, similar to Ally's own position. "You see, my father had an eye for the ladies, and Vili had found out that he was having an affair with Odin's wife, Frigg. If Odin ever found out about it, he would have my father's head. So instead of letting my father die, I accepted his offer."

"You married him even though you didn't love him?" Ally asked.

"To save my father. Not that it did any good. I saved his life but he just skipped out the next day, and I haven't heard from him since. I've thought about returning to Vanaheimr, but I just can't go back under Odin's rule."

Ally froze at the name. Odin was the king of not only the Valkyrie, but also of all the Norse gods. Her mother was in hiding because of Draven's grandfather. A chill spread over her body, goose bumps covering her skin.

"Well, I'm tired, my dear. I think I'll head off to my quarters. You sleep well, daughter."

Ally waited until her mother left before she walked into her bathroom and took off her dress. She hung it back on a hanger and slid on some pajamas. She then went over to her vanity and started undoing the delicate braids that ran around the crown of her head.

She was so tired after the ball, and as much as she enjoyed everyone's company, she was glad to be alone for a bit. As she

started turning down her sheets, she caught sight of one of the servants standing in the doorway.

The young woman quickly bowed before approaching Ally. Her face was flushed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think you'd be in here—"

"Don't worry about it."

She curtsied. "Would you like some tea, mistress?"

"Oh, no, thank you. Not a tea person." Ally shrugged.

The servant nodded and set the tray down on a table. "I hope you enjoyed your evening."

"Oh. Thank you, I did." Ally smiled. "I'm sorry I forgot to ask earlier, but what is your name?"

The woman blushed and looked down. "My name isn't important, mistress."

"It's important to me. You've been so kind since I arrived."

The woman kept her eyes down. "My name is Julie."

"Well, thank you, Julie."

"I'll wake you for morning repast, my lady." She curtsied once more and left the room.

Ally crawled up into the bed and sank down into her covers. She had so much to think about. She wished Draven were with her. Hell, if she were making wishes, she wished she were back in the mansion with him. Even though it was lovely here, she'd much rather be with Draven. No matter where it was. She wondered if there was a way to get out of this situation so she could be with him again.

But what if she couldn't?

*No.* She refused to think that way. She would find a way to be with him.

Her mind circled over and over again, coming up with ways to get home. Tomorrow, she'd ask Dellinger if there was a library or a place she could go to read up on the temple and the deities who resided here. One way or another, she'd find a way out of here.

But again, her mind circled back to that troubling question. What if she couldn't get back to Draven? If that were the case, should she just be with Dellinger here? She couldn't imagine ever loving anyone the way she did Draven, but Dellinger seemed like a stand-up guy, and he really was gorgeous. Not that that meant

anything when it came to choosing someone to spend one's life with, but all things considered looks really could be a bonus.

In no time, Ally's lack of energy won out. Instead of continuing to stress over men, she drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Ally came awake with a start when she heard a sound in her room. She sat up quickly and looked around, but with the shades drawn over her windows, blackness engulfed the room. She could still see well enough though with Draven's blood running through her.

Random sounds continued throughout the room, as if someone were there with her. She immediately felt that she was being played with. Was someone trying to scare her?

Her heart started beating rapidly, and she scurried out of bed. As soon as her feet hit the floor she was thrown onto her back on the mattress.

She started to panic until she looked up at the man on top of her.

Draven.

He quickly returned her gaze before he bent and kissed her. Oh, the kiss was...

Different.

Normally, Draven was passionate. His touch was pure, dark seduction, and while he was all hard muscle and strength, he was gentle and giving with her. This kiss wasn't right.

Ally pulled away from the kiss and looked into his eyes. They weren't glowing as they always did when Draven kissed her.

"I knew you wanted to be with me," he said. "Master Dellinger wants you badly, but I've seen how you look at me. You *crave* me."

*Oh, God! No humming feeling, no glowing eyes.* And this was no dream.

"Theo?"

"Yes. You didn't come to my room so I have come to you. I've figured out what you like about your man so much." He smiled at her again, twin fangs filling in behind his lips. He rolled on top of her and grabbed her breast as he bent down and nipped at the other one through her shirt.

"Get off of me!" Ally yelled through clenched teeth. She started pushing him off of her, and she felt like she was gaining some ground until he bit her.

The pain hit her immediately, and she sucked in a breath

and screamed. She continued to push at him, but he was able to move his body to keep her pinned underneath him. When she finally had enough room, she brought her knee up quickly and made contact with his groin. He yelled out in pain and shot off the bed, cursing at her before he started laughing.

“I didn’t even want you that way, though it would have made things easier. I got what I came for anyway.”

Ally heard her door slam into the wall as Delligr crashed through it. He quickly looked at her and then focused his attention on Theo. “Crius, what the *fuck* are you doing in here?”

*Crius?* She looked over at Theo. He had changed his appearance, and now he looked like one of the demigods Ally had danced with at the ball. “Delligr, that’s not Crius, that’s—”

Other men ran into the room as Delligr flew at Theo. Right before Delligr’s fist made contact with his face, Theo disappeared. His fist slammed into the floor instead.

Theo had just traced out of her room. Ally’s gaze dodged all around, looking for him in case he appeared anywhere. She remembered Draven explaining it to her, and that certain races were able to do that. It kind of reminded her of the black-robed being at Damion’s manor, though black smoke had remained after his disappearance.

She hoped Theo wasn’t in her room anymore. She certainly hoped he couldn’t turn himself invisible.

Ally started shaking at that thought. She would never know when he was near, never know if he was following her. When she looked down at the bed, she caught sight of the blood staining her shirt.

That bastard *bit* me.

“Gods, Ally, you’re hurt.” Delligr lunged for her and pulled her into his arms.

Her tears soaked his shirt, and she was shaking from what had just happened. She’d thought he was going to rape her, though when she’d fought him off he’d basically said that he’d only wanted her blood. But why? And how could someone play on her emotions like that? She loved Draven dearly, and Theo had taken advantage of that.

Ally vaguely heard Delligr speak. She was so consumed by her own thoughts the rumble in his chest was all she was truly



aware of. Once the other gods left, Delligr held her even tighter and kissed her forehead.

“It was Theo,” she whispered. “He makes himself look like Draven. I didn’t realize until it was too late. I thought maybe I was dreaming of him, but it wasn’t a dream. And it wasn’t him.” Ally knew she was babbling, but she couldn’t stop.

“Theo?” Delligr pulled back and looked down into Ally’s eyes.

“He gave me a gift earlier, a key to his room. And then at the ball he waited until I was alone to tell me he wanted to...be with me. But it didn’t feel right. It felt like he was trying to force that feeling.”

Anger crossed Delligr’s face, but he quickly pushed it away to focus on her. He wiped tears from Ally’s cheeks. “You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I know. If he can disappear like that, who knows where he might be. He could be watching us now.” A new wave of unease crept through Ally’s body. She’d managed to scare herself again.

Her pain from the bite had already ebbed, probably because Draven’s blood still ran in her veins, but with every thought about Theo, new fears coursed through her body.

Delligr touched her cheek. “Angel, stay in my room with me. You’ll be safer there.”

A part of her really wanted to. She felt safe with him and knew Theo wouldn’t come for her if Delligr were near. But sleeping in the same room as him was a big step on the trust scale, especially knowing how he felt about her.

Ally looked up into his eyes, trying to decide what to do. Finally, she nodded.

Delligr beamed at her and pulled her into another tight embrace. She appreciated how safe she felt with him. He was steady, he was strong, and he was gorgeous. How could she turn his kind offer down?

She wasn’t sure how long they stood there after she agreed, but eventually Delligr stepped back and led her from her room. When they stepped out into the hall, many of the gods who had just been in her room were waiting there.

“She’s staying with me until we can sort out this mess. We need to put the temple on alert to keep an eye out for the servant

Theo.”

All of the men stared at them in shock, and finally one of them stepped forward. “Goddess Alaina, you don’t have to stay with him. We have plenty of rooms where you can stay.”

Ally shook her head. “I don’t think Theo will attack me again as long as I am with another man, and I know Delligr better than anyone else here at the temple.”

“We understand. You haven’t ascended yet and need someone to protect you.”

Okay, so did everyone know she hadn’t ascended as a goddess yet? That worried her.

“She’ll stay with me for now. If she ever wants to be with someone else, I vow I will leave her be,” Delligr said. He took Ally’s hand, led her to his room, and shut the door.

“I’m sure you’re exhausted. It’s been a long night. Here, you take my bed and I’ll take the couch.” He removed his shirt and lay down on the couch as Ally crawled up into his bed and pulled the sheets over her.

She stared at the tall ceiling above. “They know I’m not a goddess yet.”

“I know,” he replied. “I’m surprised they’re treating you with such respect. Without ascending, no one knows if you really will become a goddess or not.”

Ally stayed silent as she thought about that. No one had mentioned the possibility of her not becoming one. What if they were wrong? What if she really wasn’t a goddess? What would happen to her?

“Deep down they know you’ll ascend, but no one really knows what, or even how strong, your affinities will be.”

“What do you mean?”

Delligr shifted on the couch so he could look at her. “Remember how I told you that deities usually have their affinities from birth, or from childhood? I think there are just some gods that aren’t sure what to make of you yet. Your mother is one of the most highly respected deities within the temple, and right now she’s the reason none of them are arguing over your right to be here.” He laid his head back down. “But don’t worry, angel. I’m here to fight for you as well. I know you’re something special.”

Ally’s heart melted for him a little. How could he have so

much faith in her? He really was a true friend. She looked over at the couch he was lying on. She could see the top of his head on one end and his legs dangling off the other.

“Oh jeez, you don’t have to sleep on that uncomfortable looking couch, Dellinger. You don’t even fit on it. If anyone should sleep on it, it should be me.”

He cocked his head up over the back of the couch again. “I’m not about to let you take the couch. I’m fine.” The lights overhead dimmed to darkness. “Besides, I won’t sleep. That way I’ll know if Theo makes another attempt.”

Silence stretched between them as Ally settled herself on the bed. “Dellinger?” she said into the darkness. “Thanks for letting me stay with you.”

“Anytime you need anything, angel, you know I’m here.”

She closed her eyes and rolled over onto her stomach before falling asleep.

She dreamt again of watching Draven sleep in a large bed surrounded by castle walls.

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“Gods damn it! Her emotions are everywhere. One minute I feel fear, then pain. Then I feel comfort and...and *lust*. I can’t fucking *stand* it!” Draven growled. He paced back and forth as his brothers searched through every book in the mansion, hoping to find a way to one of the temples of the gods. He hoped they would find a way to the right one.

He had to reach Unitas.

Draven had been searching for hours and had to take a break from the books. He’d gotten a headache from sensing Ally’s varying emotions. A moment of pure terror reached him, and he knew it had come from her. He had grown so angry at the time because he wasn’t there to protect his female.

And what if he could never reach her?

A growl escaped his chest, and the Guardians moved out of his way when he exploded in rage. A bonded male could go nuts when his mate was away from him, and even though Ally and Draven weren’t technically mated, everyone around him could see that they were bound together.

He was so high-strung that a thunderstorm started up outside the mansion, and he proceeded to rip the pool table apart.

The damned thing was in shreds now.

When Draven had sensed lust, he'd started punching the wall over and over until his knuckles bled. Lightning struck outside each time his fist made contact with the wall, which had crumbled to pieces and fallen to the floor. Thank the gods his brothers were there to help him with this research shit. He'd never reach her without their help because he couldn't stay still long enough anymore.

Why was Ally feeling lust? Had she found another male? If so, he was a god, no doubt. Had she already forgotten about him?

"I'm sure she's thinking of you," Raider said.

Draven narrowed his eyes. Raider had an ability to read other's thoughts and, at times, change their mood. No one knew how he'd gotten the ability, though Raider suspected that it came from his mother. "Stop getting into my mind, Raid."

"Hey, I can't help it. You're transmitting really loud tonight, and unless you want to go for another walk, I'm stuck listening in. Besides, I know she loves you. She's a loud transmitter, too."

"Yeah, and not just in her head." Blaze laughed.

The *fuck you* went unsaid as Draven glared at them in clear annoyance, but then he stopped and stared at Raider.

"You can hear *her* mind?"

"Not right now," Raid replied. "But when she was here, it was clear she adores you."

"I assume the 'she' you're referring to is the reason you emailed me?"

Draven and the other Guardians turned around to see Demetrius standing in the doorway with his arms folded. He leaned against the doorjamb, his wings tucked tightly behind his back.

"Fuck, am I glad to see you, Demi." Draven approached him. "If there's anything you know about reaching the temples of the gods, I need help ASAP."

Once the two men sat down, Draven started feeling the slight tingle as Raider rummaged through his head. He'd forced Draven to calm down. Normally he hated when Raider jumped into his head, but tonight he was thankful for his uncle's ability to calm him down.

“Is it the same female who experienced the ripple?”

“Yeah,” Draven replied.

Demetrius popped an eyebrow and rubbed his chin with his fingers, all the while listening to Draven explain everything that had happened since he'd met Ally. Once Draven had given the Cliffs Notes version of the situation, Demetrius leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “Don't get your hopes up too high, but I think I know how you can reach her.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Ally woke up and immediately yawned, the influx of oxygen rousing her from sleep. She was still on her stomach and didn't want to move from this very comfortable position. She felt like she'd slept a million years she was so rested.

"Good morning, my little angel," Dellinger said. He was sitting on the bed, watching her with a smile on his face. "Do you know you talk in your sleep?"

Her jaw dropped, but she quickly shut her mouth again. "No, I don't," she argued. Damn it, her friends had always teased her about that, but she'd never truly believed them.

"You do," he assured her. The friendly smile he'd been giving her since she woke up slowly vanished. "You dreamt of him last night. Draven."

"Uh, yes."

"You love him."

"Yes."

"He is not a god, Ally," Dellinger said, sidling closer to her on the bed. "He wouldn't make a good match for you. You're too special to mate with anyone less than a god."

She sat up slowly, careful not to let her gaze leave Dellinger's pained one. "What he *isn't* doesn't matter to me. I love him for who he *is*."

"Tell me about him. What makes him so special to you?"

Ally pictured her dark warrior, a smile curving her lips. "He's handsome and strong, and he fights to keep everyone safe from the evils of the world. He saved my life."

"Is that why you love him? Because he saved you?"

"No," she answered honestly. "His saving me is how we met, and it's how I knew I could trust him, but there's something more between us. It's like we're connected somehow. I've dreamt of him my entire life, long before I ever saw his face. It's like I've known him forever."

Dellinger reached over and gripped her hand, even as his eyes burrowed into hers. "What does he have that I don't?"

Ally played the part of a guppy for a few minutes, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly as she was unsure of how to tell him that she believed she was fated to be with Draven. She

didn't get the chance to respond because Dellinger bent over and pressed his lips to hers.

She pulled away after a few seconds, her cheeks flaming with the blush that had spread across her face. "Dellinger, I...It's not that he has something you don't. It's just that I love him."

"But he's not good for you," Dellinger whispered. "I would be good for you. We're both gods, and I could keep you safe." He looked down then, swirling his thumb over her hand. "I just ask that you give me a chance, angel. That's all I'm asking."

A quick knock sounded at the door before a soft voice spoke through it. "Excuse me, mistress, but it's time to get you ready for morning repast."

"Come in," Dellinger said.

Ally jumped and rolled away from Dellinger when Julie entered the room. "Julie! Oh, hi."

Julie blushed and bowed. Clearly she had the wrong idea about what was going on before she entered. Yes. Julie had the wrong idea. Nothing had happened. Right?

"Carla and I have brought your things since your room is unsafe at present. We've brought a selection of gowns along with your hair and makeup items."

"Thank you, Julie." Ally smiled at her and then turned her attention to Dellinger. "Do you mind if I use your bathing chamber to get ready?" Ally smiled at the term. Why did that make a bathroom sound so formal?

"Of course. Take all the time you need. I don't really need to shower anyway. Unless, of course, you'd allow me to join you."

She laughed nervously and crawled around him to hop out of bed. "You know, you really should shower. It's pretty gross if you don't."

Dellinger laughed. "It's really more of a luxury for deities, not a necessity." He stood up in front of her and in a heartbeat his clothes had changed from the loose pants he'd worn to sleep in to a nice black suit, and then he was back in his pajama pants.

Ally gawked at him, which made Dellinger laugh even more. "How did you do that?"

"You just think about what you want to wear, and *poof*, you're wearing it. Not everyone can do it, but most of the deities I know of can."

That. Would. Be. So. Cool.

Ally focused all her concentration on a pair of clothes she'd had back in her own world, but nothing happened. Frustrated, she went into the bathroom as Julie and Carla carried all of her things into the room. Once the bath water was turned on, Ally shut the bathroom door, undressed, and slid into the warm water, thinking of the feel of Dellinger's lips on hers and what it meant for their friendship.

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"Alright, I think I have everything you'll need to summon an Angelos for passage to Unitas. If they find you worthy, you will be granted access to the temple. From there you only need to find her." Demetrius was in Draven's room placing candles in a circular pattern where Draven was going to perform the ritual. "Remember, you need to be sure to claim that you are a grandson of Odin, as you may have better luck reaching Unitas that way."

Draven came out of his bathroom wearing the white satin robe Demetrius had acquired specifically for his summons. "Right, I'll remember."

"The Angelos are touchy and extremely protective of the gods' realms. If they don't feel you are worthy, then they'll likely kill you. Some of them would just as easily transport you to the afterlife rather than take you where you want to go. I've personally never had to do this, so I'm not exactly sure of what type of payment they'll demand. You'll have to be ready for anything. Which means you should make sure to hold on to those." He gestured to the crystal ceremonial knife and chalice in the middle of the candle circle.

"I'm ready," Draven said. "Let's do this."

Demetrius shook his head, smiling at Draven. He'd always liked the vampire prince and hoped nothing bad would happen to him on this excursion. "Good luck, brother." He turned off the lights and left Draven alone to perform the ritual.

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Draven stepped into the middle of the circle and lit the candles that surrounded him. After all the candles were lit, he lowered the robe's hood and grabbed the ceremonial items before he closed his eyes. Bowing his head, he whispered an incantation Demetrius had written up, hoping he was calling upon the right



beings. He repeated it three times before he felt a presence in the room.

“Who ssssummonssss the Angelossss?” An eerie, whispering voice echoed throughout the room. The drawing out of the “s” sounds made it even harder for Draven to pinpoint where the voice was coming from.

“I do,” Draven replied. He kept his head bowed and his eyes shut as he addressed the being, just as Demetrius had instructed him to do.

“And who are you to disssturb the Angelossss?” it asked.

“I am Draven, grandson of the god Odin.”

“Ahhhh, you are a Bers—”

“No. I am Valkyrie.”

“There are no male Valkyrie. What you ssssspeak of issss imposssssible.”

“I am part Valkyrie, the son of Raine, demigoddess of Valhalla.”

Draven could feel the being circling around the room, though he couldn't hear footsteps. Rather he felt as though it was floating around him.

“Ah yesss, I have heard of the Valkyrie Raine. She wassssss a great warrioressssss. I do recall that ssshe isss the only Valkyrie to have born children. You may gazzzzze upon me, warrior.”

Draven opened his eyes to find that the figure was indeed floating before him. The Angelos was nothing like what he had expected. He'd always pictured a beautiful angel to escort souls to and from the heavens. This being before him was heavily robed and appeared to have a very slight frame. The robe concealed everything but the ethereal glow from its eyes. It was as if no one were allowed to see any part of it. Even its hands and feet were covered by the robe.

Draven looked around, finding that he was no longer in his room. His candles and furniture were no longer in sight. Instead he floated in black nothingness. The Angelos floated before him in this void.

“My mother is still a great warrioress. I am claiming both Raine and the Norse god Odin as my ancestors so I may request transport to the Temple Unitas.”

“You undersssstand that I mussst verify your heritage before granting ssssuch passssage?”

“I understand, Angelos. What would you ask of me?”

The being started floating around him again, watching him, studying him from every angle, almost as though it couldn't decide what form of payment it wanted. “Firssst, you mussst offer a blood sssacrificce.... Sssso I can tassste your blood and check your bloodline.”

“Yes, of course.”

The being was clearly annoyed at his hastiness. “That isss not my payment, young warrior.”

Draven sensed he was losing this battle, and he needed to do whatever he could to get to the temple. “I would give whatever you request, Angelos, but understand that I do not wish to harm anyone during my visit to the temple. I am a Guardian under the leadership of Demetrius. I mean only to protect.”

Now the being paused, seeming to be momentarily shocked. “Demetriusss?”

“Yes, he leads—”

“I know who Demetriusss isss, Guardian! What busssinessss do you have at Unitasss?”

“I am in love with someone who is there, a goddess who has just been taken to the temple. I am requesting passage so that I can see if she returns my love enough to return to this realm.”

“A noble causssse that one isss, Guardian. Love isss the only worthy reassssson for a requeusst ssssuch assss thisss.”

“Yes. If it would not offend, I would ask what you request as your payment?”

“For now, we will leave it that you owe me. You sssshall grant me anything I wisssh at the time I wisssh it.”

“What if it is something I can't provide?”

“Anything I requeusst of you will be within your power.”

“Then I agree. We have a deal.” He'd do anything to reach Ally.

“You may be too eager for your own good, young warrior.” It laughed. “I sssshall call upon you when I wisssh to retrieve my payment. Now, I mussst tassste of your blood to verify your lineage. If you are who you ssssay you are, then I will transsport

you to the temple. But know thissss, young warrior. If you don't fulfill your end of our agreement, I sssshall take the life of one you hold dear."

Draven brought the ceremonial knife it to his wrist. He slashed his flesh and let the blood spill into the crystal chalice. Once it was filled, he held the goblet out to the Angelos.

It took the goblet gently in its hands and tipped it to its lips. It threw its head back and swallowed Draven's blood, and then he saw its mouth for the first time as it formed into a smile.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

“Wow. You. Are. Exquisite. I know I keep saying that, but...it’s the only word I can think of to describe you.” Delligr stepped close to Ally and kissed the back of her hand. “And even *that* doesn’t do you justice.”

She laughed as Delligr stepped around her and headed for the bathroom.

“I’ll be out in a few. Time for a little luxury.” He winked and shut the bathroom door.

Ally walked over to the couch and sat down. She was grateful she had a few minutes to think about the whole Draven-Delligr situation. Her bath hadn’t been nearly long enough to think. Julie and Carla had yanked her out and started primping her for the evening long before she was ready.

On one hand, she was in love with Draven. She’d had an instant connection with him. She could even sense his emotions and dream his dreams, which was completely foreign to her. That had to mean they were meant for each other, didn’t it? He’d protected her from his psychopathic uncle and killed one of the men who murdered her family. Oh, and not to mention they were sexually compatible...

Unbelievably, mind-blowingly compatible.

On the other hand, Ally lived here now and Delligr had shown her nothing but kindness. He was her protector here at Unitas, and she felt a connection with him as well. Also, she hadn’t had time to ask about a library yet to research how to get back home, and she still had no way of knowing if she’d ever find anything there or not.

She was so comfortable with both men that it had felt like she’d known them all her life.

However, she didn’t feel that same spark with Delligr. He wasn’t Draven. That had to mean something too, right?

She’d told Draven she would marry him, and she still wanted to. But what could she do? Gersemi had told her she had to remain in Unitas and never see or hear from her Earth family and friends again.

No. That’s just wrong. If she was a goddess, even though she hadn’t ascended yet, then she could make her own decisions.

Yeah. She would tell her mother that she was leaving, and she'd just have to deal with it. Ally was certain she could come back and visit anytime she wanted, so it wasn't like they would lose touch.

The only downside about this decision? It was going to break Dellinger's heart, and she really did care about him. He'd become a big part of her life since she moved to the temple. She didn't want to lose his friendship.

She started stewing over how she would break the news to Dellinger. She'd tell him before she even told Gersemi about her plans to move back home.

"What's wrong, angel?" he asked from the doorway. His eyebrows were drawn low over his eyes as he leaned against the doorjamb.

Wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist, Ally watched as water dripped from his hair and sluiced down his hard chest.

Why did he have to be so damned handsome? Thank God she didn't have any feelings for him because that would have made giving into her lusty desires far too easy.

She met his gaze and plastered a smile on her face. "Nothing's wrong. Just hungry," she lied. Jeez, how long had she been sitting there thinking? It hadn't felt like long enough for him to shower.

He walked over to her and pulled her from the couch. "Well, in that case, Lady Alaina," he said as he bowed. "Would you allow me to escort you to morning repast?"

Ally laughed and bowed. "Yes, Dellinger. I would be delighted to join you. Oh, once you're dressed, of course."

He smiled and bent to kiss her. She shifted so that his lips only touched her cheek, but as she did so one of her heels broke and she fell.

Dellinger caught her and held her to him for a second. "You are so clumsy, young goddess. Beautiful, and wonderful, and smart. But definitely clumsy." He laughed and kissed her on the forehead, and then he disappeared into the bathroom to dress.

This was going to be hard.

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Draven threw his hands over his eyes at the onslaught of

light, thinking he might be in direct sunlight. Slowly, he lowered his hands and opened his eyes to find that he was surrounded by white fog. Somehow it was bright in the area, but he couldn't sense where the light came from.

He was still kneeling in the same position he'd been in when speaking with the Angelos, so he rose to his feet. Slowly, he walked forward, although he didn't know where he was going. Honestly, he wasn't positive he was even in the right place, but he knew his Ally had been there at one point. An incredibly strong version of her scent assaulted his nose.

The scent brought a smile to his face.

As he continued to walk through never-ending fog, he finally spotted something solid. He approached a water fountain surrounded by three golden benches.

So far everything here had appeared white, and those benches presented the first splash of color he'd seen. The fountain area was beautiful. Serene. The tranquil sight of it made him think of Ally, who could calm him with a touch, a quirk of a smile, or hell, even just a glance from her eyes.

Gods, how he ached to reach her. He had to see her, and he couldn't wait any longer.

"What are you doing out here?"

Draven reeled around and saw a tall woman carrying baskets of berries. A servant, by the looks of her, and thank the gods she wasn't devoid of color like her surroundings.

"Help me in with this. Morning repast has already begun," she said.

Draven opened his mouth to tell her that she was mistaken, but on second thought, he decided not to complain. Apparently this woman thought he was one of the servants, and maybe it wasn't the best way to get into the temple, but he sure as shit wasn't about to bitch about it since she was about to lead him right where he wanted to be.

He walked over to her and grabbed one of the baskets before following her into the temple, which he hadn't seen until she arrived. He continued to follow her through large hallways until they reached what looked like a dining hall. There were gods and goddesses everywhere, with servants scurrying about with food and drink. As Draven looked around, he also saw what looked

like angels and warriors about as well. He followed the woman over to a table where she set her basket down. Just as he was about to place his basket next to hers, she sent him over to a different table to place it there.

“God Delligr and goddess Alaina,” said a loud, booming voice. Just as the announcer said that, everyone turned to them and bowed.

Draven stared at the two as they entered the room and walked toward one of the tables. Anger flared inside him when he saw Ally’s arm looped around the god’s.

Delligr was his name, if he heard the announcer correctly. Fuck if he wasn’t a good looking enough to be a god. *Pretty* was a more appropriate word.

The bastard.

Draven continued to watch in contempt as Ally and Delligr made their way past most of the other deities. And he knew, god or no god, he could and would kick *Pretty’s* ass if it came down to it.

He’d rip the fucker’s throat out if he had to.

*She. Is. Mine.*

Was he the reason for the feelings of fear? Or for the lust and arousal?

Either way he was a dead fucker.

Draven tracked their movement around the room. He watched as Ally smiled at the man often, and *he* was constantly smiling at her.

He looked so damned proud to have her on his arm.

Draven had to hold back a growl as his thoughts playing havoc in his mind. He knew he needed to get to her and talk to her. Fuck, he needed to hold her and kiss her.

And his Instinct demanded that he claim her again.

*Mine.*

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Ally walked through the crowded room on Dellingr's arm. Every single time she looked over at him her heart ached. He always looked and acted adoringly when next to her. How was she going to break it to him that she couldn't stay? And how was she going to get him to help her find a way home?

She smiled back at him despite the ache in her heart. For the first time since she'd gotten to Unitas, she felt a rush of cold air run through her, and she shivered from the chill. The rest of her time spent here she hadn't felt any change in temperature, as if it was always a nice seventy degrees in the temple.

Dellingr led her to some empty seats and pulled her chair out for her. After she sat, he scooted her chair in and placed his hands on her shoulders. She felt the heat of his hands on her skin, but at the same instant she felt another surge of cold run through the room.

Dellingr took a seat just as some other gods she'd met last night came over. It still felt strange to her that everyone wanted to know every little detail about her life.

Each of the men was attentive to her, and they made sure the servants served her food first and always called a servant over if she needed anything. They even did so if she didn't.

Dellingr amazed her with his ability to sense when someone asked a question she didn't want to answer, and he seemed to always have another distraction at the ready.

"Dellingr, could you take me on a tour of the temple? It'd be nice to know my way around since I live here now." Hopefully she could find a library that way, and she needed to tell him her plans to leave.

He took her hands in his. "I will always be happy to escort you, my little angel."

Another cold draft. *What the hell?*

She looked around to see if anyone else was responding to the chill in the air. "Dellingr, does it feel cold in here?"

"No. It's always perfect here at the temple."

She shivered again, and he rubbed his hands up and down her arms. "You *are* cold."

"Yeah, I've been cold since we got in here."



“I’ll go find one of your servants and have them fetch something for you.” He slid a hand back down to hers and drew it to his lips. Once he kissed the back of her hand, he bowed. “I’ll be back momentarily, my little goddess.” He turned and walked away.

“I *don’t* like the way he looks at you. And I sure as shit could do without all the touching.”

Ally pivoted around to find Draven standing near the wall. Or Theo, rather.

The jerk.

Pure hatred rolled out of her. “You have some nerve showing up here after what you did to me. How could you *bite me*, you jackass?”

He approached her. “Don’t even pretend you didn’t enjoy it. You know, I thought you might miss me, but it seems you’ve found someone else. How long did that take you? A few hours? A few minutes?” He snorted. “You work fast.”

She narrowed her eyes and practically hissed at him. “I would *never* miss you. How could I love someone like you? Someone who plays on my emotions, someone who tried to *force himself on me*? My life and who I love is certainly none of your business.”

His eyes glowed as he his gaze bore into hers.

She’d just pissed him off.

He stalked toward her and panicked tears began falling down her cheeks as she backed away from him. Her back hit the wall, but still he prowled toward her. He placed his hands on the wall, on each side of her head, creating a cage around her body. “I thought you loved me, Ally.”

There was pain in his eyes. This psychopath really believed she loved him?

Ally tried to scramble away from him as he lowered his face toward hers.

Just before their lips touched, Dellinger plowed into him and threw him to the ground. Both men’s arms and legs started flailing, grunts and growls escaped them as they duked it out. When other gods ran over to help Dellinger, a servant was sent away to get restraints.

Ally slid down the wall until her butt hit the floor. She didn’t want anyone hurt on her behalf, but she hated that bastard

for toying with her feelings.

Theo was winning the brawl, and he'd pinned Dellinger down to the ground with a ferocious growl and was ready to snap his neck just as two other gods dove in and pulled him off. One of the servants rushed into the room, carrying cuffs and chains.

It took three of them to hold Theo down before they had him shackled.

"Those are reinforced so even you can't trace your way out of them," Dellinger said through ragged breaths. "Throw him in the dungeon and make sure someone monitors him."

Dellinger wiped away some blood that was on his face. He crawled over and scooped Ally up in his arms. He held her to his chest as his ragged breathing heaved in and out of his chest. "It's alright, angel. I promise he won't be able to harass you again. I'll see to it myself."

Theo roared in anger, and Ally turned to watch as four gods tried to keep him under control. With his sheer strength and raw hatred, he was making it difficult for them to haul him out of the room.

He made eye contact with her as he fought with the gods, the few times he was free of them he reached out for her. The pain in his eyes made her heart break all over again as she thought of the real Draven. Oh, how she only wished Theo didn't look so much like him.

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The dungeon was actually nice, as far as dungeons went.

Draven had never been held captive himself, but he had rescued others from similar situations. At least it was clean here. Score one for the gods when it came to comfy captivity.

Honestly, he'd been surprised he'd made it so far into the temple before being caught, but what happened when he'd approached Ally hadn't made any sense. She'd looked at him with pure hatred. He'd also felt fear in her, as if she believed he would hurt her.

It just didn't make sense.

One thing was clear though. His Ally had changed since she'd come here. Maybe godhood had gone to her head, or maybe they'd brainwashed her. Either way, he wasn't doing any good being held up in the damned prison.

He tried tirelessly to contact the Angelos who'd transported him here, continuously chanting the same summons he'd used when he'd first called her to him, all to no avail.

The gods who were keeping an eye on him definitely thought he was a crack case. Every time he tried to summon the Angelos they looked at him like he should be in the nut house instead of the dungeon. No matter though, as he didn't really give a shit what any of these gods thought of him. He only cared about Ally.

Draven kept his eyes closed and tried to summon the Angelos again.

"How dare you attack my future wife?"

Draven didn't even need to open his eyes to know who it was.

*Oh great... it's pretty boy.*

"Actually, she's mine. She accepted my proposal to be my bride only days ago," Draven said.

"Riiight. Let's cut the shit. You know she's above your station."

*Fuck. Don't I know it?* If she still loved him, then it hardly mattered as long as he could get her out of there.

Draven shrugged and didn't say anything, but he did finally open his eyes and glare at Dellinger.

"You're only making my job easier. After what you pulled last night, she slept in *my* bed so I could protect her from *you*," Dellinger added.

"And exactly what did I do?"

His jaw tightened. "You forced yourself on her. You only stopped because she screamed and kned you."

"No...I didn't." Anger boiled within him, and just as he started to explode, sadness took its place. He hadn't been there to protect her. He shuddered as he recalled the emotions he'd felt from her hours ago.

Cold air rushed through his cell. "I hope you find the one who did—"

"Save it. We are having a trial. It will be decided if you shall live or die for the actions you've taken." Dellinger smiled. "And I'll make *sure* you won't live to hurt her again."

"I vow to you it wasn't me. I know her from her home,

from the Earth realm. I'm Draven.”

Delligr just shook his head before walking out of the cell.

Draven dropped his head and let the cold air embrace him as he fought back his anger and sadness.

He'd failed his mate again.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Ally sat inside Dellinger's quarters waiting for him to return. It felt like he'd been gone for hours, though really it had been only minutes. She felt sick over what happened, not only heart-broken, but also truly physically sick.

She sat in one of Dellinger's chairs and looked out a window.

As she stared out at the white fog, she started to notice some of it swirling around, the way it would if there were wind. Before she knew it, there was snow falling outside. Wrapping her jacket tighter around her, she looked through the window, transfixed.

"Hello, angel." Dellinger walked through the door and closed it behind him.

Ally jumped out of the chair and ran toward him. "Did you see him?"

"Yes. As I expected, he claims he didn't do anything."

He finished the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. "He won't harm you anymore after the trial. I'll see to it. You'll never have to see his face again."

A tear slid down her cheek. The face he spoke of was Draven's, and she'd give anything to see it again. "I think I should speak with him."

"That's not going to happen. You know he'll try to trick you again."

"I just...I've already had to say goodbye to the real Draven once. And even though Theo's not really Draven, it still hurts."

"I understand, angel, but you have to forget about him." He looked out the window, his gaze narrowing as he saw snow. Rubbing his hands up and down her arms, he asked, "Would you like to change before it's time to go?"

Ally nodded and pulled out of his embrace. During the scuffle her dress had gotten wrinkled and dirty, so she needed to change before going out again.

They walked together to her room and found a gown, and then they headed back to Dellinger's quarters.

"I'm sorry, mistress. We should have been here to fetch a gown for you," Julie said quietly. "Please come into the bathing

chamber, and we shall help you prepare.”

Ally’s servants ushered her into the room and helped her with her dress, hair, and touched-up her makeup.

When she came out of the bathroom, she noticed Dellinger already wearing pristine new clothing. He quickly stood up with an awe-filled smirk on his face and bowed to her.

Ally had chosen a gown made of light blue shimmering cloth. The dress was sleeveless, and she couldn’t miss his gaze as it traveled down to the cleavage showing at the neckline.

Before he had a chance to call her another endearment, she held one finger up to silence him. “Please don’t. I just can’t right now.”

He inclined his head to her before he offered her his arm, and then he led her from his room.

“Dellinger?”

He looked at her. “Hmm?”

Ally glanced out the windows they past, still seeing the light snowfall outside. “I thought you said the weather never changed here.”

He looked as well, the crease worrying his brow again. “It doesn’t. I don’t know what’s going on.”

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The hall where they normally ate had been transformed. The thrones were situated differently. Before, they had been situated closer to the walls, whereas now they were huddled in a large circle in the middle.

Once again, Dellinger and Ally’s arrival was announced to all in the room. He led her to her throne positioned next to Gersemi’s.

“I promise everything will be alright, angel,” he whispered before leaving her alone with her mother.

Everything did not feel alright. Ally felt so sick she thought she might hurl any minute. The pain had become so much more intense now than it had been earlier.

“Are you well, Alaina?” Gersemi leaned over and placed her hand on Ally’s. “I’m surprised you didn’t come and stay in my room after what happened. I found out from my servants today what happened to you.”

“I’m fine, mom—”

“Mother.”

Ally sighed. “Mother. Theo won’t touch me as long as Dellinger is around.”

Other deities started whispering, and Ally’s attention was drawn to Cassius and Crius as they walked through the doorway. They had Theo in tow, who seemed to prefer looking like Draven. Would he ever get sick of messing with her this way? She wondered if anyone could force him to change his appearance.

Behind him were two more gods, who were just as burly as Crius and Cassius. Each of the gods held a chain that was linked to a clasp around Theo’s neck. His wrists were shackled together.

They’d made him change his clothes for the trial, and as painful as it was, Ally was impressed with the level of detail Theo had put into portraying himself as Draven. He wore only a pair of loose pants, leaving his chiseled abs, arms, and chest bare.

Oh, how she wished her real Draven were here. Theo even had the tattoo that wrapped from his left peck up around his shoulder. He had the Guardian’s Mark as well.

Just seeing his tanned, taut skin sent shivers through her. That man turned her on more than anything, and although she wouldn’t admit it to anyone, she was turned on at the sight of him, despite her mind knowing her real love wasn’t here.

Damn him.

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Draven caught Ally’s gaze as four gods pulled him into the room in chains. As they neared the center of the room, strange voices echoed off the walls. They all stood up from their thrones and faced toward a platform on the opposite side of the room.

He looked at Ally again and saw how confused she was until some blonde woman whispered something to her. She immediately stood and faced the same direction. Only when she stood, her heel caught her dress and she tripped a little, catching herself on the arm of her throne.

He smiled despite himself. His poor, clumsy Ally. Oh, how he loved her...

He had to find a way to talk to her. To show her he was himself and not the man who had attacked her, while at the same time wondering how she could have mistaken a stranger for him.

The four men escorting Draven pulled on his chains,

forcing him to kneel. He saw three robed figures form on top of the platform. The collective voice coming from them was captivating. All three spoke together as one, their three voices combining together to make a humming sound that echoed behind their words.

It was eerie.

“Good evening, deities,” they said.

The others in the room all bowed. “Moirai.”

“We know what you’ve gathered for,” they said. “But the first order of business is not a trial. We have traveled to this fair temple to meet the goddess Alaina.”

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Ally stiffened at the mention of her name, but Gersemi touched her hand and gave her a comforting smile. “Don’t be afraid, daughter. The Fates will cause you no harm.”

“Come to us, Alaina,” they said.

Ally stepped down from her throne and slowly walked over to the platform. She was about to meet the three women who knew the fate of every being in existence, the ones rumored to instill fear in the gods she’d learned about in school.

She ascended the stairs, careful not to stumble. She did *not* want to roll down the stairs in front of the Fates and all the deities in Unitas. She’d never live it down if she biffed it now.

As she stepped closer to them, she found that they each had a thin build. Their long, flowing white robes covered their entire bodies. There was something majestic about the way the robes glided around them, as if they were floating. She couldn’t see their eyes, noses, or mouths. Their faces were completely concealed from everyone’s view, only their hands revealing any skin.

The Fates motioned for Ally to stand in the center of the platform. When she reached the intended spot, they had her place her hands on a sphere atop a small pillar.

She stood at a ceremonial altar, peering out at the onlookers who gazed at her with mixed expressions of confusion and awe. She wasn’t sure what was happening or why they wanted her here, and butterflies formed in her stomach. The Fates stood in a small circle around her and held their arms out, touching each other’s palms. They looked up at the dome above the platform and the ceiling opened up as if they’d willed it so.

Ally held the globe between her hands, and wind began to



swirl around her. Clouds rolled in above her in the sky, and her gaze was drawn upward at the phenomenon, even as the other deities whispered amongst themselves. The temple didn't have weather issues, and now twice in one day they were experiencing strange weather, first with the snow, and now with the dark clouds. She wondered if she'd been the cause of the variation all along, or if there was something else at play.

She looked down at the sphere and was immediately mesmerized by it as it started glowing on the inside. It exuded a small, dull light at first, but the glow was growing, expanding within the globe. Ally's hair whipped around as the wind swirled. The light within was bright, and the sphere itself had started to warm under her touch.

Reflections started to appear on the crystallized surface of the globe. She could see herself staring into the shiny surface, and she could see the robes of the Fates whipping around in the wind. She could also see that they had let go of each other's hands and had started raising their arms slowly toward the sky.

Then she saw lightning within the billows of the clouds rolling in above her head. Her stomach clenched as she saw a bolt of lightning strike.

Ally screamed as the bolt hit her.

She closed her eyes and her head whipped back, but she kept a tight hold on the sphere. She couldn't have let go if she'd wanted to.

The lightning didn't hurt like she'd thought it would. Instead of feeling pain, she felt like she was floating in a warm cocoon. Oddly enough, the most disturbing part about this was the fact that she couldn't open her eyes. She could hear voices whispering in her mind too, the voices of the Fates.

They were speaking so fast, and this time they weren't all speaking in unison. Ally struggled to make sense of the jumbled mess of the three voices.

Then the visions started.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ally felt like she had a front row seat to the entire history of Unitas since its conception. Centuries and centuries flashed by in an instant while the Fates continued whispering in her head. Although she couldn't keep up with everything they said, the information was somehow being engraved in her mind.

She still felt the warm cocoon enveloped around her as she watched her own private version of the History Channel. When there was nothing left but whispering in her head, she opened her eyes and found herself surrounded by a blanket of lightning. She couldn't see anything but arcs of light spinning around her.

She reached out and touched it only to find that the sheet of light rippled around her with her every move. Ally couldn't help but smile as she looked around. This wasn't scary at all. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She felt like she was connected to everything at once.

It was utterly amazing.

Ally was startled when she found herself back on the ground, still holding the sphere. The Fates were standing in a circle around her, lowering their arms and linking their hands together once more. As the glowing light faded from the sphere, the ceiling above her closed, blocking out the thunderous sky.

They held their hands out to her and led her to stand with them at the front of the platform. Ally's eyes immediately found the prisoner, who looked pained as he met her gaze.

"Interesting. Very interesting," the Fates said. They turned toward the rest of the deities in the room. "Alaina has now ascended to godhood. Please welcome your new major goddess."

Ally's eyebrows popped up, and she looked at the Fates. "What exactly does that mean?" She'd studied gods in junior high, but she wasn't sure if she fully understood what it meant to be a "major" deity. She couldn't believe she was even a goddess at all, let alone a stronger, more powerful one.

And what the hell had just happened to her?

She could hear all the deities in the temple as they whispered to each other, wondering what she was a goddess of, how the daughter of Gersemi and Vili could have had such an amazing ascension, and how the Fates classified her as having

more power than even her parents. That was simply unheard of, but no one dared second-guess what had happened. If the Fates were involved, one never questioned it.

They responded to Ally by speaking in her mind again. *Major goddesses have concentrated powers and strength, many of which are for only certain affinities. Major Deities of the past have used their gifts to create new forms of life, new factions. Some have even created different realms, or worlds, for those life forms to live on.*

Ally turned and faced two of them. “What am I goddess of?”

“That is something we must let you discover yourself, young goddess. It seems your warrior realized the strength of your power before any of your fellow deities did. He has already pledged his life to protect you.”

Ally stared at the three robed beings in confusion, not sure who they meant. “Who are you—”

The Fates looked out to the other deities and spoke before Ally could ask her question. “Now, let us move on to the next order of business.”

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Dellingr stood from his throne and descended his stairs. He walked to the platform and bowed to the Fates and then to her. Smiling at Ally, he held out his hand. “Goddess Alaina, may I escort you to your seat so we may begin the trial?”

She walked toward him and took his hand. Everything that just happened was confusing to her, and she wasn’t sure about what the Fates had said about her warrior. The only one she even knew here was Dellingr.

Ally sat in her throne and watched him as he headed to the middle of the room. Would he actually pledge his life to protect her?

His booming voice thundered throughout the room. “Theo, servant of Unitas, come forth and be tried for your crime against the goddess Alaina.”

Crius and Cassius pulled on his chains until he stood, and then the four gods yanked him to the middle of the room to stand before Dellingr.

The prisoner kept his head held high and stared Dellingr in the eyes.

“How do you plead?”

“As I told you before, *Pretty*, I’m not Theo. And I am not guilty,” he replied.

Dellingr stepped away from the captive and looked around the room. “The servant claims he is not guilty of attacking Lady Alaina. Now that she has ascended, I ask you today to let our new major goddess pass judgment upon him. If she chooses death as his punishment, I am willing to deliver a death sentence myself. I would pledge myself to her, and if she will have me as her warrior, I will gladly defend her honor.”

The gods and goddesses all looked to the Fates. As Ally’s mother had quietly explained, since they were the highest beings present, the decision was effectively theirs.

“Justice will be brought by the young goddess Alaina,” they said.

Dellingr looked at her expectantly.

She smiled and nodded at him. Of course she trusted him enough. He’d been her friend and protector since she came to the

temple.

The Fates laughed and clapped. “Intriguing,” they said. “Two warriors now have pledged their lives for young goddess Alaina.”

“Two?” Ally asked. “Who is the other?”

“That you will have to learn on your own, child. Continue with the tri—.”

“I did,” the captive said, interrupting the Fates.

A round of shocked hisses sounded around the room, and within a second Dellinger was standing nose to nose with him. “You *never* interrupt the Fates, servant. You shall die for that alone.”

“You would kill me just for interrupting those three broads, but you can’t just kill me for believing that I attacked Ally? *Ally* is most important, *Pretty*. Ally is worth *killing for*. *She is worth dying for*,” he said with a growl.

Giggles erupted from the Fates. “Oh, what a lovely day to visit Unitas.”

Dellinger whipped out his sword and placed it to the prisoner’s throat. The two men were still glaring at each other as Dellinger pushed the blade to his skin.

Ally watched as the man who looked so like Draven pried his gaze away from the god and looked at her.

“Don’t you look at her!” Dellinger shouted.

“I love you, *Caalia*,” he said, and then he looked back at Dellinger and snarled.

Dellinger pulled back and thrust his sword to Draven’s neck.

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“I’ve come with very good news, master.” Theo bowed.

“Change to your natural form, Theo.”

“Oh, yes. I apologize, master. Please forgive me.” Theo quickly shifted to his regular form. Looking just like any other tall, lanky, red haired man, he bowed his head again.

“And what do you have to report?”

“I did everything as you asked, my lord.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, sir. I shifted my appearance into a male she trusted and seduced her. I almost had her within my grasp, but she panicked.” When Theo saw his master’s eyebrows pop up he quickly continued. “She panicked, but not before I bit her. I

ingested some of her blood. I can sense her now.”

“Is the bond strong enough that you can track my daughter?” Vili asked.

“It is,” Theo rushed. “I took enough so that I would be connected to her for a while, and I think there is something else you will quite enjoy.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’m not sure how, but I can also track her lovers, both the male from the Earth realm and Master Dellinger.”

Vili looked down at the still-bowing Theo. He reached down and pulled Theo’s chin up so he was looking up at him. A wicked smile curved on his face. “That *is* good news. I may just need to promote your station, since you’ve done so well. With Damion being tied up with the Guardians right now, I think I may have just the job for you.” He released his chin, gesturing him to stand. Sitting in his chaise, he looked upon his minion. “Now, what more do you have for me?”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Stop!” Ally shouted. The other deities all gawked at her as she ran to the middle of the room, her heels clapping loudly on the tiles. “Stop, Dellinger. I have to see for myself.”

Dellinger dropped his sword, holding it at his side as he stepped in front of her, blocking her from reaching the captive. He ran his fingers down her arm with his free hand as he stared into her eyes. “Angel, don’t. It’s not safe. He’s a monster who has used his abilities to taunt and hurt you repeatedly. He’s not deserving of another chance.” He continued to stare at her, pleading with her to stay away from the prisoner. “Please.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders. “I need to see for myself. You asked me to judge him, so let me judge him.” She reached up and placed her hands on both sides of his face. “But thank you for caring so much.” She rolled up on her tiptoes as she pulled him down and kissed his forehead. Dellinger leaned down so she didn’t have to stretch.

“She already behaves like the goddess she is meant to be. Already knows how to act with her warrior,” the Fates whispered. Everyone in the room could hear their enjoyment. “Intriguing.” They laughed.

Ally pulled her lips from Dellinger’s forehead and smiled up at him. Her smile was cut short by the sound of a growl. She glanced over at the prisoner and saw that his lips were pulled back over his fangs.

“You don’t have to rub this in my face,” he barked.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ally replied stiffly. She wasn’t about to play games, and she still had no idea what was going on. All she knew was that there had been a thrumming in her veins ever since he’d caged her in at breakfast. She’d written it off to nerves, but she just had to know for sure. Her eyes caught sight of the Guardian’s Mark. Now that she was closer, she could see differences in the tattoo she looked at now compared to what she’d seen on the real Draven’s arm. “You messed up,” she said. “His never moved.”

He followed her gaze, looking down at his arm. His eyes widened, appearing shocked at what he saw. The design itself was the same, but it moved as if it were a living being. Its colors pulsed

and changed on his skin along with its movements. “It’s never done that before,” he said, looking back up at her.

Her eyes met his and she gasped. “Your eyes...they’re glowing.” Theo’s eyes had never flashed the vibrant green that Draven’s did.

Keeping her gaze locked on his, she approached him. A vision of him kneeling before someone and filling a goblet with his own blood flashed through her mind. In the vision, she also heard him telling the being that he loved her.

“*Caalia?*”

As if brought back by his words, she shook her head and blinked. “Beloved?”

It was then that she realized he’d called her Ally earlier. And *Caalia*. This definitely wasn’t Theo. This was really Draven.

She threw her arms around him. “It’s really you?” It was. It was really him. Draven’s scent and his warmth washed over her as she clutched her vampire.

“I’ve tried to tell you that,” he said with a snort as he nuzzled his head against hers.

Ally’s tears streamed down her face as she dropped tender kisses over him. “I didn’t mean anything I said before. I’m beneath you...I love you.”

“You were right about everything, *Caalia*, but I can’t give you up. You and I are Fated to be together. I can’t let you go. I don’t want to.” Draven’s hands were still shackled together, so he stepped away from Ally and lifted his hands above her head. He then slid his hands down her back and pulled her into an embrace, tucking his head into the crook of her neck. Her hands wound tightly around his back and shoulders, and she began trembling.

The humming sensation intensified wherever Draven touched her. “It is really you,” she whispered.

Ally heard clanking sounds and looked over her shoulder. Delligr was unlocking the shackles around Draven’s wrists, but he looked more than a little upset about it. She pulled away from him so that Delligr could unhook the clasps on his neck cuff.

As she watched him, she noticed his jaw was clenched, and he was purposely avoiding looking into her eyes.

Gods knew she didn’t want to hurt him, but her heart belonged to Draven.



She turned back to Draven as he pulled her into a harder embrace. This time his hands roamed freely as he rubbed them over her back and shoulders, his lips kissing her neck and working up to her mouth.

“Well, isn’t this endearing,” a booming voice said from behind them.

Ally turned to see the black-robed man she’d seen in Damion’s manor.

“Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but it seems to me you should have asked my permission before courting my daughter.”

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“Come on, brother. Wake up.” Ethan sighed and leaned his elbows on Riley’s bed.

It had been a week since Raine had brought Riley and Ferox home, but Riley still hadn’t woken up. All the Guardians had taken turns spending time with him while he was in a coma. Ferox had even spent a good deal of one-on-one time with him, but he was even second to Ethan in visitation time.

It scared him that Riley was gradually getting worse. Despite all their efforts, he was dropping weight and had even begun to pale.

Riley was dying.

This was all his fault, and he knew it.

Raider and Ethan had been training with Riley all along, but he had convinced Ferox that he was ready for a mission.

If he’d have only known it was going to kill the little guy, he never would have pushed for it.

He grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Please come back, Rye. Dad’s doing alright. He’s a bit more pissy than normal. Oh, and you’re gonna love this. It turns out Draven’s chick is a freakin’ goddess, and right now our valiant oldest brother is braving against the gods themselves for her. And I think he and Thrash are so pissed off at each other they’re going to go toe-to-toe. No one should miss that.” He snorted.

Still no response from Riley.

Ethan let go of his hand and walked to the door. He looked back at Riley before flipping off the light switch. “Night, little brother. Hope you sleep well.” He shut the door behind him, walking through the basement hallway that led up to the main floor

of the manse. He only hoped his little brother would wake up. He couldn't live with himself if he didn't.

## Chapter Forty

Dellingr whirled around, sword drawn, and stood in front of Ally.

Draven pulled out of Ally's embrace and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Dellingr as Crius and Cassius flanked them. She could only stare at the newcomer from between their shoulders.

"Who is that, *Pretty?*" Draven whispered to Dellingr.

"It must be Vili, Alaina's father. He was married to Gersemi before the attacks on the temple. He's now considered our enemy."

"My daughter, let me see you," the black-robed man said.

A low rumble came from Draven's chest. "You won't get near her again." He reached his hand back to touch hers, almost as if he wanted to reassure himself that she was still behind him.

"Ah, yes...the Guardian who braved against my commander in an attempt to win over the fair goddess' heart. It is a shame my reunion with Alaina was so rudely interrupted." He chuckled in a menacing way. "Now, daughter, come to me." He pulled the hood from his head.

Ally's heart constricted at the sight of him, and she felt Gersemi grab her hand tightly. She hadn't even heard her mother approach.

She kept staring and blinking at her father, unable to look away. He was *her* father, the one from home. Or at least, he was as similar as anyone could get.

She let go of Gersemi's hold and walked past the men who were blocking her. She brushed out of Draven's grip as he reached for her.

"Dad?"

Vili held his hands out to her when she reached him. "My daughter," he said as he gripped her hands. "It's time for you to come with me."

Ally continued to stare at him. He really did look like her father, and there were very few physical differences. The biggest flaw Ally could see in the man before her was that *her* father had been a kind and loving man. The man in front of her had evil radiating from him, evil that he was trying to mask from her.

Tears stung her eyes at that thought. She pulled him into an

embrace anyway, sobbing into his shoulder, willing this man to be the father she knew and loved. As Ally hugged him, she felt more differences between the father she knew and this man. Vili was built strong and solid, more like a warrior, more like Draven and Delligr and like the gods she'd met since coming to Unitas. And he radiated no love toward her. Ally had always been daddy's little girl. She'd had him wrapped around her finger since she could remember. This man was tense as she hugged him, like he didn't know how to react to the tender and loving contact.

Ally pulled away from him and looked into his eyes. There was no kindness in them. Suddenly, her mother was standing by her side, staring at Vili with fear in her eyes. Fear and hatred.

Gersemi grabbed Ally's hand and tried to pull her farther from him. "Come, Alaina. He is not the god anyone believed him to be."

Vili's face morphed before Ally's eyes as he stared at her mother. In an instant she saw love, pain, and then happiness.

"You never understood my potential, wife. I am twice the god I ever was." He held his hands out to them both, palms up. "Ah, my Gersemi and my Alaina. We can be a family again. Join me and we can be together once more."

Gersemi pulled on her hand more forcefully and when Ally looked over at her mother, she saw tears in her eyes. "Alaina, please. He can't be trust—"

"You will not take her away from me, Gersemi," he said furiously. "You hid her from me for over twenty years. She's mine now." Any happiness and love that had just shown in his eyes disappeared, and a red gleam shone from his pupils. He waved his hand like he was shooing a fly, and Gersemi was thrown away from Ally.

The room erupted in anger as Gersemi fell to the ground. She landed in a heap nearly twenty feet away from where she'd been standing. The gods and goddesses stood from their thrones in rage, the women rushing over to help Gersemi as the men ran to the middle of the room to stand by Draven and Delligr.

Ally found herself backing away from Vili. She had almost reached Draven when her body froze. It felt as though someone was holding her in place, but no one was there. Why wasn't she moving?

*Take a step. Just take a step.*

Nothing.

Ally looked at Vili, who had his hand raised, reaching for her. *He couldn't be...*

"Yes. I have the power to hold an object in place," Vili said.

Her eyes widened when he answered the question that had formed in her mind. "You can read minds too, then?"

Vili didn't confirm or deny it by giving any sort of response.

Suddenly she felt her hands enveloped in warmth. Draven's hand gripped her left hand as Dellinger grabbed her right. Her warriors, her protectors, flanked her.

"I can't move," she whispered.

Both men nodded at her and looked at each other. *Alaina, the Fates said, speaking in Ally's mind. Concentrate on Vili. Seek the truth as you did with your warrior. You must learn the truth of what happened years ago, of the pain Vili inflicted on your loved ones. You must see for yourself in order to judge true.*

As she did with her warrior? Ally realized what they meant. She'd somehow looked *into* Draven, the vision guiding her to the truth. The Fates were right. She stared into Vili's eyes, willing a vision to come to her. Before she could even question how she did it, she was thrown into a different time.

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*The temple looked similar. The décor was a bit more old-fashioned, but it was still just as grand. And from what Ally could see, there were many more deities living in Unitas at the time.*

*Gersemi walked hand in hand with Vili. Her mother's white satin dress flowed down her body, only tight around her bulging pregnant belly. Gersemi looked up at Vili as he cupped her face in his hands and touched his lips to hers. The baby must have kicked because they both placed their hands on her belly and laughed.*

*Ally followed them as they walked toward the doorway that led to the corridors outside the throne room. She called after Gersemi, but it seemed as though no one could hear her.*

*She was in another vision, meant only to watch.*

*Loud explosions rang out from the foyer, and the entire temple shook. Women and children ran, screaming. The men*

*rushed their families to the safety of their quarters and grabbed weapons.*

*A battle was about to ensue.*

*“Dell! Dell, where are you?”*

*Ally turned her attention to the woman who was yelling. She was searching all over for someone, panic in her eyes.*

*At the same instant, Ally noticed that her parents had scurried down the hall, so she quickly followed after them. She snuck in through the door they had entered just before Vili shut it.*

*“Stay in here and lock the door after I leave. I must fight this threat,” Vili said. He placed a kiss on Gersemi’s cheek and headed for a cabinet. He removed a sword and a dagger, which he clipped to his belt. “I’ll come back for you, Gersemi. I love you.” He ran out the door, leaving her in their quarters.*

*Ally looked at her mom quickly before she followed Vili out of the room. Gersemi’s facial expression had changed from one of fear to one of loathing as she’d watched his retreating form.*

*Ally ran after him and stayed tight on his heels as he ran down the corridor. They reached the throne room where all hell had broken loose, and there were demons in the temple fighting against gods and goddesses.*

*The demons looked terrifying. They had glowing red eyes and their bodies had a black ink-like exterior that didn’t even look like skin. They slinked and slithered their way toward the gods and warriors who were fighting valiantly to ward off the attack on their temple.*

*A little boy’s tiny voice grabbed Ally’s attention as she followed her father through the room. “I’m going to protect you, mom. Don’t worry...I’ll take care of them all,” the little, brown-haired boy said.*

*“No!” she cried. “We need to get back to our room, Dellinger. The warriors will protect us!”*

*Dellinger...*

*Ally watched as the mother chased the boy, but he was a lot quicker than she was. He was perhaps five or six years old and just as brave as any of the warriors currently fighting with the demons. He wanted to protect his mother with his little bow and arrow. Only toys, but to him they were as good as the real deal.*

*Suddenly, the boy stopped running. “Pretty,” he whispered.*

*He pointed right where Ally was standing. "Mom, she's a pretty angel."*

*Ally looked around trying to figure out whom he was pointing at.*

*He couldn't be pointing at me, she thought.*

*The boy took a step toward her. "What's your name, angel?" he asked.*

*"You can see me?" When the boy nodded, she smiled at him. A chill went through her body at the sound of his nickname for her. He'd been calling her angel ever since she'd come to the temple. "Ally. My name is Ally."*

*The boy smiled at her just as his mother began to scream. Both Ally and little Delligr quickly looked at the woman, and then followed the direction of her gaze.*

*Vili had just swung his sword and beheaded a man right next to them. Ally gasped when she realized her father had just executed a god.*

*Not a demon.*

*The mother grabbed onto Delligr's shoulders and tugged him back. She kept her eyes on Vili as they backed away.*

*"You should have stayed in your quarters," Vili barked at her.*

*Tears streamed down the goddess's cheeks as she tried to talk. "Why? Why did you kill him? He was your friend."*

*Vili only laughed at her as he stalked toward her and little Delligr. She pulled her son behind her as Vili raised his sword. When it was above his head, he plucked out his dagger and flung it into her chest, and then he spun around and sliced his sword through her neck.*

*Delligr screamed and backed away as his mother's lifeless body fell to the floor.*

*Vili turned his attention to Delligr, and he stalked toward the boy, stepping on his mother's body and pulling the dagger free from her chest. When Vili brought his arm back to throw the dagger at Delligr, Ally ran to the boy, screaming. Just as she reached him, Vili swung his sword. It hit Ally first and sliced her arm before it slashed Delligr's shoulder. The little boy cried out at the same time Ally did. Blood started to pour from their gashes, intermingling as they held tight to each other.*

*Vili still couldn't see Ally, but he was clearly confused as to why the young boy wasn't dead. Just as he went for him again, a man tackled him from behind, throwing him to the ground.*

*"Run to your room, Dellinger!" Ally cried.*

*The little boy looked at her with tears running down his face. He was frozen in place from fear and sadness. Then he looked down and watched the two men fighting on the floor.*

*Ally continued to kneel beside him as he watched the two men fight next to his mother's remains.*

*"I'm so sorry, Dellinger. But please, go to your room where you will be safe."*

*He threw his arms around her again and sobbed. "You're an angel, so you can bring her back."*

*"I don't think I can. Now, please go to your room. It's not safe for you here." How could she get him to listen? "You should always listen to a guardian angel, right?"*

*He nodded.*

*"Can you go find your dad?" Ally asked.*

*Dellinger shook his head. "I don't know my dad."*

*No...He was an orphan.*

*Ally's heart sank. Her eyes filled with tears and she hugged him tight. "Go to your room and don't come out until you're sure it's safe."*

*He nodded and pulled away from her before looking at her again. The sight of the huge tears overflowing his chocolate brown eyes and streaming down his cheeks shattered her heart.*

*"Will you ever come back, angel?"*

*"I promise, Dellinger. You'll see me again. Now hurry."*

*Little Dellinger looked at the two gods who were still fighting, and then his gaze found his mother's body. He cried out again before he turned and ran for the hallway toward his room.*

*Ally watched as the two men threw punches and stabbed each other with daggers. Vili got the better of the other god and plowed the hilt of his dagger into the man's temple. When he was out cold, Vili stood up and readied to deliver the deathblow.*

*Two black demons slinked up to him. "The master is requesting your presence," one said in a shrill, shrieking voice. "We'll take care of this one."*

*Vili nodded and sheathed his sword before he ran toward a*



*black-robed man at the other end of the room. He approached the figure and bowed before speaking with him briefly.*

*Ally ran in their direction until she could hear their discussion.*

*“I must bring my wife. That’s what we arranged,” Vili said.*

*“Ah, yes,” the robed man said. His voice was thick with a rich accent, very formal, and very terrifying. His voice had an ethereal quality, sounding like the Fates did when they spoke in unison. “The Noiratti will hold off the gods while you fetch your loved one. Retrieve her and bring her to me so we may leave this temple.”*

*Ally gathered that the Noiratti were the inky demons slithering everywhere. They looked disgusting.*

*Vili took off down the corridor toward his quarters. She didn’t leave the room this time. She stayed next to Dellinger’s mother, fearful that he would try to return. She finally understood why he’d acted so adoringly toward her. He’d always thought she was his guardian angel.*

*When Vili returned a few moments later, he strode over to the robed man again. Ally had inched a little closer. All she could overhear was that his “master” was displeased that he couldn’t find Gersemi.*

*Vili bowed again with his hand out palm down. The being touched his hand, and they both disappeared.*

*Where they went, Ally didn’t know. Only black smoke remained where they had just been, just like what she’d seen in Damion’s manor. She didn’t have much time to ponder that at the moment because more gods stormed the room and attacked the demons. Not just any gods, though.*

*These gods emanated power.*

*She watched them battle against the Noiratti, and only then did it appear they were starting to win. Ally kept watching and listening as the war played out.*

*Names were thrown around, and she heard Zeus, Thor, Eros, Apollo, Ares, and others she didn’t recognize. Clearly deities from different pantheons had come to the rescue.*

*The vision sped up again as it showed Gersemi’s escape from the temple. She realized then that Gersemi had witnessed*

*Vili's exchange with the evil, robed being. She'd hoped she could see how Gersemi had created her human parents, but the vision turned to a radiant white that had Ally closing her eyes.*

*When she opened them again, she was looking at a beautiful castle nestled in the middle of a forest.*

*The land was a rich green, the castle decorated proudly. It was a hot summer afternoon and the sun was getting ready to disappear behind the mountains. Ally looked around the abundant palace, but there was no one in sight. Clearly people lived there, but it was like a ghost town at the moment.*

*As she looked around the lush green fields surrounded by trees, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Just as she saw him, the black-robed being disappeared. In the blink of an eye, Ally was transported to the inside of the palace where the being materialized.*

*It was dark within the castle walls, and every window had been covered to keep sunlight out.*

*She knew without a doubt that the robed being was Vili, even before he lowered his hood.*

*She followed him down the hallway until he entered a room. Ally peered inside the bedroom and found that Damion was awake. He'd been waiting for Vili's arrival.*

*They were planning on murdering Damion and Ferox's parents, as well as Draven who was asleep down the hall. They'd have to wait for Ferox, Raine, and Ethan to return to the castle before they could finish the job. If all went accordingly, by dawn tomorrow Damion would be the new vampire leader.*

*Ally could do nothing as she watched them set the castle walls and furnishings on fire. Damion entered his parents' room and before Ally could follow him, she heard their screams as their own son viciously murdered them.*

*She couldn't bring herself to look.*

*Vili took off down the hall, and Ally followed right behind him. He entered another dark bedroom full of a spicy scent Ally recognized all too well. It was Draven's room. Her father was about to murder her love.*

*With Vili still unaware of her presence, Ally approached the side of Draven's bed. How could she wake him?*

*He stirred, no doubt because he'd sensed someone in his*

room. Just as Draven rolled from his stomach to his back, his eyes popped open and he saw Vili. He'd lunged out of bed, but as Vili raised his hands, he was frozen in place.

He struggled to break free of the invisible hold, but he couldn't. He could only stare as the god stalked toward him with his sword unsheathed.

"No," Ally cried.

Draven looked directly at her.

He could see her.

Just as her father was about to strike, Ally bounded toward Draven and placed her hands on his shoulders. She could touch him, the same way she could touch little Dellingr. She started to pull on him, which surprisingly broke Vili's hold.

The god snarled a curse and lunged toward Draven. He brought his arm up and smashed his sword hilt against the top of Draven's head. Blood surged from his wound, and he fell limply to the ground, still in Ally's arms. She continued to pull on his body, trying to save him from her father.

Ally concentrated as Vili prowled toward Draven's body. He unsheathed another blade and brought his two swords together in an "x." He was going to decapitate Draven.

She screamed and closed her eyes as she pulled more forcefully on the dead weight in front of her. God, how she wished she could get him out of there.

When she opened her eyes, she and Draven were outside in the forest somewhere. He was alive and breathing, and at this point, that was all she cared about.

She crawled on top of him and embraced him, tears falling on his chest. She wasn't sure how she did it, but she'd gotten him out of that castle.

She bit her wrist as hard as she could until blood trickled from her skin, and placed it against his mouth. "Please, Draven, wake up. I love you, baby. Wake up," she cried.

His eyes opened as his hand braced her wrist against his mouth.

He didn't say anything as they stared into each other's eyes, but she knew that he recognized her as the one who had saved him.

Recognition turned to awe.

*He licked her wrist, healing the skin.*

*"You saved my life."*

*She nodded.*

*"I am forever in your debt, my lady."*

*She shook her head, thankful he was alive. "Draven."*

*"You are so beautiful," he whispered. His arms came up around her, and he pulled her tighter against his body. He held onto her back with one hand and wound the other in her hair. With one quick movement, he pulled her down for a desperate kiss that took both their breaths away.*

*Ally started rubbing his chest and working one of her hands up to stroke his cheek. When she touched the top of his head, he pulled out of their passionate kiss and winced from pain. His head was still bleeding.*

*"Draven, you need to feed," she said.*

*His brows furrowed as she angled her head so he would have easy access to her neck. He tried to pull away.*

*"Please take from me, Draven. I am yours. My blood is meant for you."*

*His eyes flashed green with need. "You don't have to do this."*

*"You're right." Ally nodded. "I don't have to, but I want to. Now, please take my vein. You need to heal. You haven't taken nearly enough."*

*Draven looked up into the sky as if he were saying a silent prayer. "My mate," he whispered so quietly even Ally had a hard time hearing it.*

*She closed her eyes in bliss as she felt Draven's fangs slicing through her flesh. "Your Fated."*

*She knew then that she was his female from decades ago, his female who'd been lost to him for all these years. She now knew why she'd dreamt of him for all these years. She'd always been meant to save him. Their fates had always been intertwined.*

*\*\*\*\**

*Ally was pulled back to present. She was again staring into Vili's shrewd eyes as he held her frozen in place. From what she could tell, only a second had past while she experienced her visions.*

*The Fates spoke to her inside her head again. Now you*

*know, Alaina. Vili turned his back on his own family. He turned his back on his friends and his people.*

“You will join me, daughter. I have always known you would become something special. My seer predicted it before you were even born, and now that you have ascended, you’ll help me create the most powerful race ever to exist. Together we will rule all the realms.”

Ally narrowed her eyes on Vili. Oh, she hated this man. How could he have betrayed everyone the way he had, and then ask her to join him?

Understanding struck her. He *needed* her. Yes, he was a creator, but he obviously needed more power in order to create an entire race. He wouldn’t be pushing so hard if he had it figured out on his own. Yes, he was a minor god of creation, but he apparently couldn’t create a stronger race without some help, so he wanted to bring in his long lost daughter, who also just happened to be a major goddess?

*I think not.*

Ally stared at her father with all the hate she could muster. If she could have moved any part of her body, she would have attacked him herself.

She thought about the pain her mother had to have felt when she was blackmailed into marrying him, only to have him behead another god, one that was his friend. She thought about little Dellingr, and how he suffered the loss of his mother. And Draven...

She stared at Vili with hate. She only wished she could burn holes right into the bastard’s eyes.

Then she did the ballsiest thing ever. She laughed at him.

## Chapter Forty-One

*Oh, gods. She's lost it.*

Draven watched Ally out of the corner of his eye as he stared down Vili. He'd seen her face change from fearful to angry. And then...she'd *laughed* at the guy.

Fury rolled out of her in waves. He could feel her powers growing by the minute, somehow their blood-bond intensifying. He knew he'd be quaking in his boots if he were ever on the receiving end of her wrath.

"You think I should join you after what you did to us?" she yelled. "You killed your friends! You killed Dellinger's mother, and you almost killed *him*! And you tried to kill *Draven*! You've hurt everyone I love. You are a *pathetic* excuse for a father and a god. We'd all be better off without you."

The temple rumbled under their feet, only adding *oomph* to Ally's fury.

Could her anger really be powerful enough to shake the temple? Hell, maybe the temple was scared of her too.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draven saw someone leading a pack of demons into the room. The number of demons wasn't even what caught Draven's attention. The man leading them in was an exact clone of Draven himself. He could have been looking into a mirror.

Draven's doppelganger and the black creatures spread wide behind Vili, positioning themselves for attack. The deities in the room scattered, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon.

"And now you plan to attack again." Ally didn't phrase it like a question. She spat the words at her father with disgust as she stared him down. "I'm nothing like you, father. I could never do the things you've done."

She turned her head and looked at Dellinger. A smile spread across her face before she turned her gaze toward Draven. He shared a confused glance with Dellinger before he turned his focus to Ally again. When he raised an eyebrow at her, her proud smile only grew.

"He lost his hold on me."

\*\*\*\*

Rage built up in Vili as he saw Alaina move. She'd been able to turn her head, which only slightly shocked him since he wasn't holding that part of her still, but when she stepped toward him, he knew he'd lost his hold on her body.

He cursed and the demons behind him started hissing. They sensed his irritation and were ready for battle, merely waiting for the attack orders.

Vili had *never* been overpowered when he froze someone. He'd been harnessing his power for nearly a millennium, and he couldn't begin to fathom how a newly-ascended goddess had shaken out of his hold.

Alaina was nothing like her mother as far as guts went. Gersemi would have just lain down and taken what he was offering. But no, not Alaina.

The only likeness she had to her mother was her looks. Though far shorter than her mother, and not nearly as graceful, Alaina was still as lovely. However, unlike her mother, she seemed to be a firecracker. The daughter was nothing like the mother, whom he'd loved so long ago. He still did, in fact. He truly had loved Gersemi dearly and had been ecstatic when they had finally conceived their daughter. He'd always wanted a large family, but the opportunity to build a new, powerful race had taken the reins in his life. He was born to create, and nothing was going to stop him from fulfilling his dreams now, just as he had let nothing, including Gersemi and their child, stop him from pursuing his dream then.

Although he'd planned on taking his wife and child with them, he'd been forced by circumstances and escalating events to leave them behind.

When he'd gone back for his wife the night of the battle, he hadn't been able to find her. He'd convinced himself she didn't matter, and then he'd gone ahead without them to lay the groundwork for this new race.

Shortly after the attack on Unitas, he had returned once more for her. She had already birthed their daughter by then and placed her in hiding. The rage that had built inside of him at the time had been too overwhelming for him to even face her. For her safety, he'd left the temple undetected and searched for his daughter.

After years of searching countless realms, he had finally found her. Alaina's essence had been masked all along, which had made it difficult to pinpoint her location. He'd figured he would never have to return to this dreadful temple again once he found her.

Yet here he was, back at the temple he hated. If he could get Alaina to join forces with him, together they could bring the new world to fruition. With her kind of power, he'd win Gersemi back.

His wife and daughter should have been proud to stand by his side and rule the new world. It was in the nature of deities—hell, in the nature of every living being—to side with power, and his side was harnessing the ultimate power.

He quickly ran through ideas on how to sway Alaina to his side. There had to be something. She had to have a weakness.

He'd sensed what a loving heart she had when she embraced him earlier. She had two men standing beside her, their love for her saturating the air. If what he sensed was true, both men would gladly die for her. They stood beside her as warriors who would lay down their lives for her. But which one, if either, would cause her to falter? Which one would she cave for?

A thought occurred to Vili as he contemplated his options. Alaina had been extremely angry that he'd tried to murder the two men at her side.

How did she know that he himself had tried to murder Dellinger and Draven?

Oh, the decisions. *Eanie, meanie, miney, moe.*

He suddenly recalled Theo's altered form when he'd traced into his temple. Ah, so *that* one was her weakness. He turned his gaze to Draven and smiled.



## Chapter Forty-Two

“Fuck!” Draven yelled. His body seized up, and he collapsed to the floor. An electrical current ran through him, causing him to convulse in agony. The pain was so immense he couldn’t pay attention to what was going on around him.

Only Ally’s voice reached through to him. Her strength gave him strength through the blood-bond they shared.

“Stop!” she screamed.

“The only way to save him is by coming with me,” Vili replied.

*No, Caalia. Don’t give in,* Draven thought. He hoped their bond was still strong enough that she picked up on his emotions. He wished he could form the words with his mouth, but the electrical shock pumping through him at the moment had his jaw locked tight.

He’d felt this pain once before, and he’d never wanted to feel it again. He knew it was the same bastard who’d done it to him before. And to think he was Ally’s father...

Ally knelt next to him and reached out in an attempt to comfort him, but Draven reached his shaking arms out and dragged himself away from her. He feared the pain would shoot right into her if they touched.

He heard Dellinger’s voice right next to them as Ally sobbed. “No, don’t,” he said, pulling her back.

Despite the pain, he felt a change in her resolve. He sensed her fear. She feared for Draven’s life, feared for Dellinger’s, and for her mother’s life as well.

“*Okay, stop! You win,*” she said. “If you leave these people alone and unharmed, *all of them,* then I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Draven bellowed through his clenched teeth. But it was too late. Just as he yelled out, his pain suddenly vanished and he heard the evil laugh of Ally’s father bounce off the walls.

Draven stood and reached out to her. He couldn’t—no, *wouldn’t*—let her go. It had taken him too long to find her, and he wasn’t about to lose her again. He took her into his arms and placed a soft kiss on her lips. He had to find a way to keep her from going with Vili.

“Come, daughter.” The bastard actually had joy in his

voice. He knew he'd won.

Ally looked up at Draven, but she had no fear in her eyes. "I have to do this," she whispered. "It's the only way to keep everyone I love safe."

She slipped out of his embrace and bowed her head as she started toward Vili. After a step or two, Dellinger took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles before he let go of her. "We'll find a way out of this, angel."

Draven and Dellinger looked at each other again, and Draven saw the same unease in Pretty's face as what he felt. He cared for Ally more than anything, and the god appeared to feel the same. She was risking herself for the good of everyone, and he resolved to work *with* Dellinger to save her, rivalries and differences be damned.

When she reached her father, Draven's doppelganger approached them with the shackles that had been on Draven earlier. The doppelganger gave Draven a quick wink before offering them to Ally's father. Vili took the shackles and placed them on her wrists, binding her arms behind her back.

\*\*\*\*

Ally's jaw clenched as she felt the cold metal on her wrists. Could she have made a mistake by promising she'd leave with him? She'd only been thinking of Draven and the pain he was in. She was willing to do anything to save him.

She stood there only seconds before she felt a pull on her bindings as Vili led her from the banquet room. The deities all expressed anger at this.

"No one leaves this room until we have left Unitas," Vili said to Theo and the Noiratti.

He led her outside, obviously not caring that the cold rain started soaking her hair and gown. She was able to see more of the realm than she'd ever been able to before. The rain had effectively cleared out the fog. He led her through the gates until they reached the sparkling water fountain surrounded by the three benches. He turned to face her, and as their gazes fixed on each other, Ally saw that his form had started to shift into smoke.

He was going to trace her from the temple.

She really hadn't thought this far ahead. She'd only known that she needed to get him away from Draven. She couldn't bear to

see him in pain, and she'd hoped she would have a little time to come up with an escape strategy. She couldn't allow herself to be taken prisoner again.

As Vili started to dematerialize, Ally closed her eyes and tried to focus. She attempted to hone in on her new affinities.

Vili gripped her shoulders tightly and gave her a forceful shake. "What the *fuck* are you trying to pull?"

Ally opened her eyes again and glared at her father as the rain continued to soak her. Goosebumps formed all over her skin from the chill in the air.

He started dematerializing again just as something large rammed into him. Ally was thrown to the ground from the impact, and as she hit the pavement, she saw Draven slam to the ground with Vili underneath him.

\*\*\*\*

"It's wonderful to see you again. Please, join me in my visiting room. I so rarely have visitors here to use it."

Serin, Cass, and Kat all straightened in their seats at the sound of their mistress's voice outside in the hall.

They'd been stuck there for days under orders not to leave her domain. She'd put them up in guest rooms during their stay, but still she wouldn't allow them to locate Ally.

Hours ago, they'd been summoned to this room and hadn't heard a peep from anyone since.

At least not until now.

"That's by choice and you know it, Annie," a man responded.

"You know I can't be around others."

Together, they walked through the doors that led into the room.

Serin shot out of her chair. "What are *you* doing here?"

The man's eyebrows popped up, and he looked between the three women. "I could ask you the same." He glared at their mistress with his arms folded. "What's going on, Annie?"

"Well, really, this *is* all your fault, Eros. Had you not asked for that *teeny-weeny* little favor all those years ago, I wouldn't be obsessed with her."

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean by 'obsessed?'"

"Sit down," she said with a huff before taking her own seat.

Eros, Cass, Kat, and Serin took their seats as well.

“I’m not interfering nearly as much as you are, Eros,” she said. “Serin, Katya, and Cassia are my elite warrioresses. Since I couldn’t be there to keep a close eye on her, *like someone else I know*, I sent my best to guard her. But even still, her future is cloudy. I’ve watched her too long, and now I can’t see her anymore.”

Eros shook his head. “I can’t believe you never told me. It would have been nice to know that her own best friends were lying to her all along.”

The three of them sucked in a breath, just as Serin launched out of her chair again.

“Us? Oh, you have *got* to be kidding.” She laughed. “We aren’t the only one keeping secrets here. Ally is going to be pissed when she finds out about—”

The doors flew open, and Annie’s husband stalked into the room, his face intent on his wife until he caught site of Eros, the distraction making him pause. “Eros, nice to see you.”

“Hey, brother.” Eros stood and inclined his head. They gave each other a quick embrace.

“What brings you here? Not another favor, I hope. I still shouldn’t have done that favor for you last week.”

Annie narrowed her eyes on the men. “What favor?”

“Just a tiny ripple, sweetheart. And I limited it to one small location...and to only the few humans who were involved. Please tell me our dear friend is not here for another favor from you.” He turned to Eros. “As much as we owe you, I can’t do *that* shit again.”

Eros smirked. “No, nothing like that.”

“Darling,” the man began as he walked over to Annie and placed a kiss to her cheek. “Not that you wouldn’t know already, but a certain new goddess has just ascended today. Oh, and word has flown around the pantheons that the temple Unitas is under attack.”

\*\*\*\*

Draven and Vili rolled on the ground, struggling to take control of the fight. As Ally watched, it appeared that Draven was dominating. Clearly, Vili wasn’t used to physical combat. Although he was built as though he could handle himself, he was

already swollen and bleeding from the nose and mouth. Ally felt proud to see Draven winning. This was who he truly was, a fighter, both her lover and her protector. He lived to fight evil, and her father was clearly on that side of the fence.

Before Ally realized what was happening, Vili pulled his dagger from its sheath and plunged it into Draven's ribs.

He howled in pain as Vili twisted the blade before extracting it from his body.

"You think you're fast, you fucking vampire?" Vili laughed. "Looks like I'm faster."

Blood seeped from the wound as Draven tried to keep the god under control, but Ally could feel his strength weakening. She could see his muscles rippling as he tried to keep his hold on Vili, but with blood pouring from him, he wouldn't be able to hold the god much longer.

Ally pushed herself up from the ground and tried to slip her hands out of the cuffs, but it was no use. They were clamped tight on her wrists. If only she could reach Draven, she could try to trace him out of harm's way. At least that's what she thought she had done in her vision. It appeared her father possessed that ability, so it would make sense that it could have passed on to her.

She kept her gaze on Draven and Vili as they rolled around on the ground by one of the benches, their grunts and punches drowned out only slightly by the sound of pouring rain. Lightning struck all around them.

Ally continued to watch, unsure of how to help Draven, when she realized that he was the one causing the weather changes. With every blow he dealt, lightning would strike.

The Valkyrie in him had been summoning the weather depending on his mood. When he'd been locked in the dungeon, it had snowed. When he feared for her, it had started raining. Now his anger had turned the rain into a thunderstorm.

She was still wrenching on the shackles that bound her wrists when an orange glow grabbed her attention. The gods and the Noiratti were still inside the temple, and a fire had erupted from within. She wasn't sure how long the fire had been going, but she could already see it burning the outer walls. She hoped all the gods and goddesses would be able to defend themselves against the demons and somehow escape the flames.

Ally heard a bellow of rage and turned as Draven dealt more powerful blows to Vili's face and body. While she'd been focused on the temple, Vili had stabbed him again.

Draven continued to bleed from the first stab wound as well, and the massive blood loss scared her. Vampires normally healed rapidly when they were injured, and he should have at least stopped bleeding by now.

Draven wasn't healing.

As if on cue, Vili grunted through his teeth. "Try healing from those wounds, you fucking leech. You'll never heal from a god-forged weapon. You'll die a slow, painful death, and I'll make sure my daughter watches you suffer."

Draven continued to fight, but his body visibly shook from excursion. Ally could only watch as she continued to pull on her bindings. Could Vili have told the truth? Could a god-forged weapon kill the love of her life?

Draven threw another punch, but Vili jabbed his fingers into one of Draven's wounds. Draven yelled, his head flying backward as he wailed in pain. "That's right. Cry in front of your female. Show her you're weak."

Ally shook her head. He wasn't weak. Draven was strong and powerful, and she'd never think him weak. "Draven," she cried. "I love you, please don't give up."

He must have heard her because he pulled his arm back and let it fly toward Vili's face. It collided with his chin, sending him onto his back. Draven growled, opening his mouth as his fangs fully extended. He crawled on top of Vili.

And then Dellinger was there, bracing his hands on Draven's shoulders and hauling him off. "You can't kill him in front of her. You never get over watching one of your parents die. Get off."

Draven rolled off of Vili as Dellinger leapt on the other god and took control of the fight.

Ally rushed over to Draven and knelt by his side. If only she could wrap her arms around him and hold him. He'd been so strong defending her, and she couldn't even comfort him or tend to his wounds.

No. She could.

"Take some of my blood, Draven. Take my vein."

He was panting from the fight, barely able to remain

upright as he swayed. "I didn't even see him grab it."

Ally held his gaze. "What?"

"His blade. I didn't see him grab it."

One of the temple towers collapsed, causing the ground to shake beneath their knees. Both Draven and Ally turned to look at the rubble and saw how much havoc the fire had caused the temple, which was starting to crumble, and that wasn't the worst part. The Noiratti slithered from the temple, heading straight for them as if their master were a beacon, beckoning them to his side.

"Please, Draven. You need more strength," Ally said as she turned back to him. He'd already lost too much blood, and the only way she could think of to counteract a blow from a god's weapon was to give him her blood. Just as she'd done in her vision, she angled her neck so he would have easy access to her vein.

She watched as Draven trailed his gaze down to her neck, his lips peeling back from his fangs. "Who bit you?"

Ally smiled, remembering Draven's bite just after she'd saved him at the castle. She was a little surprised the bite marks had come back with her. And yet, she shouldn't have been surprised at all. Keeping her neck cantered to the side, she said, "You did. What, you're telling me that you don't remember this dress?" His eyes narrowed as he looked over her, his gaze slowly traveling up her body until he met hers. "The castle...But how?"

She glanced over at Vili and Dellinger who were still battling against each other a few feet away. "Probably not the best time right now. Besides, I don't even have it figured out yet." She inched closer, craning her neck for all it was worth, willing Draven to bite her.

"When are you ever going to get sick of healing my ass?"

"Never."

He ran the back of his hand down her cheek, causing her body to shudder. She was already cold from the rain, but his touch had a way of making her both warm and cold at the same time.

"Don't let me take too much. You need your strength, too, *Caalia*."

He kissed her neck softly before he struck his fangs into her flesh. Ally sighed, her body falling against his. It was over too soon. It always was. He ran his tongue gently over the punctures before he stood and pulled her into an embrace.

They jumped apart as Delligr roared in pain. Vili had just impaled his leg and wrenched his dagger free. He fell to the ground, grabbing his leg.

“I need to get in there.” Draven lifted her in his arms and flashed her to a safe distance. Rain pounded down, and both of them were soaking wet.

He hooked a stray piece of her hair behind her ear, speaking urgently. “In case I can’t make it back in time to protect you, you need to tap into whatever powers you can find to protect yourself. I know they’re within you. I can feel them. You need to be strong.”

Ally nodded before she looked over at Delligr and Vili and saw how close the Noiratti were to reaching them. Draven was going back in to battle against the demons and the bastard who claimed to be her father.

They weren’t going to make it, not going up against that many.

She turned back to him and grabbed his shoulders. “You are my strength, Draven.”

“And you are mine,” he said before kissing her knuckles. “Every part of me lives for you. You hold my heart in your hands, and it will belong to you forever.” He kissed her forcefully. “I love you, *Caalia*.” He ran back into the fray.

Ally’s heart melted for him all the more. With everything going on he’d just opened his heart up to her.

Oh, God. He’d realized the same thing she had. He knew he was going in to die.

He’d been saying goodbye.

Ally could only watch as her warriors defended her. If only she could break loose from these binds, she could help. She just had to.

Damn the shackles. She’d go in anyway. She could feel powers building within her. Even though she didn’t yet know what she could do, or what her limitations were, she had to go in with her warriors. She’d go down fighting alongside them.

“No daughter of mine could be bound by such restraints.”

Ally whirled around to see a man standing behind her with a cocked smile on his face.



## Chapter Forty-Three

Ally gawked at the blond man who'd appeared behind her, unsure of what she was seeing.

The large man was bigger than Draven and Delligr. He had a rock-hard chest, and his bulging biceps thrummed with energy and strength. He wore only light armor across his arms and chest. He'd come ready for battle.

And she knew him.

"Phanes? What are you doing here?"

"Concentrate on getting out of those," he said, looking back and forth between her and the battle behind her. "Use your mind, not your body."

"Phanes...How did you get here? What the hell is going on?"

"Just listen to me, Alaina. You need to get out of those, and you need to concentrate. Your strength supersedes the magic used to reinforce those shackles. They can't hold you if you don't let them."

As absurd as that sounded, Ally believed him. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the shackles. To her amazement, the clasps opened and fell to the ground. She opened her eyes and looked down at the cuffs before looking up at the man in front of her.

"You called me Alaina." No. That wasn't what had caught her attention. "You called me your daughter."

"Yes."

She looked at his face, studying him while she waited for him to explain. His hair was blond, with waves down to his ears. He looked the same as he always had, except for the fact that he was wearing battle armor instead of a suit.

There was definitely something different about him. She could feel power emanating from him, and she'd never felt that around him before.

His smile was the same. Even now, he was smiling down at her with his big purple eyes.

*Purple eyes?*

"What the...Who are you? Really?"

"You know who I am."

“You’re supposed to be my dad’s...well, my *human* dad’s best friend. Why the hell are you here?”

He stepped closer. “I’ve been around you your entire life. William and I started a business together, and I only did that to ensure that you never went without anything. But the truth is...” He paused and sighed before looking over at the impending battle. “I didn’t want to break this to you like this. In this world, in the presence of other gods, I am known as Eros, and I am your true birth father.”

Ally cocked an eyebrow at him doubtfully. “I’ve heard *that one* a few times before. Hell, I’ve already heard it once today!”

Eros glanced down at the glowing pendant that lay across her chest. “It’s even more beautiful when you’re wearing it. That was actually your first gift. I gave it to your mother to give to you when you were born.”

Ally held the diamond in her hand, remembering that Gersemi had told her of the gift and that it had been from her father. She looked down at it before looking back at the man she’d always thought of as an uncle.

Phanes was focusing on the battle, but quickly turned back to her. “Alaina. *Ally*. You are blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. Look inside yourself, and you will feel the truth of it. I searched you out after your mother left you in the Earth realm, and I concealed you from other deities and supernatural creatures. If any ever came near you, they thought you were just a normal human, and a clumsy one at that.”

Ally’s mouth opened to form an “o.” “You *made* me clumsy?”

Eros held his hands up in surrender. “I had to.” His attention was going to the battle, a scowl crossing his features. “When you were a young child, you were more graceful than most adult humans. Once I concealed your grace with clumsiness, people stopped talking about you.”

Ally was about to lay into him when he held up a finger to silence her.

“I made it so that the concealment would end once the Moirai helped you ascend. Now, I need to go help your warriors fight—”

“Wait!” Ally threw up her hands, everything finally

catching up to her. "I thought Vili was my father."

"Vili was only your mother's husband," Eros replied. "Where you came from isn't as easily explained as most others and is better left for a future discussion. Be safe."

Ally watched him as he ran past her. More gods and Noiratti joined in the fight, insiting a bloodbath outside the temple walls.

She believed that Eros was her father. It felt right. She could feel the truth of what he said, and she'd never seen purple eyes on anyone but herself before. Even though they weren't an exact match to her own violet eyes, it reinforced his revelation. She'd always thought she looked more like him than she did her father, William, though somehow she'd always kept that thought hidden just below the surface of her consciousness.

Goddesses emerged from the temple. Some stood with their children away from the battle, while others came toward Ally. A few brave women brandishing weapons headed into the battle. She hadn't even realized who all was standing with her until she felt hands wrap around her own.

To her right, stood Gersemi, to her left, stood...

Kat, Serin, and Cass.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, we just heard that the deities here might need a little hand," Kat said.

Ally looked around her three friends to see another woman. She was just as short as Ally was, and she was wearing the most extraordinary black and maroon gown Ally had ever seen.

Too bad it was getting soaked at the moment.

"Who is that?"

The woman approached Ally and stood before her, looking her straight in the eyes. "Just call me Annie. I'm honored to meet you, Alaina."

Screams erupted from the men in battle. Some of them were getting badly beaten, but her main concern was for Dellingr, Draven and Phanes...Eros. *Whatever.*

The gods were outnumbered by the Noiratti, and she wondered where all the demons were coming from. It seemed as though there was an endless supply.

The ink-like Noiratti demons had separated Dellingr and

Draven from Vili, protecting him from their onslaught. Each time any of the gods touched one of the demons, their skin and clothes were scratched and cut, as if the demons' skin was made of knives.

Eros made his way through the crowd by slicing through the Noiratti like butter. His sword cut through them with hardly any effort on his part. As Ally watched, she realized that the demons could be wounded, and they would fall, but after a few minutes of lying on the ground, they would hop right up and join the battle again.

They couldn't die.

It was no wonder it seemed like there were so many. They regenerated.

But gods could be killed, hard as it was to accomplish. If the Noiratti kept fighting and regenerating, they'd keep coming back long after the warriors had fallen, and as Ally watched, she noticed many of the men and women battling had fallen. They weren't getting back up.

As she continued to watch in horror, she found that the Noiratti that Phanes slice-n-diced stayed down for the count.

Only his weapon was strong enough to slay them.

Ally was so focused on watching the war play out that she failed to notice a group of Noiratti demons slithering up behind her. Her friends and Annie pulled weapons from their sheaths and battled against the Noiratti, keeping them from reaching her.

Gersemi grabbed Ally's hand. "You have to concentrate. I know you can feel the powers within you. I can sense them coming from you now."

She gasped just as Ally's feet were pulled out from under her, and she landed on her back with a thud. A Noiratti brought its arm down across Ally's left arm, slicing her skin.

She screamed out in pain, the blows like acid burning wherever the demon touched her.

Gersemi screamed as well and tried to kick the Noiratti away, but her dress and legs were shredded and she started bleeding in the process.

Ally rolled away from the demon and stood to her feet. She would not back down. This was her fight, and damn her if she was going to give up that easily. She was a goddess. She. Was. Ally.

She bent down and picked up the shackles that had been on

her only moments before, and swung them at the demon.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Draven and Dellinger fight past a line of Noiratti and rushed toward Vili. He had been making his way toward her as she fought the demon. Her warriors were stopped yet again, but they continued to fight through the blockade. They'd almost reached Vili when he whirled around with both of his arms extended toward them. The two men crumpled to the ground, their expressions pained.

Something washed over Ally, an awareness of Draven's thoughts as he realized how Vili pulled the trick. He needed to have enough concentration in order to pull this shit. That was why he couldn't freeze anyone while actually fighting them. He needed to focus his attention in order to direct his powers.

Which meant that Vili had a weakness.

She dared another glance at her two warriors, her two friends, lying in heaps on the ground, and anger coursed through her. She was sick and tired of this man pulling the freeze card on the people she loved.

Her wrists shook as she balled her fists up. The demon lunged for her again only to scream in pain and fall to the ground. She drew her gaze to her men once more.

Draven stood up on shaky legs and began to walk slowly toward Vili. He moved slowly, his legs shaking due to the force of Vili's power, but he did continue to push through. Ally felt that resolve in him, the need to fight through whatever hold the god had on him. He flashed Vili a fanged smile as he slowly stalked toward him.

"What the fuck!" Vili cursed. He moved one hand, no longer pointing it at Dellinger and held it toward her vampire, pushing another blast of his power at Draven.

Draven snarled. The blast slowed him down even more, halting him completely, but only for a few seconds. He pushed through the hold again and pressed on toward the evil god.

Ally couldn't stand seeing Draven in such pain. She screamed in frustration as she thrust her hands in the air toward Vili. Even though he was probably fifteen feet away, a blast of lightning flew from her fingers, crushing him to the ground.

His robes smoked as he regained his footing. That was the first time she'd ever seen red shine from his irises.

Vili raised his hands toward her slowly, the same way he did with her warriors. She knew he was building up power to send her crumpling to the ground in pain, but before Vili had a chance to blast her, Draven rushed him and grabbed the god's throat, lifting him in the air as the god struggled to pry his fingers from his neck.

"I'll let her decide what should be done with you," he said to Vili. "Since she's your daughter."

Ally's irises illuminated, and she raised her palms in the air. As if the elements demanded it of her, she closed her eyes and raised her arms higher and higher. She needed to concentrate on her power, and she could already feel what she was tapping into. The elements surrounded her and swirled in anticipation. Wind and rain whipped around her. Her arms shook from the exertion, but she called upon everything she could muster.

With her eyes still closed, she heard Draven roar in pain. Her eyes flew open and she saw that a Noiratti had a hold of Draven while he tried to maintain his stranglehold on Vili. More blood gushed from Draven as the demon sliced and stabbed him. His eyes had started to roll back as blood leaked from his body. He could no longer keep his hold on Vili, and he dropped him to the ground.

With a viscous laugh, the god turned on Draven and slashed him across the chest with his sword.

Ally screamed out as she watched him fall. His body collapsed in a heap at Vili's feet.

That. Was. *It*.

No longer would she watch as her man was beat down by that bastard.

Without realizing what she was doing, she released her power. Heat rushed through her fingertips as she held them out toward Vili. The entire area lit up as bolts of lightning shot out and wrapped around him.

He hollered in pain as the electricity burned through his body. The lightning arced from him and connected with each of the Noiratti. After a bright flash, all that remained was black smoke swirling where he had just been. The Noiratti demons screamed and wailed as they fell to the ground, their inky exteriors bubbling as they got smaller and smaller. Soon they were only charred spots

on the ground, the tar-like substance sizzling.

Ally panted as she shook. She had used all her energy when she'd called upon her powers to destroy Vili. She fell to her knees as she looked over at the battlefield. Only gods and warriors remained. Women and children rushed in, tending to the fallen, and covering the men and women who had been killed in battle.

The Noiratti were no more. Not even their spots dirtied the ground now. The rain had helped wash it all away.

Unsure of exactly what she had done, Ally couldn't help being surprised when she saw that she'd been able to get rid of Vili. It shocked the hell out of her that she'd generated enough power to take out all the demons, too.

She stayed on her knees and bowed her head, grateful that they'd won the battle. She felt arms wind around her, and when she looked up, she found that Draven had knelt in front of her and taken her into his arms. He was weak, but he'd pushed himself through it just to reach her. They were both soaked from head to toe, water dripping freely from their hair.

"You were amazing, *Caalia*." He bent his lips to hers and plunged his tongue deep into her mouth. Ally moaned and wrapped her arms around him. She tangled her hand in his hair and crushed him closer to her. Even though she was exhausted from the excursion, she needed him. She needed him *now*.

"Alaina!" Ally pulled away from Draven's kiss at the sound of her mother's voice just before she latched onto her. She had to position her arms around Draven's in a sort of group hug because he refused to let her go. Gersemi ignored him and gave her a loving hug anyway.

"You defeated Vili," she said, her voice awed.

"She did," Eros agreed. "Your daughter has considerable strength."

Startled, Gersemi looked up at him. Her eyes widened as her hand came up to her mouth. "Eros?"

"Yes, my lady." He bowed.

Other gods and goddesses approached the small group that had gathered around Draven and Ally. Dellinger had finally limped over and put a loving hand on Ally's shoulder. Kat, Cass, Serin, and the new girl, Annie, had disappeared.

"*Protogonos*," one of the gods said. The deities started

whispering amongst themselves as they bowed to him. Their faces showed shock and awe at the sight of him.

“*Protogonos?*” Ally whispered to her mom. Suddenly she realized that she knew what that meant. During her ascension, she’d learned about other gods. “The first born?” Her jaw dropped. “My father is a *first?*”

Gersemi smiled at her daughter and placed a finger on Ally’s lips. Quietly, she said, “Yes, he is a first, but this must be kept between us, Alaina. No one can know he’s your father.”

Ally nodded in understanding. If her father was one of the Protogenoi, then he was even more powerful than major deities. He was a primordial god. His generation had been responsible for earth, air, water, and...*everything*. The Protogenoi were creators, and they were some of the most powerful beings ever known.

The Fates approached Eros and pulled him aside. As they spoke Ally offered Draven her wrist, hoping that she could provide him enough blood to heal his gaping wounds. After a brief discussion with them, Eros turned to the deities and lifted his chin. “Today is one of happiness and sadness,” he announced, commanding everyone’s attention. “Lady Alaina has ascended to her status as a major goddess, and she has shown potential to be much more than that. You all fought valiantly against our enemy. In addition, Alaina has defeated Vili, for now.

“The Moirai have informed me that although he still lives, it seems Alaina wielded the power to banish him from this realm.” He looked around at many of the faces. “There are so many reasons to be joyous during this time of great loss. I know many of you are grieving the loss of our brothers and sisters. Just remember that they died protecting everything we stand for. I myself resided here at one time, and I know of the familial energy within the temple. Although you may not be blood-related to those lost today, I know you will grieve for them. You are family. You all came here for the same reasons.

“Unitas must be rebuilt, though it will take a great deal of time to restore it to what it has been. Many gods and demigods need this place as a home, a safe place to stay and raise their families. Just as many of you fled from your pantheon’s realms, many others will need to do the same. I understand that many of you will have to find other shelter while the temple is rebuilt, but I



urge you to choose your surroundings wisely. These are dangerous times, even for gods. The war that is upon us is not just a human affair, or even that of the Lore. As evident today, the war has been laid on our turf as well. Choose wisely my friends, and be of care.”

## Chapter Forty-Four

Vili stormed through his temple in Asgard, throwing anything and everything in his path.

He was livid that Alaina had managed to ban him from Unitas. Not only had she banned him, but she had also wiped out his entire army of Noiratti.

The little bitch.

He reached the master suite of his temple and removed his bloodied robe. He roared in frustration as he saw his scorched skin, which was still smoking from Alaina's lightning arc.

Oh, that goddess was crafty.

She'd only just come in to her godhood and yet already wielded such dynamic power.

He'd known as soon as he saw her that she wasn't his daughter, but he hadn't realized who her father was until he'd seen the bastard in battle.

Eros. The primordial Greek god had visited Unitas decades ago, pretending to be a weak demigod with little knowledge of his powers. No one had questioned him since he'd masked his true identity so well. Not even Vili himself had given a second thought to the supposedly young god.

At least not until he'd caught Eros eyeballing his wife.

Gersemi was a goddess with such a kind heart. Never one to rock the boat or upset anyone, she'd never stood up for herself her entire life, which had made her the perfect match for him. How better could a mate serve her husband than in being submissive to his will?

Vili had always had a bad temper. He was a stronger god because of it. His older brother Odin had the worst temper of anyone he'd ever met, and he was the king of the Norse gods.

Centuries of his union with Gersemi had gone by without issue, she had spent their time together following his orders and doing his bidding, though she had failed to produce an heir. His temper grew with each failure, and Gersemi always took his beatings in stride as a good wife should. Though she had changed once Eros came to the temple. Instead of hiding within their quarters after her punishments, she'd started leaving the temple and going to the fountain near the gates.

That had been where the bastard Eros would meet her. He'd spent time comforting her when Vili himself would have rather beaten her all the more for shedding tears.

The two had continued their encounters, unaware that Vili knew all along of their treachery.

But he'd never known that the two of them were fucking.

And she'd bore *his* child instead of Vili's, a daughter who was possibly the key to his destruction.

His anger ignited as he thought of his beautiful Gersemi being touched by another. "I'll have your fucking head, Eros." He roared in frustration and threw a vase at the wall, shattering it into pieces.

"Wow. Calm down, tiger."

Vili turned to see a young woman sitting on top of the vanity in the corner of his room.

Her feet were also propped up on the vanity, and she was looking into the mirror, applying black lipstick. "No need to get grumpy. It's not over yet," she said.

"Who the fuck are you and how did you get in here?" The woman rolled her eyes and smacked her lips before she hopped off the vanity.

"Hmm, who am I?" She approached Vili with a slow, seductive walk, tapping her finger on her chin. "*I* would be your key." She stopped three feet in front of him and stuck a piece of gum in her mouth before placing her hands on her hips.

He looked down at the small woman. Her jet-black hair was ramrod-straight and cascaded down to the small of her back. Her ice blue eyes were framed with a thick layer of black eyeliner and purple eye shadow. She had a desirable figure, her breasts large and her waist small. The black vinyl bustier and matching skirt enhanced her already perfect body.

And even though she was a shorter woman, her five-inch lace-up boots brought her height up to about six feet.

If only he were interested in goths...

"And how exactly could you help me, little girl?" he asked, a sneer on his lips.

She sighed. "You know, your seer sucks. You should really find someone with better abilities. I'm Eve, by the way."

She walked past Vili and hopped up on his bed, and then crossed her legs and leaned back on her hands. “You know how everything in the universe is created equally? When there is great power, there is also great weakness? Same with good versus evil?”

He narrowed his eyes on her. Did she think he was stupid? “Yes.”

She raised her eyebrows and chomped on her gum, and when that got her nowhere she rolled her eyes. “Jeez, do I really have to spell it out? She’s made her choice. Everything’s been set into motion.”

Vili shook his head. “What’s been set into motion?”

“Ugh. Again, fire your seer. Whoever it is *sucks balls*. Have they even told you about the prophecy, or just the part about *her*? I’m your stepdaughter’s other half, her evil counterpart, the yin to her yang, the power to rival her own. Her kryptonite, if you will—”

“Alright. I get it,” Vili snapped. “And why are you here?”

A wicked smile spread across Eve’s face. “I’m here to help you tear her world apart.”

\*\*\*\*

Ally was packing up her clothes with Carla and Julie’s help.

Draven sat on one of the couches trying to stay out of the way as the women scurried around the room.

The temple buzzed with activity. Some deities were leaving Unitas, while others were changing rooms until the temple could be rebuilt.

“Ugh, I wish this dress hadn’t gotten ruined. This one was my favorite.” Ally pulled a pouting face and looked at Draven with her bottom lip poked out.

“Mine too,” he said. “*Holy shit*. How did you do that?”

Ally narrowed her eyes at him before looking down at herself. The dress was no longer in her hands: it was on her body, and it was in perfect shape again. She gaped momentarily, and then she thought of her favorite dress from back home, the red one with the long jacket.

Suddenly she was wearing that.

“No way!” Ally gawked. She beamed at him before changing into a sweater and jeans.

“Lady Alaina, the Protogonos is here to meet with you. Are you accepting him?” Carla said from the doorway.

“Yes. Please invite him in.”

Her father entered the room and smiled at her before turning to the servants. “You may leave us in private. And would you inform Delligr that his presence is requested?”

Carla and Julie curtsied before bustling from her room.

Ally sat next to Draven on the couch as he took one of the chairs. “So you’re really my dad? No lies?”

Eros narrowed his eyes at Draven. “We can speak freely in front of him?”

“Yes,” she replied as she took Draven’s hand. “I love him, and anything you tell me I would tell him anyway.”

Delligr knocked on the door and peeked in at them.

“Then I’m assuming I can speak in front of your other warrior as well?”

Ally nodded as Delligr sat in another chair, smiling at her adoringly. She ignored Draven’s irritated eye roll at the god’s presence.

Eros looked at Delligr knowingly before looking at Ally. He smiled. “It’s because you’re the daughter of love,” he said. “And yes, I am your father.”

Delligr’s eyes widened and he looked back and forth between Ally and Eros. “Oh, my gods...I see it,” he said.

“Were you never really my dad’s best friend? And why did you lie to me and play the role of an uncle? And what’s up with our eyes?”

Eros beamed at her, snorting at her questions. “I masked their true color, just as I masked my power and concealed who I really was. It’s a power you possess as well. And of course I cared for your parents, but my real priority has always been you. I’ve remained hidden from everyone. And that is for not only my own safety, but also the safety of my children, especially you.”

Ally took a deep breath. “I’ve always loved you, Phanes. *Ugh.*” She slapped her forehead with her palm, the two names interchanging in her mind. “I mean, Eros.”

He laughed. “I have three names, Alaina. Eros, Phanes, and Protogonos. You can call me any of these whenever my identity isn’t concealed, but I’d prefer father or...dad.”

“Okay,” she replied. “I’ve always loved you...dad, and deep down I think I’ve always sort of known we had a deeper connection. I mean, I didn’t look anything like *my* dad, but I thought you and I shared similarities. And when Trevor and Skylar came along, they looked nothing like me.”

As much as she loved her family, she’d always felt like she was different. “When you came around to visit, my heart always soothed a little. Or maybe I just felt happier.” She grinned. “It’s funny. My body seemed to recognize you as my father more than my mind even contemplated it.”

Eros reached out and took her free hand in his. “I tried to stay with you as much as I could. When you were a baby, and even when you were a child, I would sneak into your room and hold you at night.”

“I remember.” She’d always assumed it was a dream. Phanes was one of her favorite people, after all, and she’d assumed her strong feelings for him had caused her to dream of him.

“I have a gift for you,” Eros said. “At first, I had planned on giving this to you for ascending to your godhood, but three little birdies gave me some insight.” He smiled. “And I modified my plans *a lotta-bit*. Would you like to see it?”

Ally smiled at the way he’d said *a lotta-bit*. They’d shared it ever since she was little. “Yeah, let’s see it.”

“Alright. Let’s grab your bags and go.”

Draven, Dellinger, and Eros all grabbed Ally’s suitcases.

“Come to me and place a hand on my shoulder.”

They each did so, and before she could even blink, they were standing outside on a driveway facing a three-story white colonial mansion.

Ally looked at the house and her jaw dropped. The building itself was all white with four white columns that stretched up the main part of the house. From what she could see, many of the windows were actually doors with balconies. She’d never seen a building this beautiful up close, and as she looked around the yard, she could see that it was beautifully landscaped, even though snow covered everything. Trees lined the perimeter not far from the house, as if they were in the middle of a forest. The driveway was a long, cobblestone path that led to a gate that was a quarter mile away, and it was framed with trees and shrubs. The driveway

wound around a large raised pond. In the middle of it sat a tiered fountain that reminded her of the one at Unitas.

She couldn't wait to see what it would look like during the day, which would be any minute, since the sun was creeping up over the mountains.

"Wow," Delligr whispered, just as captivated by the scene as Ally was.

"Not to be a wimp or anything, but I really need to get inside," Draven said as he held his hand over his eyes. The rays weren't hitting him directly, but it looked like he was already uncomfortable.

Eros grabbed Ally's hand and led her to the front door. He opened it and gestured for her to enter first.

She walked into a grand foyer, and her eyes immediately went up. And up. The foyer's ceiling was open to all three stories, and the ceiling was painted blue with white clouds. Angels and cherubs graced the ceiling as well, laughing and playing. As Ally drew her gaze back down the walls, she found that each of the floors had an open archway looking out over the foyer. There were two curved staircases that led up to the first floor, but those were the only set of stairs she could see. Plush red carpet covered the stairs, and at each side she could see that they were accented with the same granite tile that flowed throughout the foyer's floor.

"What is all this?"

"This is your new home. I had it built specially for you, Ally."

She turned toward Eros and shook her head. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it. Now, would you like to see the rooms?" he asked. "There are plenty of them, so Delligr and Draven can choose rooms as well. Since they're your warriors, they'll need to live here with you."

Draven visibly tensed beside her, jealously reaching her through their bond.

"Are you saying that she is to stay here? On the Earth realm? Unprotected?" Delligr asked.

"It's her choice where she stays. I just assumed this is where she'd want to live. She grew up here, and I figured she'd prefer it over staying with the other pantheons. And she won't be

unprotected because she has the two of you. I've also put so many securities and safeties in this place that there won't be any problems." Eros turned to Ally. "Is the home to your liking?"

"God, yes. I've never imagined anything more beautiful. Thank you."

He smiled at her just as she heard something driving through the house. They all turned and watched two miniature monster trucks screech across the entryway, one wrecking into the other.

Two boys ran out behind them with remote controllers in their hands. They froze and dropped them. "Ally!" they yelled, running toward her.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she dropped to her knees, opening her arms wide. Trevor and Skylar ran to her, toppling her onto her back. She hugged them to her, amazed that they were here.

"How?" she asked, looking up at her father.

"I brought them back. I couldn't bring back your parents because they had fulfilled their purpose in life, which was raising and protecting you. But Trevor and Skylar were born, not created. They weren't meant to share the same fate as your parents, despite what happened."

"But how?" Ally asked, Trevor and Skylar still wrestling her to the ground.

"That's not important. But I must tell you, their lives are now tied to your—"

"Did Uncle Phanes tell you?" Skylar interrupted. "He's been living here with us, and we even have our own rooms. We've got lotsa toys, too."

"And video games," Trevor added excitedly.

Skylar crawled off of Ally, nodding at Trevor's statement. "And he's been watching us with these three ladies who stay hidden all the time. I was scared of 'em at first, but they're nice and they like to play games. And they can do cool tricks too. Like magic. One of them always gives me popcorn and candy. She's my favorite."

Ally stood up, and Skylar latched onto her hand. Draven and Dellinger stood silent, watching the family reunion. Both had smiles spread across their faces as they took in the two boys.



“I can’t tell you how happy this makes me,” Ally said. She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around her father. He tightened his arms around her, pulling her into a bear hug. “I love you, dad.”

## Chapter Forty-Five

*A few months later*

Ally was finally ready. She'd repeatedly changed her mind on what she wanted to wear and how she wanted her hair to look. Julie had spent hours watching her manifest different dresses and hairstyles.

But they finally had the look she had wanted to achieve. It was perfect.

Gersemi had gifted one of her personal servants to Ally since she and Julie hit it off so well, the servant had taken up residence at Ally's mansion. Her mother held onto Carla though, as she hadn't wanted her to leave Unitas, which was being rebuilt.

"You look beautiful, goddess. Your mother will be so proud."

"Julie...How many times have I told you? You don't have to call me goddess all the time."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Apparently not enough, mistress."

Ally sighed just as a knock sounded at the door. Julie went to the door and let Dellinger in.

Wearing a black tuxedo with a black bow tie, he looked amazing standing in her doorway. He wore his hair loose, and it contrasted with the regal look of his tux. Although he looked striking, he also looked as if the entire world rested on his shoulders. His eyes were sad, and his shoulders slumped. Even though he smiled at her, happiness didn't reach his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ally asked.

He approached her and knelt beside her chair. "You are more beautiful than anyone or anything I've ever seen, angel." He paused and looked down at his hands, biting his tongue as if to keep certain words from flying out of his mouth. "You know of my feelings for you, so you know why I'm sad." He finally looked up into her eyes. "I will love you for the rest of my life."

She tried to stop his little speech, but he put his finger on her lips. "No. Don't stop me. You never let me say what I truly feel, and this may be the only chance I ever get without *him* being around," he said. "Ever since the day my mother died, I've only

had you to look forward to. You promised me that day that we'd see each other again, and it was the only thing that got me through. I only wish you could love me as I love you. I crave you with everything in me, and I wish we could live our life together. But instead, I have to settle for watching you live your life with that *leech*...just so I can be near you. You're so much better than him. You're light, and he's dark. Can you really imagine a life where you can never be with your husband out in the sun?"

"Dellingr, stop." Ally pulled his hand away from her lips. "You're just in love with the guardian angel you saw that day. You're in love with the *idea* of me."

He shook his head. "No. I have loved you from the moment I saw you as a little boy. As many times as I wanted to leave the temple, I stayed because I knew you'd return for me. It just hadn't occurred to me that you wouldn't love me in return."

"Dell, you know I love you—"

He seared her with his eyes. "But it's not enough, is it?" he whispered. "It's not strong enough."

"I love you, but I'm *in love* with Draven. My life is intertwined with both of yours." She placed her hands on each side of his face and forced him to maintain her gaze. "I do love you, and I couldn't bare it if I ever lost you. So you have to stop talking like this. It pains Draven whenever you and I are alone together, but he allows it because he knows you're a part of me. He's already wary that you'll try to take his place, and everyone knows how territorial vamps are."

The Fates appeared in her room, surrounding the scene that was unfolding between Ally and Dellingr. Completely covered in lilac robes, they spoke in unison. "It's time, Alaina."

"Okay, let's go." She turned back to Dellingr. "Oh! Did he make it back?"

He rolled his eyes at the question she had been asking hourly. "I haven't seen him yet. I don't think he's going to make it in time."

Dellingr helped her from her chair and started pulling her veil into place. Before it completely fell over her face, he bent and placed a kiss on her cheek.

They all exited the room and walked down the hallway toward the grand foyer where Cass, Kat, Serin, and Raine all stood.

Ally's friends and the three Fates made their way down the stairs, disappearing from her view. She and Dellinger stood, waiting for their turn.

“Go get ‘em, Red.”

Ally turned, seeing Thrash rush by her. As they made eye contact, he gave her a wink and chucked her on the chin.

She couldn't help but smile as she watched him stealthily make his way down the other staircase to join his brothers in the line.

The music swelled, indicating it was her turn to march. She and Dellinger reached the head of the stairway and started slowly descending the stairs. Everyone in attendance turned to stare at her as she carefully took one stair at a time, praying she didn't trip and roll her ass down the rest of the way. Though she hadn't had any blunders over the last few months, Dellinger was well aware of her past, and was more than willing to keep her upright.

Eros and the Fates had handled all of the planning for the wedding: the decorations, the banquet, the whole shebang, and they'd only allowed Gersemi, Ally, and Draven to decide on a few minor details. They'd been manifesting flowers, candles and altars in for weeks, just flashing them in and out, in and out, trying to decide how they wanted everything to tie together. It seemed like an awful waste of time to Ally. The Fates knew what everything was going to look like anyway, but they had seemed to enjoy doing it.

Ally's eyes met Draven's, and they shared a smile as she reached the bottom stair. He was devastatingly handsome in his tux, looking better than any man had a right to, his broad shoulders and thin waist filling out his tux shamelessly. Just like Dellinger, he also left his hair loose, and Ally realized at that moment that all the Guardians had styled their hair in their normal fashion. She wouldn't have had it any other way, not wanting to change any one of her boys.

Draven stood at the altar next to Eros, who had decided to preside over the ceremony instead of walking her down the aisle. Everyone agreed there was no one better to preside than the god of love.

Next to Draven stood all of his brothers. He hadn't been able to decide between the Guardians for the honor of best man, so

they all performed the part. On Ally's side of the altar were the three Fates. They had donned lilac robes for today's event so they would match the wedding colors. Kat, Cass, and Serin were already standing in line as her bridesmaids, and Raine was just ahead of Ally, walking down the aisle as her maid of honor.

Gersemi walked forward, looping her arm around Ally's free one. Together, Ally, Gersemi, and Delligr made their way down the aisle, and as she neared Draven, she could see the loving glow radiating in his eyes. She couldn't concentrate on anything but him. There was something about a man in a tux—

No, scratch that.

There was something about *that* man in a tux that did funny things to her body. She wanted nothing more than to take him somewhere private and ravage him. The wedding could wait. She wanted him now.

Ally reached the end of the aisle and turned to face Delligr first. He lifted her veil and placed a kiss on her cheek before she turned to let Gersemi do the same. Her mother started lowering the veil over her face again when Ally's eyes lit on some of the guests sitting in the front row. After winking at her little brothers, she turned and took Draven's hand.

The ceremony itself went by in a blur. Neither Draven nor Ally could take their eyes off each other. Somehow going on autopilot, they made it through their vows, and finally, they were ready for their first kiss as man and wife.

Draven lifted Ally's veil and let it fall behind her. He grabbed the back of her head as she reached up and placed her hands around the sides of his head. They pulled each other in for a long-awaited kiss.

## Epilogue

The reception was beautiful. All of the Guardians took their turns wishing Ally and Draven a happy life together. After each of the warriors offered his well wishes, Ferox and Raine commanded the attention of the room as they embarrassed Draven by telling stories of what he was like growing up. Ally couldn't help laughing along with the guests, and she could only imagine all the trouble he'd gotten into. When they were finished, Gersemi stood up to wish them well. As she spoke, a pang of sadness crept through Ally. The parents who'd raised her weren't there to tell stories of her childhood, and the only one who'd been there through it all had to keep that fact secret. Ally nodded and smiled through it all, missing her parents and wishing they were alive to see her wedding.

Before the last of the guests had departed, Ally and Draven made a break for it, wanting nothing more than to revel in each other's bodies. They ran down the hall toward their bedroom, grateful for their first opportunity to be alone.

They opened the door and found that the entire room was lit with candles, and rose petals were scattered everywhere. Draven picked Ally up and carried her over the threshold of their suite. He took her lips with his as he carried her to the bed and laid her down. His hands roamed over her body and started unclasping the bodice of her dress.

Ally couldn't help but moan at the feel of him.

"Umm, ewww. Get a room would ya?"

Draven froze mid-kiss and mid-strip to look over his shoulder. Three young women were sitting in chairs on the other side of the room.

"Uhh, *hellllo* Cloey...they *are* in their room."

"Would you two shut up already? It was just starting to get good," the third said as she threw popcorn at the others, beaming them on their heads. When they scowled at her, she just shrugged and the bucket of popcorn disappeared.

Draven was still lying on Ally as they both stared at the three women. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Relax. We were invited into your home," one said.

"Obviously," Ally said. Eros had built so much security

right into the grounds that no one could enter unless specifically invited by someone who lived in the home.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, his voice betraying his irritation.

Ally tapped his shoulder, and he looked down at her. After she gave him a sweet smile, he rolled off of her and glared at the strangers. She slid off the bed and walked over to the three women, while making sure her wedding gown still covered her. Something about them was familiar, something she’d felt before. She gazed at all of them, noticing striking resemblances between the three. “The Fates,” she said, answering his question.

The women smiled at her.

“See? I told you guys our sister is a smart cookie.”

The two others gawked at her. “*Riiiiight*, like we couldn’t all see that, *Lacey*.”

“Yeah, but I was the first one to say—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on now. Did you just call me your sister?” Ally interrupted.

The brunette shifted on the couch, bouncing with energy. “Yep. Eros is our father, too. A lot of deities think we are the offspring of Zeus, but that’s complete crap.”

“Yeah, if Zeus were really our father, I highly doubt he’d be piss-in-his-pants scared of us all the time,” the black-haired one said with a laugh.

Ally shook her head. Just when she thought nothing could get weirder, the universe seemed to throw her another curveball. “Umm, okay, so...what do I call you now?”

The redhead answered her. “This is Lacey.” She pointed to the brunette, and then gestured to the sister with black hair. “And that’s Attie. I go by Cloey.”

Draven approached the sitting area, and both he and Ally took a seat on the couch.

“Triplets?” he asked.

The three girls nodded at him which their eyes gleaming. “That’s right, and Ally here is our little baby sis.”

Ally couldn’t believe any of this was true. “Mom didn’t tell me that she had other daughters.”

“Well, she wouldn’t,” Cloey replied.

“She has no other children. Gersemi isn’t our mother,”

added Attie.

“I can’t believe dad hasn’t told you yet.” Lacey shook her head.

Cloey nodded. “Or your friends for that matter.”

“Yeah, some friends. They know all about mom probably better than anyone. Uh, besides us.”

“They’re probably just waiting for the right time,” Attie suggested with a shrug.

Ally thought back to her conversation she’d had with her friends days after they got back from Unitas. “Kat told me that she, Serin and Cass were all sent by my mom to protect me.”

“Not technically a lie,” Lacey admitted.

“That’s mostly true—”

“—But they should have explained better,” Attie said, finishing Cloey’s thought.

Lacey looked at her sisters before gazing at Ally. “Gersemi would have miscarried you had our mom not intervened, so daddio asked for our mother’s help—”

“—So you kinda have three parents.”

Ally’s mouth gaped open. “Three parents?”

“Yep,” they said in unison.

“How is that even possible?” Ally asked. “People don’t have three parents.”

“You’re right,” Cloey agreed. “*People* don’t. You, on the other hand, *do*. Mommy Dearest stepped in so that Gersemi wouldn’t lose you, which would have put quite a damper on everyone’s futures, let me tell ya.”

“Yeah, without you, just think...Draven here would have never found his mate. He would have wandered through his life without ever being complete,” Lacey added.

Cloey twirled a lock of red hair around her finger. “And everything you’re ever meant to do wouldn’t come to pass.”

“Right,” Attie added. “Mom foresaw what would happen if she didn’t—”

“—*Assist*—” Cloey added, her fingers making air quotes.

“—In Gersemi’s pregnancy, so...here you are.” Lacey finished. She rested against the back of the couch and sat Indian-style.

“I know how you’re feeling. Here you thought you’d lost



your entire family, and really there were more of us than you even realized,” Cloey added helpfully.

Attie leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. “And what’s great is that you’ve already met her.”

“I have?” Ally asked.

“Yeah, she was here for the wedding,” Lacey said.

Ally’s eyes widened. “My mom was? I mean, my...*other* mom was?”

“Don’t worry about calling her mom. You’ll end up just calling her Annie anyway,” Attie shrugged.

Cloey nodded at Attie’s comment. “Do you remember the girl who fought alongside your friends at the temple?”

She thought back to the battle that had gone down at Unitas. Finally pieces were sliding into place. “Whoa, that Annie is *my* Annie?” Ally asked.

“Oh, *my Annie*. I love it!” Attie beamed.

The other two girls started laughing. “Do you think mom would mind if we all start calling her ‘my Annie?’”

Ally couldn’t help but smile at them. They were so happy, so full of life, and absolutely nothing like what she’d imagined the constantly cloaked Fates to be. “So, exactly who *is* my...Annie?”

The three women all smiled at her. They glanced back and forth between Draven and Ally before Lacey finally answered. “Her real name is Ananke. She’s a primordial goddess who was brought into existence at the same time as Eros.”

“She holds power over destiny and fate,” Cloey added helpfully.

Ally brightened. “So that’s why you are the Fates? Because you’re her daughters?”

“Yes, and you’ve inherited some of her genes as well when she assisted with your gestation. She gave a piece of herself to you,” Attie answered.

Ally shook her head in confusion. “What did I inherit?”

They all smiled at her.

“You mean you didn’t pick up on our hint right before you saved your sweetie pie from the sun god’s sword?” Attie asked.

“Hmm, yes, I do believe we said ‘Justice will be brought by the young goddess Alaina,’” Lacey added. “Doesn’t anyone *ever* listen to us?”

She shook her head again, growing more confused. “You mean...I’m the goddess of justice?”

All three heads were bobbing up and down emphatically. “Yep. You are Justice personified,” Lacey said.

Ally couldn’t help but smile. She knew who she was now.

“Wait. What do I do with that? What does being a goddess of justice mean?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Cloey replied.

“I just...I can’t believe all this. Wow. I knew Annie looked familiar. I just hadn’t realized why. She looks like she could be my...*our*, sister. At least I know where our height came from.” Ally snorted. “When will I get to see her again?”

Cloey was back to twirling her hair again. “When the time’s right.”

“Yeah, and you’ll get to meet Chronos. He’s badass.” Lacey grinned.

“Is he Annie’s husband?” Ally asked.

Attie pursed her lips, pretending that she had to think of how to respond. “They’re consorts. They’ve never formally wed. Primordial gods *never* bind themselves with one another with a ceremony as serious as marriage.”

“But don’t worry, you’ll like him. Like Lacey said, he’s pretty much a badass,” Cloey quickly added.

“Without Chronos, a lot of what happened the last few days would have turned out a lot worse,” Attie said. “He and Eros caused the ripple in time so that Eros could bring back Trev and Skye.”

Ally couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She and Draven had discussed numerous times how and why the ripple had happened. Her father had asked another Protogenos to save her family. She’d never be able to repay any of these gods for all they’d done for her. “I can’t believe the Fates are my sisters and that the goddess of destiny is...”

“My Annie?” Lacey smiled.

“Yeah.” Ally grinned back. She looked at each of the girls, realizing where they got their looks from. Ally herself was a mixture of Gersemi and Eros, with her height being supplied by Annie. Her *sisters*—she’d always wanted sisters—looked similar to her in their own ways as well. The four of them shared the same

violet eyes, which she gathered came from Eros. His eyes were darker than all of theirs, but it was clear that they all shared that trait.

Though they were triplets, the Fates tried to look as different as possible from each other. Attie's black hair was cut short, and she styled it in a pixie cut. Lacey's brown hair was cut short in the back and long in front, making her hair look longer than it really was. Cloey's hair was a brilliant red and curled in spirals down to the middle of her back. Her sisters were all so beautiful, and she felt it was a shame they remained hidden under their robes constantly.

"I can't believe you actually called upon your powers so soon after you ascended," Attie said.

Lacey nodded emphatically. "No shit. I mean, we foresaw it and everything, but to actually *see* you develop and hone it so fast—"

"It was *amazing*," Cloey finished.

Attie leaned forward, looking at Cloey. "Speaking of amazing—"

"—Yeah, your ascension was incredible—" Cloey looked at Lacey.

"We've never seen anything like it."

Cloey narrowed her gaze. "Well, not in real life—"

"—Right. We saw it in our vision, though."

"There's never been an ascension like yours," Attie said, almost dreamily.

Cloey kept the dreamy tone as she continued. "The way the lightning created a bubble around you—"

"—And filled you with its essence—" said Lacey.

Attie's head bobbed up and down. "—Yeah, it's a good thing you had Draven's blood running in your veins—"

"—Otherwise you wouldn't have been given that power." Cloey finished.

Holy hell, they were hard to keep up with. They were so in tune with each other that they could finish each other's sentences. Ally could see they were going to be a headache at times.

Attie crossed her legs on the coffee table as she stretched out comfortably. "Right, sisters, and it's a good thing your vamp here had your blood in his system too."

Lacey nodded. “The power in your combined blood was the only reason he was able—”

“—To hold off Vili long enough for you to hone your powers,” they finished together.

Ally stared blankly at her sisters. The way they spoke was going to take some serious getting used to.

“Oh, I can’t wait for the little ones to come along,” Lacey mused.

The other two glared at her. Ally and Draven’s eyes bugged out as they stared at each other, their jaws dropped open.

“*Oopsie*. Did I say that out loud?” Lacey giggled.

Cloey turned and looked at Draven and Ally. “*Ugh*. Don’t even ask.”

Ally shook her head as if she agreed it was none of her business.

To hell with that. She’d find out sooner or later, and it looked like Lacey was the one to corner.

Cloey narrowed her gaze on Ally. “I said, don’t.”

Well, damn.

“Oh come on,” Lacey chimed in. “We’re not going to be able to see their fates soon, so don’t you think we should tell them what we can, while we can? Ally’s our sister, after all.”

Attie shook her head. “No. We’ll mess with things if we do.”

Lacey pouted. “Yeah, but soon we won’t be able to see theirs just like we can’t see our own. Can’t we at least tell her—”

Cloey pointed at her sister, a scowl on her face. “No, Lacey. Drop it.”

Lacey crossed her arms and huffed and puffed, glaring at her sisters, who were glaring right back.

Ally gulped, the tension in the room thick as the three of them had some odd silent conversation with each other. It was weird that the Fates couldn’t see their own futures, and what they meant about not being able to see hers soon surprised her.

And right now she really wanted to know what Lacey wanted to say.

“Oh my gods,” Draven said suddenly. “The prophecy makes sense now. ‘Destiny fused, product of love, carried within a treasure.’ Destiny gave a piece of herself, but you’re the daughter

of Eros and Gersemi—Love and Treasure.” The Fates smiled at him, even as Ally gave him a questioning look. “But what about the rest? How does that have anything to do with Ally?” he asked them.

“You’ll learn soon enough,” Cloey replied. “You know we can’t tell you.”

Ally started to ask them just what they meant, but their faces all showed that they wouldn’t say a word. Instead, she decided to take a different route. “So, you guys are the reason I saved Draven and Dellinger in my visions, right?”

Her sisters, finally removing themselves from the silent war, smiled at her. “We were meant to,” they said together.

“Normally, we can’t see our own destinies, but we could see that *someone* helped you, and since we couldn’t see *who*, we just assumed it was us,” Cloey quickly added.

“Just like Eros was supposed to start building this house for you,” Attie said.

Lacey nodded. “We were obviously meant to inform him of that as well.”

“Right, or else he wouldn’t have known everything you’d need,” Cloey said. “And we wouldn’t have our own kick-ass rooms.”

Ally smiled, letting the room comment slide. “Well, I appreciate all you’ve done. Honestly though, I’m glad my little adventure is over with. I’m ready to start my new life with Draven.”

“Oh, it’s not over, little sis.” Lacey shook her head.

Attie fluffed her black hair. “Oh no, it’s only beginning.”

“You have so much more to come,” Cloey added.

Ally started to ask what they meant, but all three of her sisters put up their hands. “Sorry, baby sis. We can’t tell you,” they said in unison. “But we’ll be here to help you whenever we can.”

Draven stood up and threw his arms up in the air. “Alright, ladies, not to be a jackass and break up this family reunion, but I’d really like to spend my wedding night with my bride. Alone.”

Ally’s sisters sighed. “We knew that,” they said.

Attie stood up. “Well, little sis—”

“—We’ll be back.” Cloey smiled, standing beside Attie.

“Be sure to keep our rooms open for us,” they finished

together.

“You’ll know which rooms are ours. We’ve already started decorating them.” Lacey smiled as she stood with her sisters.

Draven stood, pulling Ally from the couch. “You know, that’s just creepy when you all talk at the same time.”

“Yeah, we’ll try to work on it,” Cloey said.

“Bye, kiddos,” they all said together. The three of them quickly shifted into what looked like Charlie’s Angels positions.

And just like that, they were gone. Ally and Draven stared as their outlines dissolved like an etch-a-sketch drawing before swirling into purple smoke.

“Ha.” Ally laughed. “I have *so* got to learn how to do that.”

“Yeah, that was cool,” Draven admitted. “But I’m glad they’re gone.” He turned to her just as a kernel of popcorn came out of nowhere and bounced off his forehead. Three peals of laughter erupted around the room before fading away.

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Draven scooped Ally up in his arms and carried her to the bed. “Hmmm...where were we?” he said into her neck. He’d already started kissing her and nipping at her with his fangs, which were more than ready to drink from his female.

Ally giggled, sending vibrations through his entire body. Before anyone else could interrupt them, he stripped both of them down to the skin and savored his bride from head to toe.

Her hand cupped him as he drew her nipple into his mouth. And when he lovingly nipped her with a fang, she cried out in ecstasy.

Gods, did he love the sounds she made.

Ally’s hips undulated as his cock rested against her core. He moved his hips back and forth so his shaft would slide against her wet, sensitive flesh, the movement causing her body to shudder against him.

He saw pure adoration in her gaze as she arched up and kissed his chest. The familiar sensation coursed through him everywhere they touched, but the warmth that generated from her kissing his chest was something else. He looked down, noticing that his Guardian’s Mark now rested over his heart, pulsating with vibrant colors. He still didn’t know what caused it to come alive that day, but ever since Ally’s ascension, it had lived on him,

always moving, always seeking to touch her.

Draven worked his lips down her stomach, lavishing attention there as she giggled. When she could take no more, he continued to kiss down her body until he reached the apex of her thighs. His fangs extended when he looked down at her glistening flesh. Before he knew it he was licking his lips and his fangs, ready to delve where he wanted to be most. He looked up at Ally with a wry smile before he flicked his tongue out and gave her core one slow, wet lick.

Ally cried out, her body going ridged as an orgasm overcame her.

Draven stayed there as she rode out her orgasm. He kept licking and plunging his tongue in and out of her core, loving her taste and loving every sound and roll of her hips.

When Ally's tremors stopped, Draven crawled up her body, kissing every inch along the way, until he thrust his shaft into her tight sheath. She cried out again as he filled her, his cock stroking every inch of her as he pushed his way in.

"Ally." Draven moaned. He was already shaking from the sheer pleasure of being inside her. After inching his hips back a little, he drove deeper within.

He felt more adoration for this woman than he had for anyone or anything else in his life. Slowly, he placed his left hand over her heart. "Goddess Alaina, daughter of the Protogonos Eros and the Vanir Norse goddess Gersemi, I love you. If not for you I'd still be coasting through a non-existent life. Or worse, I'd be dead. My heart beats not only because of you, but also for you. Every beat my heart will ever make will be for you alone. I vow to love and cherish you for all eternity. You'll never go a single day without me proving to you how much I love and respect you. I'll worship the ground you walk on even after I take my last breath. This I vow to you before the powers that be. May our mated bond be blessed."

Ally cupped his face and stared up at him. For months, he'd told her what to expect on their wedding night, and the glow of her eyes and the expression on her face showed that she knew that the mating ritual had begun, and she could feel the power in it. A single tear fell as she drew her left hand up his body and placed it on his heart. He could feel that astounding power as well, and he

slowed his thrusts.

“I love you, Draven, son of King Ferox, ruler of the vampires, and Queen Raine, Valkyrie demigoddess. And I vow that I will always be here not only as your wife and mate, but also as your partner, lover, and friend. You are dearer to me than everyone and everything else in my life, and as long as I live, I will ensure you will never be doubtful of my love and affection for you. This I vow to you before the powers that be. May our mated bond be blessed.”

Draven took the hand that she'd held over his heart and placed a tender kiss to her palm. “To complete our bond as husband and wife, and as mate to mate, we willingly give of our veins as sacrifice to prove of our devotion to one another.” Draven's thrusts sped up again. He couldn't hold back his excitement as he realized their mating was almost complete.

He bent lower and took her mouth in a scorching kiss before he sank his teeth into her neck. Ally purred his name before latching her teeth into his shoulder. They drank each other's blood as their bodies were joined together in every way possible. Blood to blood, body to body, and soul to soul. The mating ritual was done. They were mated. They were one.

“My heart is yours, *Caalia*,” he said breathlessly.

“And mine is yours, Draven.”

Forever.

The End



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