



Blood Bond

KIT TUNSTALL

■ BLOOD LINES ■ BOOK 3 ■

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BLOOD BOND
Blood Lines 3

By Kit Tunstall

Dedication

For Starr R. She wasn't the inspiration for this character, but she is always inspiring.

Chapter 1

The scent of incense filled the small tower room, making Starr's head spin with its intoxicating aroma. She kept her eyes closed as she shifted on the thick pillow cushioning her buttocks. A hint of a vision played at the back of her mind, but the more she tried to focus, the more elusive it became.

She took a cleansing breath and tried again to focus. She sensed two—no, three—people in the vision, but couldn't make out what they were doing. Slowly, the first one's visage clarified, and she recognized Lucian, with his boyish smile and carefree attitude. A smile lit up her face in response to his.

Sorin solidified next, crouched in front of a third person, whom he had his arms protectively around, as Lucian knelt on the floor beside them. Starr struggled to make out their location, moaning quietly when she realized it was her bedroom. As Sorin shifted, pushing back his longish hair as he rose to his knees, her face emerged.

A blush tinged her cheeks in real life when she realized she was nude, as were the two men. When Lucian's hand cupped her breast in the revelation, Starr's nipple beaded in real life, pressing against the soft linen of her blood-red robe.

As Lucian pressed closer to her, Sorin pulled her into his arms, resting her back against his chest. His thick body hair crackled against her bare skin, and she rubbed herself against him, moaning. Lucian's hands moved to cup both her breasts, and Starr parted her thighs, instinctively inviting him to nestle between them. She was conscious of Sorin's cock pressing into the curve of her hip, and she reached a hand behind her to caress its head.

Starr shifted with discomfort on the cushion, alarmed, yet also aroused, by the swell of moisture between her thighs. She knew she could open her eyes to end the vision, but couldn't tear herself away just yet.

Lucian slid up onto the bed, settling between her thighs when she parted them. He lifted his head to suckle at her breast. One of Sorin's hands moved from her waist to stroke the thatch of curls between her thighs. Starr parted her legs wider, moaning in the vision and real life as Sorin stroked her pussy lips, spreading her dew through the damp curls as he parted her.

She threw back her head and bit her lip as his large thumb glided across her swollen clit, igniting feelings she hadn't expected. Starr arched her hips, allowing Sorin freer access, as Lucian's teeth grazed her nipple. "Oh, God, I want you."

Her eyes snapped open, and she blinked, straining to dispel the vision. Having spoken aloud had ruined the sensual trance, and she took a deep breath, finding the incense cloying now, rather than soothing.

Her pussy ached with need, and Starr clenched her thighs. Her body hungered for release, and she pushed away from the cushion, pausing only to extinguish the candles and incense before she left the chamber.

Each step down the twisting staircase inflamed her clit to the point where she could barely stand. With a moan of frustration, she rushed to her chambers, pushing against the door with one shoulder, even as she struggled to raise the hem of her robe. She kicked the door closed with her foot and collapsed on the stone floor, unable to make it to the bed.

Her fingers buried themselves inside her pussy, seeking out the sensitive nub. Starr circled her clit with her thumb and finger, shivering as sensations coursed through her. These weren't nearly as vivid as those she had experienced when Sorin touched her in the vision, but her body welcomed the pleasure.

She increased her pace while picturing Sorin and Lucian's nude bodies. She imagined Lucian sliding his cock inside her as she took Sorin's into her mouth. She moaned and began rubbing her breast with her free hand. She writhed against her fingers, flirting with the opening of her pussy before withdrawing.

She imagined Sorin's tongue sweeping across her swollen clit, and a flood of moisture accompanied the thought. Small convulsions built deep inside her womb,

extending outwards, until her pussy clenched. Starr stopped caressing her clit as the waves pulsed through her. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her heart raced.

It was a long moment before she found strength to drag herself to the bed. She lay back, letting the cool air in the room caress her pussy, leaving the robe pushed up to her hips. She licked her lips, imagining Lucian's mouth against hers. She wondered how he would taste. Despite the recent rash of vivid visions, she had never even kissed Lucian or Sorin, except in a friendly way, when they were younger.

She rolled onto her side, cuddling the pillow against her. She never would either. As the spiritual leader of Corsova, she had to remain chaste. Her mentor, Ylenia, had told her impurity could interfere with interpreting the visions she received. She choked back tears, knowing they wouldn't change anything. It was her responsibility to follow the traditions of her people. Even pleasuring herself was taboo. Making love when she held such a position could spell the ruination of their way of life. She might incorrectly interpret a vital vision if her thoughts remained centered around love instead of duty.

But how was she supposed to do her duty when the only visions she had received recently revolved around the two men she loved? How could she see what was best for her country when she couldn't see past her own heart's desires?

Chapter 2

"You look like hell."

Lucian's teasing tone caused Starr to jerk with surprise and spill the potion she had been mixing for Petru's migraines. She looked up to see Lucian and Sorin standing in the doorway of the circular room of the tower, where she now spent most of her days.

"I didn't sleep well." She gave them a small smile, praying her eyes didn't mirror the thoughts dancing through her head. Their blood-bond with her was probably strong enough to allow them to read her thoughts if they chose, but she was almost confident her mind was stronger. After all, psychic abilities came naturally to vampires, while werewolves only received them by ingesting vampire blood.

She straightened to her full height, just two inches shorter than Lucian, who stood five-ten. Sorin still towered over the both of them, even slumped against the doorway. Her eyes traced the way the thin cotton shirt clung to his muscles. The white material didn't have a prayer of hiding the thick growth of black hair covering his body. She could place her hand on his chest and feel the crispness of his hair underneath...

She blinked when Lucian chuckled. Her cheeks felt warm as she turned to him, wondering if her expression had betrayed her thoughts. She swallowed a thick ball in her throat, worried they could smell her arousal. "What?" Her voice sounded normal. If only her hands would stop trembling, she might be able to project an aura of cool indifference.

"You're a million miles away. You didn't answer me."

She frowned. "What was the question?"

"We're going to the lake for a swim." Sorin shrugged. "You are coming with us."

She shook her head. "I can't. I have to finish this—"

"We'll wait." Lucian's tone lacked the steely thread of command that had been present in Sorin's, but his expression was firm.

"You used to come with us all the time." A twinkle appeared in Sorin's eyes. "Sans suit, usually."

A full blush bloomed on her cheeks at the memory. In those days, she had enjoyed the innocent sensuality of swimming naked with the two men now in front of her. She couldn't deny she had been aware of an undercurrent between the three of them, but she had felt no rush to explore it. Nor had she felt any discomfort being nude in front of them back then. Now, she couldn't imagine doing such a thing. At some point in the last two years, she had lost her youthful innocence under the weight of her current responsibilities.

"Really, Lucian, Sorin, I can't go today."

Sorin stood up to his full height, six-and-a-half feet, and strode into the room. He took the goblet from her numb fingers and placed it on the long wooden table. "This will be here when you return. I saw Petru this morning, and he appeared fine. He even commented that your daily dram helped keep his migraines at bay."

"I like to have this on hand..." She trailed off as Sorin's hand engulfed hers. She stopped resisting when he tugged her gently toward the door. The thought of swimming appealed immensely. It was a hot day, and the moisture in the air clung to her hair and caused the red robe covering her body to stick to her skin. "All right, but I can't stay long."

Whom was she kidding? It was almost an hour to the lake, at a full run. It would be evening before she returned to the castle. Starr thought she should probably feel a dart of guilt for shirking her duties for the afternoon, but couldn't muster any remorse. For two years, her life had revolved around trying to live up to her mentor Ylenia's teachings, while she stumbled through completing the training on her own. Surely, there was no harm in stealing a few hours for herself, spent in the company of the two men she loved?

Although the day was too hot, causing the sluggish air to hang heavily against her fur, Starr reveled in the freedom of running. How long had it been since she had

indulged in a run, just for the sake of running? For that matter, how long had it been since she slipped into wolf-form, a state where she used to spend most of her time?

Most importantly, it had been much too long since she spent any time with Sorin and Lucian. She was usually too busy, as were they. Since becoming emissaries for the Protector, matters of state often occupied their time. Now she found herself dodging the men she loved, just to avoid having to face the intensity of her desire for them.

As Bulgain Lake came into sight, Starr slowed her pace. The men bracketed her, and she could sense the coiled tension in Sorin and Lucian's frames. She knew they had held back for her sake. She wasn't capable of keeping up with them now, having gotten soft from lack of physical exercise.

She was determined not to change to human-form, to avoid revealing her nudity, but had no control over Lucian and Sorin doing so. Even as she vowed not to drink in the sight of their nude bodies, her eyes eagerly devoured them.

They were such a contrast, on the surface. Sorin's black hair curled wildly and was barely restrained by the short ponytail at the back of his neck, while Lucian's brown hair was smooth and sleek, falling precisely to collar-length. Both men were in excellent shape, but Lucian's frame was lithe and lean, while Sorin's muscular physique rippled each time he moved. Lucian's body was nearly hair-free, despite his wolf heritage. Both were tanned, but Lucian's skin was the fairer of the two.

But there was one area where they were very similar. Their cocks, both erect, were long and thick, beckoning to her with promises of fulfillment. She couldn't imagine anything more exciting than to have both of them fill her at the same time. Although a nest of dark fur obscured Sorin's balls, she could plainly see Lucian's, barely concealed by scant amounts of brown hair.

Almost without conscious thought, Starr's wolf-form melted away, revealing her in the state she knew she shouldn't be in, what with the thoughts consuming her more each day. Without looking down, she knew her nipples were hard. The areolas were dusky-pink with her arousal. Her full breasts probably heaved from heavy breathing, caused by a combination of exertion and excitement.

She didn't think she imagined the way their eyes traveled over her body, pausing at her concave tummy to eye the ruby stud there, just above her belly button, before slipping lower. Some compulsion she couldn't fight caused her to shift positions and part her thighs, to better reveal her pussy. Would they be surprised to find only a thatch of neatly trimmed blonde curls at the start of her pussy that gave way to smooth skin? Were either of them longing to taste her?

The moment seemed frozen in time, as though they were all locked in a sensual haze. She wondered fuzzily how they could ever have been naked around each other before and not have been aware of each other sexually. How could she have taken those carefree days for granted, even in her naiveté of how difficult it would be to forgo pleasures of the flesh and assume Ylenia's role?

Starr finally forced herself to move. She got to her feet and walked to the water, certain she could feel their eyes practically caressing her naked flesh. Feminine instinct took over, making her roll her hips and flex her buttocks as she walked. She paused just before stepping into the cold water, barely resisting the urge to look back and measure the effect of her show on the men who she knew stood as still as statues.

She dipped her foot into the lake, hissed, and then sighed at the coldness. She kept walking, slowly getting deeper into the water, allowing its chilliness to leach some of the sexual heat from her body. She turned in the water, conscious of the way the gentle waves lapped just under her plainly visible breasts. "Well, aren't you coming?"

On one level, Starr recognized the danger of teasing Sorin and Lucian, and that's exactly what she was doing. She wanted a response from them, even as she feared where it would take them. If she were smart, she would rein in the impulse and head back to the castle right now, before she broke a basic tenant of her position.

Instead, she swam backwards, distancing herself from the shore by a few more feet. Lucian and Sorin moved as one to enter the water. She could sense their tension and excitement as they followed her. No, as they tracked her, hunting her like prey. What would they do when they caught her? She knew the answer to that, and her pussy clenched. Would she try to stop them, as she knew she should?

Starr suddenly plunged under the water, soaking her light-brown hair in the process. She paid no attention to the wet mass as she swam several more feet from them

before letting her body sink to the bottom of the lake. She held her breath and waited for them to follow.

After what seemed like minutes, she finally got a glimpse of one of them swimming very near her. By that time, her lungs felt close to exploding, and she kicked off from the sandy bottom of the lake and rose to the top. As soon as her head broke from the water, she dragged in a lungful of air.

Their hands were there abruptly, pinning her between them. Before she could even think, Starr was trapped, with her back pressed against Sorin's stomach, while Lucian's chest pressed against her breasts, made exquisitely sensitive by the slippery water, icy temperature, and arousal. She licked her lips, watching Lucian's brown eyes darken with desire.

"We were worried about you." Sorin's breath was a caress against her neck as he dipped his head. "You shouldn't have stayed under so long."

Starr nodded, finding herself incapable of speech. Her faculties were further impaired when Lucian's hands settled just under her breasts. She caught her breath when his thumb swiped one of her nipples. She was aware of Sorin's cock pressing into her thigh. When Lucian shifted positions, moving closer to her, she felt his cock against her stomach. Her pussy responded to the stimuli with a flood of moisture.

Time stood still as Lucian's head dipped, bringing his mouth ever closer to hers. Starr closed her eyes when Sorin's tongue traced across her shoulder. As Lucian's lips settled on hers, Sorin's teeth grazed the bend of her neck where it met her shoulder. A moan escaped her, swallowed up by Lucian's lips as they parted hers.

Of their own accord, her arms wrapped around Lucian's waist. Sorin moved closer, pinning her more tightly between them. One of his hands settled on top of Lucian's, bringing it up to cup her breast. Together, they rubbed her nipple in slow, alternating strokes. Starr couldn't stop her hips from pumping, bringing her pussy closer to Lucian's cock.

His tongue slipped inside her mouth, sliding gently across hers. His lips moved with gentle pressure, while Sorin's nips contrasted to the almost-lazy sensuality of

Lucian's kiss. Starr opened her mouth wider, inviting deeper access. She dug her nails into Lucian's skin as they squeezed her breast in concert.

She couldn't hold back another muffled groan as Sorin's thick finger sought out her pussy, gliding easily inside her lips with the aid of her arousal and the water. She whimpered at his first light caress across her clit. Lucian's mouth was now more urgent, and his tongue darted deeper inside her mouth. He cupped her other breast in his hand, rolling the nipple in concert with his strokes of her other breast.

She could die right then, just from the pleasure coursing through her. Instead, Starr opened her eyes and tried to focus as Sorin's finger penetrated her folds to flirt with the entrance of her pussy. When he encountered the barrier of her virginity, he withdrew, tracing a path up the inside of her lips, to circle her clit.

This was wrong. It didn't matter how right it felt. She knew she couldn't allow things to go any further. Her first duty was to Corsova, and though it might hurt her to do so, she had to do what must be done.

She pushed against Lucian and slipped beneath the waves before either could think to hold on to her. She swam several feet away before resurfacing. She didn't pause to look back as she made her way to shore. Once out of the water, she turned back to them. She couldn't find any words.

"Starr, come back."

Lucian's coaxing tone was nearly her undoing. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes before falling free, as she somehow found the strength to shake her head. "I can't."

"You complete us." Sorin's rough tone hinted at his frustration and pain. "We need you."

Once more, she shook her head. "You know I can't do this." Without conscious thought, she assumed her wolf-form and turned away from them, running at full-sprint. They could easily catch up with her, but apparently decided she needed space. She didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed about that as she gave in to the urge to run back to the sanctuary of her tower room.

* * * * *

She stood in the shadows, watching them. How she came to be there, she didn't know. She couldn't spare the energy to focus on that question when she couldn't tear her eyes away from the two of them, lying on the bed together.

She knew they were lovers, but it had never mattered. They had never made her feel like she wasn't an essential part of their relationship. She had never felt like they were a couple, and she was just the fifth-wheel. In truth, Starr had often thought they were merely waiting for someone.

How could she not think about it when they were spread so temptingly before her? Such a glorious sight. The depths of her own arousal surprised her as she watched them writhe together. Her dripping pussy spasmed, begging for release. Her mouth watered as Lucian pleased Sorin. She ached to be the one drawing Sorin's cock between her lips as she watched Sorin pump his cock into Lucian's mouth.

What would it be like to cross the distance separating her from the bed and join them? She had no doubt they would welcome her. They would lavish her with pleasure and shower her with love.

Her nipples beaded to the point of pain as a summer breeze blew in through the open balcony doors and caressed her breasts. The air brushed against her inflamed pussy, making her squirm.

She should leave, but she couldn't turn away. She had decided to go forward. Starr took a step toward them, and they became aware of her. Neither Sorin nor Lucian made any attempt to hide what they were doing. Lucian continued pleasuring Sorin, who raised his hand as she drew nearer. Her feet carried her without conscious thought.

As she neared the bed, Starr reached out, intent on burying her fingers in Sorin's hair and drawing him to her for a long kiss. She touched his hair, but it felt like cotton, not the soft texture she had expected. She frowned.

And woke up. Starr's eyes snapped open, and she was conscious of clenching the light sheet covering her from the waist down in a death grip. Her mind had made the dream so real that it took her a moment to realize she was in her own bed, and that she had not been in Lucian and Sorin's chamber, watching them make love.

A groan escaped her as she loosened her hold on the sheet and tried to relax her stiff muscles. Starr's pussy ached, deep down inside, where she couldn't reach. It was an accustomed ache, but that made it no easier to bear. Her body craved Sorin and Lucian. Even her dreams reflected her desires.

She sat up, shaking her head to dispel the mental fog lingering from the dream. Instead of fading, the images sharpened, eliciting a moan. Her pussy spasmed, reminding her yet again how aroused she had been from seeing them together. She longed to slide out of bed and go to the floor below hers, where she would make the dream a reality.

What would Sorin and Lucian think of her if they knew she fantasized about watching them together? Would they be embarrassed, or would they show her what she longed to see?

She knew one thing. If she went to them, things might start out with Sorin and Lucian making love, but she would inevitably join them. By the morning, her virginity would be gone, along with that deep ache inside. But she would have betrayed the trust of the people and the Protector.

"Damn." Starr rarely cursed, but she felt the urge to let fly a few more expletives. The frustration she felt had stretched her nerves taut and sharpened her senses. The cotton she lay on was too rough against her skin.

She knew she wouldn't be able to dismiss these thoughts unless she sought release, but pleasuring herself was only a temporary solution. She had to find a way to deal with her desires, to banish them, so she could return to the state of mind she should be in as spiritual leader of Corsova.

She leaned back against the pillow and closed her eyes. Starr kept her breathing even, determined to reach a state of meditation. Perhaps she could soothe her tightly strung nerves and get a few more hours of sleep before the dawn.

Starr focused on relaxing, but sleep refused to come. She tossed and turned a long time before admitting defeat and rising from bed. As she slid her arms into the oversized robe, she cursed her body for its refusal to accept it couldn't have what it craved. Waves of desire still pulsed through her, bringing a sensation that bordered on

pain. Her hands trembled, and she stuffed them in the pockets of the robe as she left her bedchamber and walked through the east wing of the castle.

She made her way to the kitchen, seeking solace in a cup of cocoa laced with brandy. It was a sleep remedy she found herself turning to increasingly these days. The last few months, her hormones seemed to be in a constant state of hyperactivity. No matter how she tried, she couldn't rein them in. Instinct and her own heart propelled her to Lucian and Sorin. Only her mind resisted, knowing she couldn't indulge in the forbidden relationship.

Once she had prepared the cocoa mix and brandy in a mug, Starr took milk from one of the refrigerators and poured it into a copper pot. She could have sent one of the servants to prepare her drink, but she liked the simple act of doing for herself. She still hadn't adjusted to the reverent treatment afforded her by the citizens. She wondered if she ever would.

She watched the milk without really seeing it. Her thoughts returned to the previous afternoon, when she had so nearly given in to temptation. Part of her cursed her sense of responsibility—the part of her thrumming with need. Her nipples chafed against the terry of the robe, giving a low, constant reminder of how sensitive the buds could be to her lovers' touch.

The scrape of a shoe in the doorway broke Starr's thoughts. She turned quickly and froze. She bowed her head. "Your Highness." She sounded hoarse and felt guilty for her erotic thoughts. She had no reason to think Anca would probe her thoughts, but still made an effort to shield them as she straightened.

"Starr." The queen wore a sated expression. Her hair was mussed, and her lids drooped lazily over her eyes. It was easy to infer what she had recently been doing. "I didn't expect anyone down here this time of night. Demi and I normally have the castle to ourselves during the wee hours."

She cleared her throat. "I, um, couldn't sleep." She gestured to the boiling milk, realizing it was about to burn. She lifted the pot from the burner. "I was making cocoa. Would you care for some, Highness?"

Anca shook her head. “No. I just came for a midnight snack.” Instead of going to the fridge, she walked over to Starr, standing a few feet away.

Her hands shook as the queen watched her every movement. Anca intimidated Starr, although she didn’t know why. The queen was always friendly, but she couldn’t relax around her. Perhaps it was a product of her upbringing and training under Ylenia. It had been drilled into her from an early age to respect and revere the Protector of Corsova, to honor their sacrifice for the people with diligence to her duty.

With clumsy fingers, she poured the milk into the mug. She placed the pot in the sink, and it clattered against the basin as her fingers released it prematurely. She felt tears pricking the back of her eyes and didn’t know why. Her emotions had been in a heightened state the last few months too. Could that be attributed to sexual frustration, or was it a side effect of the more pervasive soul-deep emotional deprivation she felt?

She almost yelled when Anca touched her arm. Starr jerked away and took a step back. Shallow pants escaped her, and she made a conscious effort to control her breathing as the queen watched her with an expression of concern. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. I don’t know what got into me.” She tried to laugh, but it emerged as a high-pitched choking sound. “I’m—”

“What’s wrong, Starr? And don’t tell me ‘nothing.’ You haven’t been yourself for the past few months.”

Starr forgot how to breathe. Was it so obvious? “Your Highness, I’m fine—”

“You aren’t.”

The soft counterstatement, said so gently, caused Starr’s control to slip. “The visions, Highness. I can’t sort them out. The more I try, the more I—” She clamped her mouth close, realizing she was too close to revealing where her thoughts led her while meditating. “It gets blurry,” she settled for saying. She tensed, wondering what Anca’s reaction would be. In the history of Corsova, she didn’t know of any other spiritual leader having failed in her duties. Would she be banished?

“You need a break. When I used to struggle through Algebra—and that was quite a struggle, believe me—my mother would tell me to take a walk. She was right. Physical

exertion always cleared my cerebral block." Anca grinned. "You need to do something that's just physical and stop thinking. Have a little fun, Starr. You certainly deserve it."

If only the queen knew what thoughts her words inspired, she would probably order Starr segregated from Sorin and Lucian for the rest of her life. A flush of heat swept up her neck, and only sheer willpower kept it from invading her cheeks. "I don't think that's a good idea, Highness."

"Sure it is. I want you to take a vacation. Go into the mountains or visit one of the cities."

"I can't abandon my duties."

Anca waved her hand. "What is there to see to? Helena's Pledging Ceremony to Jon isn't until next month."

"What if Ezru's baby comes early?"

"The midwives handle the delivery. The Welcoming Ceremony for the baby can take place up to three months after its birth, so don't use that as an excuse either." Anca touched her again, lightly patting her arm. "You know she isn't due for several weeks. I insist you spend some time away from here. Forget about your duties for a short time and just enjoy yourself."

"I can't go, Your Highness." Starr tried to be firm, but it was difficult to retain her resolve to stay when the idea was much too tempting.

"You can't go alone, that's certain." Anca shook her head, no longer listening to Starr. "What fun would that be? No, you must take Sorin and Lucian with you."

"I couldn't!" When she blurted that half-hysterically, Starr choked. Once she caught her breath, she shook her head. "They have duties."

"If anything comes up, we will cope. I'm certain they would appreciate some time alone with you. Demi tells me you're their blood-link. It must be difficult to be away from them."

"I do miss them." *I ache for them so much I hurt.* She quickly blocked the thought, lest it be transmitted to Anca.

"Good, then it's settled. You'll leave as soon as you've packed."

“No! I—“ Was this really happening? Was the queen sending her away with Sorin and Lucian, giving her *carte blanche* to have fun, without thinking about her duties? Maybe she was still upstairs and had fallen back to sleep without realizing it. She would awaken to learn this was a dream.

“Of course, you’ll need to let us know where you’re going. Unless there’s an emergency, we won’t bother you. You will return by Helena’s Pledging Ceremony, won’t you?”

Starr nodded numbly, surprised she was capable of moving. “Yes.”

“Do you know where you’ll go?”

She didn’t have to think about it. Memories of lazy days spent in the mountains came back to Starr. “Yes. My parents have a cabin in the mountains. No one has stayed there for years, not since they moved to Bulgainia, but it should be fine, with a little effort.”

“Don’t spend too much time working. I want you to enjoy yourself.”

A shiver seized Starr. She didn’t doubt she would enjoy herself if she gave in to her desires, and it seemed unlikely that she could resist Sorin and Lucian for an entire month. That was the reason she had no intention of letting them accompany her on her imposed sabbatical, regardless of what the queen said. Having them close would be more temptation than she could resist and would defeat the purpose of taking time to gain perspective and control her desire.

Chapter 3

The cabin had definitely needed some work. Starr lay in the canvas hammock she had strung up between two gârnila trees – similar to the smaller white oaks around the side of the property, but with scaly bark – just hours after she finished cleaning the cabin and restoring it to habitable conditions. It had taken most of the day to complete everything, and during that time, she had been so physically drained that her brain hadn't found the time to obsess over her raging hormones.

She turned her attention to the stars twinkling in the twilight sky. Complete darkness would come in less than an hour, bringing with it a nearly full moon. She didn't know why, but the knowledge that it was the last night before the full moon caused her a vague sense of restlessness, spurring her to finish restoring the cabin by tonight. The air felt heavy with anticipation.

She almost thought Sorin and Lucian were up to something, but refused to invade the privacy of their minds for answers, even if she had been in close enough proximity to do so. Since they were back at the castle, and she was here, she couldn't reach them anyway. Still, she couldn't shake the notion that something was coming. Did they have something planned? Her stomach clenched with nervous excitement. She trailed her fingers lightly across the taut flesh, wishing her hand belonged to one of them.

She slid her hand lower to explore the flesh under the waistband of the skimpy shorts she wore, before bringing her hand higher. Starr skimmed over her stomach again and stopped her hand just under her breasts. She cupped one of her breasts, rubbing the nipple through the blue cotton tank top she wore, *sans* bra. She had forgotten how good casual clothes could feel, having spent the last two years wearing the red robe that symbolized her position.

Right then, she wanted to be out of all clothes, to let the soft breeze blow across her hot skin, heated more by the thoughts flowing through her mind than the exertion of the day.

She closed her eyes and allowed her hand to slide lower, once more to the waistband of her shorts. She flicked open the button and lowered the zipper with stealth, not certain why she was being so discreet, since she was alone. Her pussy ached, and she couldn't help but trace the outline of her swollen lips through her panties. She moved her hand lower, encountering moisture leaking into her panties.

Starr squirmed in the hammock, spread her thighs wider, and slipped her fingers under the crotch of her underwear. She recalled a mental image of being with Lucian and Sorin, and it stoked her desire while she pleased herself.

Sexual release had become an addiction. She was convinced of that. Her pussy pulsed as she pushed a finger inside her tight opening, stopping only when she encountered a barrier. She arched her hips, causing the hammock to sway. A moan slipped from her, and she bit hard on her tongue to keep further sounds of pleasure from escaping. Hiding her pleasure had become so innate that she didn't even think about the fact she was alone and could shout about her gratification if she wished.

She should stop, but couldn't. Her body needed fulfillment too much, even though she knew her orgasm would only give her empty satisfaction. She needed something more than her own hands to be truly fulfilled.

When Sorin cursed and took a step toward the door, Lucian touched his arm, attempting to restrain him. "She can't know we're watching."

"I can't stand this. My cock is about to explode. Look at her, touching herself. I think she senses our presence. She couldn't really think we would stay at the castle and wait for her to return after she slipped away in so cowardly a fashion. She had to know we would come after her. She must have planned for us to discover her in the act." The last part emerged as a growl, as Sorin's eyes darkened and took on a wolf-like appearance.

Lucian knew Sorin was close to losing control, but who could blame him? He was barely holding onto self-control himself. Only the knowledge of what they had planned kept him from tearing through the door and claiming Starr that minute. "Patience, *dragostia*. She will be ours tonight."

"What if she can withstand her desires? This is our only chance to consummate our relationship." Sorin ran a hand through his shaggy hair, not bound by the leather thong right now.

The possibility worried Lucian too, but he placed his faith in the belief that her desire for them was as strong as theirs was for her. Their need for each other was building in intensity. Once she got over the shock of having them show up and the surprise they planned, she would have to give in. Surely, she wouldn't be able to resist giving in. He clung to the hope, and had done so for the last month, since he and Sorin concocted the plan to lure Starr away from the castle and her constant duties.

It had taken some finesse to get Anca to suggest the vacation without openly requesting she do so, but she had, much to their relief. Now the only obstacle standing in their way was Starr's sense of duty. He couldn't fault her for that, because his loyalty to Corsova and the Protector ran deep. However, his need for Starr outweighed his strong sense of obligation. It was the same for Sorin, and Lucian knew the self-perceived weakness angered his lover.

Sorin stiffened and leaned closer to the window. Lucian did the same, and his breath caught in his throat as Starr lifted her shirt above her breasts and began rubbing one of her nipples. Her other hand matched the rhythm as she pumped it in and out of her pussy. His cock jerked against the fly of the worn jeans, and Lucian shifted his weight to relieve the pressure.

His voice emerged as a husky croak. "Come on, Sorin. Let's wash up in the stream and prepare our surprise."

It was a long second before Sorin tore his attention from the view outside the window and turned to the back door of the cabin. Lucian followed him, but couldn't resist one last peek over his shoulder. He groaned as a low sound of pleasure reached his ears. Starr's body convulsed, and she slowly relaxed into the hammock. Obviously, she had climaxed. He hoped she had only whet her appetite, rather than curbed it.

Otherwise, the night's events would do little to entice her, and their plans would be for naught.

It took Starr almost an hour to compose herself after her impromptu orgasm. As darkness consumed the sky, save for the ripe beauty of the moon, she finally propelled herself from the hammock and to the stream running behind the cabin.

She cast a glance over her shoulder, scanning the area for predators or any of the Pack out for a run, before throwing off her clothes and wading in. The stream, fed from a mountain spring, was chilly, and she shivered at the contrast of the cold water and warm night air. It was just cold enough to cause her to hurry through bathing.

When she finished, she left the water and crouched by the stream, letting drops of moisture slide down her body. She hadn't washed her hair, but the ends were wet. She finger-combed the strands and stood up, shaking off the droplets in much the same way she would have in wolf-form. She was still damp when finished, but not so much that she couldn't put on her clothes and return to the cabin.

She was aware of the way the ribbed cotton clung to her damp breasts. In the light, she imagined the areolas were plainly visible, as were her hard nipples. The denim of her shorts chafed against her damp legs as she walked to the back door of the cabin and let herself in.

Silence greeted her, only to be broken by low moans. Starr froze for half a minute, listening. She felt the urge to turn around and leave the cabin without discovering the source of the sounds, but deeper instinct propelled her through the small kitchen and into the living area of the cabin.

It was a studio design, with no room breaks. An old couch was against one wall. A large stone fireplace dominated another wall, but the bed drew her gaze. Rather, what was happening on the bed caught her attention. Her lips parted in a gasp. It was her fantasy, brought to life.

Sorin and Lucian lay on the bed, embracing. Lucian's hand stroked up and down Sorin's thick cock, eliciting the moans she had heard. Starr clapped a hand over her

mouth as she watched Sorin receive pleasure. His hair was wild about his face. The column of his throat was plainly visible from the way he had thrown back his head. His lips had skinned back from his teeth, and it was clear he was close to climaxing.

Lucian's soft voice reached her ears, speaking endearments and words of encouragement to his lover. He didn't appear to care that Sorin's hands weren't stroking him. It seemed to be enough for his lover to hold him.

Lucian thumbed just under Sorin's thick head, causing the other man to cry out. Starr couldn't restrain her own cry as spurts of satisfaction exploded from Sorin's cock. She tried to melt into the shadows, but their eyes moved up to settle on her, freezing her to the spot. She couldn't tear her gaze away from the sight of Sorin's fulfillment streaming from his still-rigid cock.

"Starr."

At the sound of her name on Lucian's lips, she finally wrenched her gaze up to look at them. "What are you doing here? You shouldn't—" She couldn't go on. The tenderness evident in their embrace brought a lump to her throat. She felt tears at the back of her eyes and yearned to join them.

Sorin extended his hand, making no apologies for showing up unexpectedly, nor for the scene she had walked in on. "Come to us."

She shook her head, even as her feet obeyed him. Was she really surprised to see them? She had to admit she wasn't. In the back of her mind, she had expected they would follow her. When she left the castle, she had acknowledged this was a likely outcome of leaving the sanctuary of her tower room and watchful eyes of those in the castle. She had anticipated this moment since her arrival, which was why she had worked feverishly to have everything finished. She was ready for this to happen.

A flicker of doubt shadowed her eyes when she reached the bed, but it faded when Sorin and Lucian each took one of her hands to pull her down beside them on the bed. The last bit of internal resistance disappeared when Sorin pulled her against his chest. Lucian draped his arm across Sorin's waist to squeeze her hip. "This is what you wanted, what you needed," he said.

It felt right. She lay on the bed without speaking, relishing the feelings sweeping through her. There was desire, as she had expected, but also warmth, and the sensation that a void inside was slowly filling. Why had she fought this for so long, she wondered, as all else slipped from her mind.

She rested her head against Sorin's chest, wondering what would happen next. She knew they would be lovers by the morning, but didn't have the courage to initiate the next step.

She lifted her head when the bed moved and Lucian sat up. She frowned, thinking he was leaving. She wanted to protest. She wanted to make love with both of them, not separately.

She didn't have to worry. As she kept her eyes glued to Lucian's nude form, he walked around the bed and dropped down on the other side, pressing himself against her back. His breath caressed the back of her neck, and a sharp surge of desire accompanied his hand when it settled on her breast, through the tank top.

Before she could speak or move, Sorin's hand was between her thighs, lightly brushing against her pussy through the denim. She closed her eyes when Lucian's hand slid lower, to the hem of her shirt, slowly lifting it. Her breath hissed through her teeth when he splayed his hand across her bare side and trailed it higher.

He cupped her breast, as Sorin's hand moved higher to unzip her shorts. "We love you."

She didn't need Lucian's whispered assurance. She knew how they felt. She had felt the same since becoming their blood-link at seventeen. Six years had only strengthened her emotions. "I know," she whispered in return, breathlessly. A gasp issued from her when Lucian tugged gently on her swollen nipple.

Seconds later, Sorin's finger slipped past the barrier of her panties and stroked her pussy lips. Another gasp escaped her when his finger plunged inside to flirt with her clit. Starr arched her hips, and Lucian followed the movement, thrusting his cock against her buttocks, keeping her pressed against the light pressure Sorin exerted. She whimpered as he circled the sensitive bud. Lucian mimicked the movement on her nipple.

Starr writhed under the pleasure. She was conscious of Lucian's cock pressed into her buttocks, while Sorin's pressed into her stomach. She slipped an arm behind her to grasp Lucian's cock. She imitated the motion she had seen him use on Sorin, and he responded by thrusting against her buttocks, pressing her even closer to Sorin's finger, inflaming her clit further.

Her other hand was trapped between her and Sorin. She freed it and reached down, searching for his cock. When her hand closed around it, she felt traces of his ejaculate, released earlier. Starr ran her thumb through the sticky substance, pleased when Sorin's cock spasmed.

She was curious of the taste and released Sorin's cock. She brought her thumb to her lips and licked away his cream. Both men moaned in concert, and it felt as though their cocks suddenly swelled even larger. It seemed to happen quickly that she was in a sitting position, with Lucian stripping off her shirt. Seconds after that, he lifted her by the waist to allow Sorin to strip off her shorts and panties.

Her pussy flooded with arousal as their eyes caressed every inch of her. Starr didn't resist when they lowered her onto her back and leaned over her on each side. She reached out and rested her palms on their upper backs.

Sorin's head lowered first, to press a kiss to her neck. Starr turned her head to allow his lips freer access. Lucian's head dipped lower, and he traced his tongue across her abdomen. She moaned when Sorin nipped her, while Lucian flicked his tongue across her stomach, inching slowly upward.

Sorin's lips seemed to be moving south, and she knew they would meet at her breasts. Starr opened her eyes and moved her hands from their backs. She felt behind her for a pillow to prop up her head. Her stomach quivered, and she held her breath when their heads got closer together. A shudder moved through her when Sorin's mouth fastened on her left breast at the same time Lucian's lips took possession of her right nipple.

She arched her back, offering them more. Sorin's tongue was rough and raspy over her swollen nipple, while Lucian's was more gentle. The sensations made her quiver, and moans tore from her. When Lucian's soothing tongue turned to a provocative nip, a

cry escaped her. "Please..." She didn't know what she was asking for, except that they relieve the ache deep inside her womb.

They were in no hurry though. They continued to feast on her breasts, causing her body to clench with excitement. Her pussy spasmed, and she tightened her thighs, seeking relief. It seemed like ages since she had masturbated in the hammock. Her pussy ached as though it had never known release. "Sorin..." She tangled her hand in his hair and raised his head. "Please, I need..." She squirmed, unable to voice what she needed.

Lucian lifted his head and chuckled. "In time, Starr. We've waited too long for you to rush through this."

She bit back her protests and released Sorin's hair, allowing his head to return to her breast. She returned her hands to their backs and dug her nails lightly into their skin, seeking the strength to withstand the passionate torture they were inflicting on her.

It seemed as though they spent years on her breasts, exploring each plump inch, savoring the taste. By the time their heads drifted lower, she was close to screaming with frustration. She felt a wave of relief as their tongues blazed a trail down her stomach, where one of them briefly licked around the jeweled stud. They shifted away from her, and she let her hands fall to the bed. Her breasts ached with the pleasure they had given her, and she balled her hands into fists, mentally repeating to herself that they would soon fulfill her.

She was pliant as Sorin lifted her into a sitting position and draped her against his chest. She held her breath with anticipation as his large hands moved to her thighs, parted them widely, and then moved to open her pussy. Lucian was now kneeling on the floor, with his upper body still on the bed. His breath was hot against her lips as he blew gently against her clit. Starr tensed, waiting for him to taste her.

He moved forward with what seemed like deliberate slowness, but finally, his tongue swept down her slit, licking away the juices that had collected there. Starr shifted impatiently, finding the rough texture of Sorin's hair against her back only further inflamed her senses.

Lucian's tongue darted inside her, swirling around her clit. A small scream managed to free itself, and Starr gripped Sorin's forearms, not certain if she would

survive the pleasure. She had never imagined a tongue could be so soft, or that her clit could be so responsive. Why didn't it feel like that when she touched herself?

"How does she taste?" Sorin's tone was so gruff with passion that the words were barely distinguishable.

She moaned when Lucian pulled away to answer.

"Like Heaven." He sighed. "She's sweet and tangy at the same time. She's so wet."

Her pussy spasmed as he described what she tasted like. It was amazing how his words could turn her on and make her long to taste herself on his tongue. "Kiss me." She uttered the words without thought, giving her impulses free rein.

Lucian nodded and rose to his feet. He settled on the bed on his knees between her opened legs and leaned forward. His mouth was gentle when it settled on hers, but Starr didn't allow that. She brought up a hand and buried it in his hair, bringing him closer. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and flicked it across his. Her taste lingered on his tongue, as she had expected. It was different from the taste of Sorin's arousal.

He leaned closer, pressing her into Sorin's chest, as his tongue tangled with hers, stroking eagerly. Starr's heart raced, and she opened her mouth wider, allowing his tongue deeper into her mouth. Sorin cupped her breasts and squeezed gently, reminding her he was watching.

She released Lucian's hair and turned her head slightly to break the kiss. Starr leaned back against Sorin's chest, with her face upturned, watching Sorin. "Now kiss him." She leaned back a bit to allow Lucian to get closer to Sorin. She held her breath as their lips met. Her heart pounded as Sorin's tongue darted into Lucian's mouth to taste her essence on his tongue. The kiss they shared was no less hungry than the one she had experienced with Lucian, and it made her anxious to taste Sorin.

When they broke apart, Lucian rested his forehead against Sorin's chest, while his hand sought out hers, which lay on Sorin's thigh, squeezing gently. Starr leaned closer, and she could hear their hearts racing as quickly as hers. Slowly, she raised her head and brought her mouth near Sorin's. She didn't want to push Lucian away, and he seemed to realize this. He shifted enough to nuzzle her neck as she tilted her head. Sorin's mouth came down on hers. His kiss was urgent and possessive.

She responded enthusiastically, opening her mouth to let his tongue sweep inside. She moaned as Lucian's fingers sought out her pussy and began stroking her clit. She was vaguely aware of Sorin leaning back, bringing her with him. Lucian lay across her, but balanced most of his weight on his free arm. Once again, his mouth slid lower, pausing to suckle her nipple, before continuing down. He flicked his tongue around the ruby stud in her belly before drifting even lower.

She bit down on Sorin's tongue when Lucian's tongue slipped inside her pussy again. As he probed her entrance, she pushed her tongue into Sorin's mouth, branding him with her touch. Almost imperceptibly, he shifted her onto her back once again on the bed, only then disentangling his mouth from hers.

Starr panted for breath as Sorin kissed her cheek before shifting positions. Now he was kneeling and slowly sliding his mouth down her body. She parted her thighs further as he neared her pussy, where Lucian's tongue continued to explore.

"Oh!" She was surprised the sound was at all intelligible when Sorin's tongue joined Lucian's in her pussy. One swirled around her clit, and the other probed at her opening, seeking entrance. She arched her hips without control, unable to stop the instinct. Their strokes increased in tempo, and with her last conscious thought, she lifted her head to look. The sight of their heads pressed together, between her thighs, triggered a wave of spasms deep in her pussy.

Her body convulsed as her pussy contracted and released, bringing an intensity of release she had never experienced before. She sobbed out their names and grasped the coverlet on the bed in her fists, trying to weather the storm of pleasure without passing out.

Her heart seemed to stutter before slowing gradually. Starr could almost breathe normally again when they turned her on her side. Lucian's tongue resumed caressing her clit, making her cry out. "I can't do that again." How did she manage to speak at all?

"You can." Sorin's tone brooked no argument. He didn't speak again as his lips skimmed her buttocks, and his tongue darted into her cleft.

She stiffened when Sorin's hand parted her cheeks and one of his thumbs pressed lightly against her anus. She stiffened further when something thin penetrated her,

followed by something warm and slippery filling her anus. Her eyes widened with alarm. "What is that?"

Lucian's lips left her throbbing pussy long enough to answer. "Anal lube. We came prepared."

She tried to relax as Sorin's finger penetrated her anus. It wasn't that difficult, as Lucian's expert touch reduced her to a pile of sensation. It didn't take long for her sphincter to relax and for Sorin's ministrations to become pleasurable. She closed her eyes and surrendered her body to the thrust of Sorin's fingers and the velvety exploration of Lucian's tongue.

"Is she ready?"

Starr's eyes snapped open when Lucian's tongue left her pussy again.

"Almost. I can feel her pussy convulsing."

"What's going on?" There was a thread of panic in her tone. She knew they wouldn't hurt her, but couldn't help feeling apprehensive about what might come next.

Sorin was the one to answer. "We want to make love to you in every way imaginable. Together, separately... Do you want us to take you at the same time?"

She didn't have to think about her answer. "Oh, yes."

Sorin stretched her anus as another finger joined the first. "We want to possess you here, but you need to be prepared. Do you trust us?"

Again, she didn't need time to think about her answer. "With my life."

Sorin sounded hoarse when he answered. "Then relax, *dragostia*. Let us pleasure you."

Starr obeyed him and focused on relaxing. Soon, Lucian's tongue and Sorin's fingers once again induced a passionate trance, and she was helpless to keep her body from responding, even if she had wanted to.

She could feel her orgasm building, and Lucian must have realized, because his strokes increased in pace. Abruptly, her pussy convulsed, and she cried out. As she reached the summit of her orgasm, something entered her anus. She stiffened at the intrusion, but more from surprise than pain. Her orgasm continued, making it impossible to ask what Sorin had slipped inside her for several long seconds.

When her body slowly relaxed and her heart rate slowed, Starr realized whatever he had put in her was still in her anus. She opened her eyes and lifted her head, straining to see.

Sorin caressed her hip. “Shh, *dragostia*, it’s just a plug to stretch you. After a short time of having it in there, you will be ready for me.” He chuckled. “But first, are you ready for Lucian? His cock is begging to have you.”

She shivered with mingled anticipation and anxiety. She wasn’t afraid of the pain—well, maybe a little. Rather, it was what their joining meant that truly frightened her. Once Lucian took her virginity, there was no going back. Even as she had the thought, she knew it was already too late. There had been no going back from the moment she formed a blood-bond with these two. They were her destiny.

Chapter 4

"Are you ready for me, Starr?" Lucian's voice was gentle and hesitant, with an underlying note of need he couldn't mask.

She nodded, feeling incapable of speech. It was only a sudden dart of worry that caused her frozen tongue to thaw. "What if I get pregnant?"

"You won't." Sorin sounded confident.

"I could—"

"No. We've planned everything carefully, *dragostia*," Lucian said. "For the past month, Sorin and I have been taking a contraceptive potion." He laughed. "We found the mixture in one of your books while you were busy with other matters."

Then she had nothing else to worry about. She nodded. "I'm ready."

Sorin settled against the headboard and drew her against him. Her head rested against his stomach. Starr licked her lips as Lucian shifted positions and knelt between her thighs. She looked up at Sorin. "Why Lucian?"

"Would you rather have Sorin?" Lucian asked.

"I want you both at the same time, but I can't do that my first time." She shrugged, conscious of Sorin's crisp body hair brushing against her shoulders. "I just wondered why you two decided on Lucian going first?"

"Sorin is..." Lucian cleared his throat. "Well, his cock is larger than mine. We thought I would be easier on you."

She groaned. "If that's going to be easy..." Starr trailed off as Lucian scooted closer. She locked her thighs around his waist as he leaned forward.

"Just relax." Sorin caressed one of her nipples. "Don't think about the pain. Focus on the pleasure, *dragostia*."

It was good advice, but her stomach insisted on fluttering with nerves as the head of Lucian's cock paused at the entrance of her pussy. She grasped Sorin's thighs and took a

deep breath. Her pussy still throbbed with arousal, and she was wet. Physically, at least, she was ready for Lucian's possession. She nodded again.

His cock entered her with one deep thrust. Starr closed her eyes, but the flash of pain had faded almost before she realized it had hurt. She let out a deep breath and was aware of the tension in her muscles easing. She hadn't even known she was tense.

"How does it feel?" Lucian asked, looking down at her intently.

She parted her thighs and shifted her buttocks to accommodate his length. "It's wonderful."

That was before he began thrusting. The first time he withdrew and entered again, it hurt a little. Starr breathed through the pain and resisted the urge to tense up. By the time he entered her again, only pleasure remained. She hadn't expected to feel so different just from having a cock inside her. There had been a persistent ache in her pussy the past few years, but it was now fading away. Each time he surged inside her, the ache slowly changed to a nagging pull that triggered minor contractions deep inside her womb.

She could feel the tug of desire in her belly. Her entire body ached, and Sorin's rough thumbs on her nipples served only to heighten her need. She thrashed in his arms, as her hips instinctively rose to meet each of Lucian's thrusts. Breathless moans escaped her, but she was powerless to rein them in. Starr dug her nails into Sorin's flesh, searching for an anchor as Lucian filled her.

Small convulsions began inside her pussy and radiated outward. Lucian must have felt them, because he slipped a hand between their bodies to stroke her clit. Starr tightened her thighs around him, trying to keep him in. As he thrust into her, his fingers worked her clit in small circles, mimicking Sorin's actions on her nipples.

She cried out as Sorin tugged on her nipples, while Lucian thrust deeply into her. He pushed lightly against her clit, and spasms overtook her. Starr could feel all of her body shaking as her pussy clenched and released around Lucian's cock. She cried out from the release as intense pleasure washed over her. She was vaguely aware of Lucian coming inside her, but the intensity of her orgasm consumed her, making it impossible

to take much joy in the knowledge she had pleased him. Later, she would be able to reflect on that.

Lucian collapsed on top of her, but supported his weight on his arms. Starr opened her eyes, not even realizing she had closed them, when he pressed light kisses to her brow. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his face was flushed. He was breathing as heavily as she was, and their pants filled the room.

Starr tilted her head and looked up at Sorin. His eyes glittered with need, and a flush filled his cheeks too. She could feel his cock poking into her back and was ready for him, just like that. She loosened one of her clenched hands from his thigh and brought it up to caress his hair. She smiled. "Your turn."

To her surprise, Sorin shook his head. "Not tonight, Starr. You might not feel it now, but you'll be sore in the morning. I don't want to hurt you."

"I want you, Sorin."

He brushed his hand across her forehead. "Tomorrow, we'll see how you feel."

She frowned. "But it's not fair to you."

"I can survive some frustration, *dragostia*. Lucian saw to my needs earlier, knowing this would be the outcome tonight."

She shook her head, refusing to deny Sorin release. Yes, Lucian had pleased him earlier, but he was hard and ready again. "I want to do something for you. What can I do?"

Sorin and Lucian traded looks before he answered. "I don't want to overwhelm—"

"You won't. What do I do?" Would he want to penetrate her backside? She swallowed a hint of apprehension, determined to do whatever he asked. He had been so generous with her tonight that she couldn't do any less.

"Well, if you don't mind..." He seemed hesitant. "I know you haven't before. If you don't want to—"

Lucian must have realized Sorin was having a hard time uttering his request. "He wants you to suck his cock, Starr."

She nodded eagerly. "Okay."

Lucian rolled to the side, allowing Starr to roll over onto her stomach. She scooted down until her mouth was at his cock, and then looked up at Sorin. "What should I do?"

Lucian touched Sorin's shoulder, and he propped his back against the headboard, while still sitting. His eyes remained wide, obviously preparing to absorb every detail of the first touch of her mouth on his cock.

She turned her head as Lucian settled beside her. He rested his head on her back. "Put your mouth around him, Starr. Just relax your jaw."

She opened her mouth and tentatively took the head of Sorin's cock into her mouth. It barely fit, and she was momentarily thankful Lucian had been the one to take her virginity. As she supported the base, she swirled her tongue around the head of the cock. Sorin groaned, and she took that as a sign of pleasure. Once again, Starr flicked her tongue around his cock, pausing to trace the tip.

"Feel the V with your tongue? Lick him there." Lucian interspaced his instructions with a string of kisses across her back and shoulders.

Starr found the spot and flicked her tongue across it. Immediately, liquid dripped from Sorin's tip and flooded her mouth. She paused to swallow before resuming her ministrations.

"Apply suction. Just enough for him to feel it." As he continued, Lucian's hand slid under her to grasp her breast. He thumbed her nipple, while sucking gently on her shoulder. How could that one spot be so sensitive? Darts of pleasure spread from the epicenter of her shoulder, making it difficult to focus on Sorin. She tried to clear her mind and return to the task at hand.

Once again, Starr followed Lucian's instructions. She was soon sucking Sorin and moving her mouth up and down the length of him, as far as she could go. Lucian continued to caress her nipple, causing the little bud to ache with desire. She pressed her pussy against the bed when her need increased again.

Reassured by Sorin's sounds of pleasure, she found her own rhythm. She stopped sucking to trace her tongue down the vein throbbing in Sorin's cock. She heard a low growl escape Sorin, and his cock spasmed. Instinctively, she put her mouth around him and resumed sucking, enjoying the way his cock convulsed in her mouth. She could feel

his muscles bunch and swore his cock hardened further, as he neared climax. In seconds, he was coming, sending hot spurts of satisfaction into her mouth. She swallowed as quickly as possible, but some trailed down her chin.

She kept her mouth around him until his cock began to soften. Finally, Starr lifted her head and shot a glance at Sorin, to gage his pleasure. He had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily.

She turned her head when Lucian stopped kissing her shoulder.

Sorin's tone was gruff when he said, "You're a natural, Starr."

She smiled at Lucian. "I had a good teacher." Starr discreetly wiped her mouth and flexed her jaw muscles. Sorin was more than a mouthful. As Sorin turned onto his side and patted the bed, she scooted up and cuddled against him. She was aware of Lucian removing the plug from her buttocks before he nestled behind her. He put his arm around her, and his hand rested on Sorin's hip.

Starr draped her arm across Sorin's waist and placed her hand on Lucian's. Her body still thrummed with desire, but pleasant exhaustion was flooding her. She found it impossible to keep her eyes open. A yawn escaped her, and she cuddled just a bit closer to Sorin. Lucian followed the movement.

Curled together, they slept.

Starr couldn't remember sleeping better in her life, which made the nightmare particularly horrifying.

She was lying in bed, but not the one she shared with Sorin and Lucian. In the vision, she was bound somehow to the bed, but not by any physical means. As she watched with wide-eyed terror, a glint of silver flashed above her. As the silver descended, the moon shining through the window reflected off something sharp...

She awoke with a scream trapped in her throat, and her heart racing in her ears. It took Starr a second to realize she was no longer in the dream, but back safely in the cabin. She frowned, wondering if the nightmare had just been a dream, or if it was

actually a vision. She had always required an herbal concoction, incense, and meditation to induce visions in the past.

Could it be that her powers were increasing? She knew Ylenia had been adept at tuning into visions without the aids Starr used, and had often received messages in her dreams.

But what did it mean? Was it a message, heralding someone was going to stab her, or was it allegorical? Did it symbolize her betraying Corsova, in effect stabbing the Protector in the back?

Starr's attention wavered from the dream when the bed dipped. She turned her head to find Sorin watching her. She curled closer, while grasping Lucian's hand. She couldn't hide her anxiety, but they must have misinterpreted the cause of it, not being privy to her vision.

"Please don't regret what happened," said Lucian, sounding mournful.

"We have done nothing wrong," Sorin said quickly. "This was meant to be."

"Everything will be fine. It will work out. You must believe that, *dragostia*," Lucian added.

She shook her head and tried to hide the lingering disquiet from the nightmare. It didn't seem like the right time to burden them with the vision, especially since it was probably nothing more than a manifestation of her anxiety over having given in to her needs.

It was difficult to meet their eyes. Shyness welled inside her, and she looked down. Memories of the night they had spent together flooded her mind, reminding her of just how uninhibited she had been. She wondered what they thought of her this morning. "It *was* meant to be, and I don't regret what we did," she whispered. It was true she didn't regret making love with them, but she couldn't help dreading the consequences.

Lucian stroked her hip, while Sorin's fingers gently turned her face up to meet him. Before Starr could feel disconcerted by his gaze, he brushed his lips against hers, giving her no time to speak. As he lifted his mouth, Lucian's lips traced across her neck, eliciting a groan from her.

Her discomfort melted away, replaced by a surge of desire. Starr ached for them again, with an unnerving intensity. It was even stronger than the need she'd had for them before they made love to her. She cupped her hand around Sorin's cock, and then made a sound of surprise as he pulled away. Didn't he want to make love to her, as Lucian had? She stared at him with confusion.

He gave her a tender smile. "I want you, Starr."

She leaned forward, wetting her lips, but withdrew at his next words.

"But not today."

She made a sound of distress, and then bit hard on her tongue. She didn't want him to see the pain his rejection caused. She resisted the urge to turn her head away when Sorin caressed her cheek. "You need your rest for tonight, *dragostia*."

Starr's brow furrowed, and she forgot her ire. "What happens tonight, Sorin?"

Lucian laughed, low in his throat. "It's a surprise."

Sorin also laughed. "That's not the only surprise. We have one more for you, so hurry and dress." The note of huskiness in his voice and the gleam in his eyes led Starr to believe the surprise was of the carnal sort. A shiver of anticipation went through her. She couldn't help imagining what sorts of things they had in mind for her. She didn't doubt each one would be a sensual delight.

Chapter 5

The first surprise turned out to be a trip to the natural hot springs a few miles up the mountain. When Starr asked why they were going there, Lucian had replied, "To loosen your sore muscles. You must be ready for tonight."

She felt a stir of frustration at their cryptic attitude, but bit down the urge to demand an answer. Anticipation had already heightened her senses. She could just imagine what state she would be in by the time they unveiled the surprise.

It felt wonderful to sink into the hot water. Muscles she hadn't been aware of until last night ached with low-grade persistence. Almost as soon as she settled in the waist-deep pool, the water soothed her tense areas.

Lucian and Sorin slid in on either side of her, but made no move to touch her. Starr looked up at them through the veil of her lashes, waiting for one or both to reach for her. Her mouth settled into a frown when all they did was lean back and close their eyes. The water bubbled around her with gentle whispers, but it couldn't calm her racing thoughts and taut nerves.

As the silence settled between them and lengthened, she sighed. Finally, it was too quiet. The water was too relaxing, and she was too anxious to rest. "Well?"

Lucian opened one of his eyes and gave her a lazy look. "Well, what?"

"What are we doing here?"

"I told you...relaxing."

She sighed again. "I'm relaxed."

Sorin chuckled, but didn't open his eyes. "No, you aren't. We can feel your mind thrumming with thoughts."

Her mouth dropped open. "*What?* What do you mean, you can feel my mind?"

He finally opened his eyes and looked at her. "Today, your mind is so strong, I can't block mine from yours. There's a constant," he paused, frowning with concentration, "hum coming from you. Not all of your thoughts are flowing to me, but I can feel your emotions."

"I can sense them too," Lucian added. "If it had been this easy before, it wouldn't have taken so long to figure out what you needed."

"I don't—" Starr broke off, turning a puzzled gaze on Lucian. "What do you mean?"

Color had warmed his cheeks, and he shared a long look with Sorin, who seemed annoyed with him. Lucian cleared his throat. "We, uh, we deliberately eavesdropped on your thoughts whenever we sensed you were aroused. We were trying to discern what you wanted, so we could give it to you." His blush deepened. "We hoped that fulfilling your fantasies would convince you to join with us."

She felt a stir of anger, remembering how she had always respected the barriers in place between them. Being a vampire, it would have been easy to tune in to their thoughts, especially in the early days of their bonding, when their minds hadn't acquired any psychic abilities. How dare they not give her the same respect?

"We felt bad about it," Sorin said. "We knew it was wrong, but we never, *ever* listened in when you were doing other things. It was only when we sensed your arousal. You have to understand that it was desperation driving us, *dragostia*. We've been aching for you since we were seventeen and formed the blood-bond with you.

"When we joined with you, we didn't think about not being able to have you in every way. When we realized what your future position meant for all of us, we tried to deny our feelings for you, but the time passing has only increased our need, not diminished it, as we had hoped it would." He gave a small, forced laugh. "Your being forbidden made you all the more tantalizing."

She remained motionless when Lucian touched her thigh. She refused to look at him, but couldn't pretend that her heart didn't race at the light touch.

"Hasn't it been the same for you? Knowing you can't be with us, but longing for it. Haven't you been tempted to do things you thought you shouldn't?"

She turned her head to meet his eyes. She winced at the mingled shame and desire she saw there. Slowly, she nodded, remembering the hours she had spent masturbating while fantasizing about the two of them.

“We planned to tell you that we had seen your fantasies,” Sorin said. He glared at Lucian. “We just hadn’t planned to today.”

Heat blossomed in her cheeks, and it wasn’t from the temperature of the hot springs. “You know what I fantasized about. Was last night staged?”

There was a hesitation, before Sorin spoke again. “We did arrange for you to walk in on us. We’d hoped you seeing what you desired would crumble the last of your resistance—because we are all lovers, *dragostia*.”

Should she be angry for their manipulation, or grateful that their plan had finally overruled her sense of duty? Starr couldn’t decide. She had known coming to the cabin with them would lead to lovemaking, but had expected it to occur naturally. She hadn’t imagined it would happen because they had orchestrated it.

Would she have been brave enough to make the first move? Even last night, she had been powerless to act on her wants for a long time. If she were honest with herself, she had needed that extra push provided by Sorin and Lucian.

She fixed a frown on her face. “I expect you to stay out of my mind now that you’ve gotten what you want.”

“We will,” Sorin said.

“What we all wanted,” Lucian added simultaneously.

The last bit of anger faded away, and Starr relaxed. “Yes, that’s true.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. Sorin and Lucian moved closer to her, but neither reached out to touch her. They seemed content to relax without speaking.

It was a while before she broke the silence. By then, her muscles had relaxed, and apparently, her tongue had loosened too. “We’re very near Necheau. Perhaps you should visit your families.” She was instantly aware of the way they tensed and could have kicked herself. She knew they didn’t like talking about their past, but still couldn’t resist trying to get them to reconcile with the Pack at least once or twice a year.

She opened her eyes when Sorin shifted away from her. The bleak expression he wore made her frown. She looked at Lucian and saw it mirrored on his face. This was different from their usual brusque reaction to any mention of the life they had turned away from when they were seventeen. "What is it?"

It was a long moment before Sorin answered. He sounded reluctant, and there was no disguising the trace of pain in his eyes. "My mother is dead, Starr. She died a year ago, last winter, challenging Rica. Lucian's father was killed too. They tried to steal leadership of the Pack. Rica did what was necessary."

She gasped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Lucian wasn't looking at her when he answered the question she had asked Sorin. "It wasn't that important."

Starr shook her head. "How can you say that? They were your family. You didn't get a chance to reconcile with them before their deaths."

Lucian turned to look at her. "They didn't act like our family, Starr. My father and Belia turned their backs on us when they discovered our relationship and intent to seek out a vampire to form a blood-bond. We did our mourning when we left Necheau. We've been dead to our families the last six years, so what does it matter if they are now dead to us?"

She turned to look at Sorin, searching his face for signs that he held a different sentiment. His expression bordered on glacier. "Sorin, surely –"

He frowned. "You should understand how it is. Look how your parents reacted when you formed a blood-bond with us."

Starr flinched at the reminder of how narrow-minded her own parents were. Rather, her mother. Her father had just followed his wife's lead. Starr's mother was one of the few vampires who believed in maintaining pure bloodlines. She saw no advantage in gaining the ability to transform into a wolf by bonding with a werewolf. To her, that merely weakened pure vampire blood.

When Starr refused to break the bond forming with Sorin and Lucian, her parents had moved from the castle and turned their backs on her. Their only contact these days was through stiff letters and an occasional meeting when Starr ventured into Bulgainia.

The separation bothered Starr, but she knew there was no way to bridge the gap. Like Sorin and Lucian, she had made her choice long ago and must live with it. Still, she didn't think she could be so blasé about either of her parents dying.

The reality of how short time was, even for a vampire, hit her. She reached for Sorin, touching his arm. "What about your sister? Don't you want to get to know her again?"

He shrugged. "I never really knew her at all, and from what I remember, she allowed Mother to rule her life. She was twelve when I was banished. I doubt she remembers anything of me at all. When we returned to Necheau eighteen months ago to deal with the anthropologist, Lia didn't even look at me."

She could see the way they were withdrawing from her and knew it was time to drop the subject. She wouldn't give up trying to get Lucian and Sorin to approach the Pack again, since things had changed in the werewolf community with the arrival of the anthropologist who became Lupina, but now wasn't the time. She didn't want to spend a moment of their short month together wasted on angry words or bitter feelings.

* * * * *

To her frustration, Sorin and Lucian refused to give her even a hint of what they had planned for later as the day wore on. They kept her in a constant state of suspense, and it was with a feeling of aggravation that she stood by the fireplace later that night, watching Sorin and Lucian disrobe. She had already removed her clothing and now walked to the bed.

"No," Sorin said. "Not there."

She looked up at him, posed to question his words, but her eyes fell on something Lucian held. It was thin and red. "What's that?"

He tossed it to her, nodding when she caught it nimbly. "Tie that around your hips and come outside. Don't wear anything else."

"Not even shoes," Sorin added, as he walked to the door and opened it. Before exiting, he winked at her. "Don't keep us waiting too long. The moon won't be full forever."

Lucian followed him out before she had a chance to question either of them. Starr stared down at the scrap of silk in her hands and slowly stretched it out. It was a scarlet sash. She frowned, realizing there was something significant about the garment, but unable to recall what. It was something Ylenia had mentioned long ago, but she couldn't remember to what it related.

With a sense of hesitation, she draped the sash around her hips and tied it in a knot on one side. Was she wearing it properly? She didn't know, and they weren't here to ask.

She had spent the day wondering what they had planned, but now, she was almost too worried to step outside and find out. There was something different about their moods. Excitement, yes, but also apprehension. Were they as uncertain about whatever was coming as she was? That thought did nothing to bolster her confidence.

She took a deep breath and exited the cabin. Starr frowned when she saw Lucian lighting a small bonfire. It was much too hot to need a fire. Before she could query him, he rejoined Sorin, who beckoned her forward. Her feet obeyed, as her mind questioned their intentions.

She stopped walking when she stood before them, waiting to see what happened next.

Sorin was the first to speak. "The moon is perfect tonight."

"For what?" Neither of them answered.

"Perfect," Lucian echoed.

Sorin cleared his throat. He appeared uncomfortable. "It can't be official, of course, but it's the best we could do, with just the two of us."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Welcome to your Mating Moon Ceremony," said Lucian, flashing white teeth in a feral grin. "There will be no challengers, save us."

Her frown deepened. "What is a Mating Moon Ceremony?" As she asked the question, her memory stirred. She knew she had heard the term before. Even if she hadn't, she had a pretty good idea of what was happening. "Sorin, Lucian, I—"

"This is our wedding ceremony, Starr."

She shook her head at Sorin, denying his words. "I can't do this."

Lucian's grin faded. "You won't accept us?"

She sighed. "You know I can't. Our time together is finite. Once we return to the castle—"

"You are our wife." Sorin spoke the words with quiet conviction. "You have been emotionally since the day we bonded, if not physically. Last night, you accepted our claim on you. Tonight, you will accept both of us as your mates."

"I can't!" Her voice echoed through the forest.

Sorin and Lucian stepped forward, as one. "We would rather die than deny what is in our hearts," Sorin said.

She trembled as they reached for her, drawing her into their embrace. She could feel her resolve weakening as Lucian stroked her back, while Sorin caressed her stomach, just above the sash. "Please don't make me do this."

"We don't want to force you," Lucian whispered in her ear. "We want you to accept us."

"You want to accept us," Sorin said firmly. "Do not worry so much about the future. Seize the moment, *dragostia*."

She closed her eyes, trying to fight the seductive pull of their words and her own heart's cravings. She opened her mouth to refuse, but Sorin's lips settled over hers, sealing off her protest. She whimpered as Lucian's mouth drifted lower, to kiss her neck. She should step away, but it was so difficult to fight them and herself.

"Will you accept us as your mates, Starr?" There was a note of formality in Sorin's voice.

"Accept us," Lucian whispered, and his breath tickled her skin.

Starr took a deep breath and made herself step away from them. With obvious reluctance, they let her go. "I can't accept you. We will all end up hurt if I do."

"No more hurt than we'll be without you." Lucian made no attempt to hide his suffering, and it hit her in the stomach like a physical blow. "Now that we know how it can be—"

“—how it should be—” Sorin interjected.

“—we can’t go back to the way it was. We need you. You need us. Don’t fight it.”

She took a step back, hoping that putting distance between them and her would let her think more clearly. “It’s impossible. I can’t mate with you.”

Sorin and Lucian shared a look. What passed between them was inscrutable, but a quiver of disquiet worked its way up Starr’s spine. She resisted the urge to prod their minds for more information. “What?”

Sorin straightened to his full height. “By rights, we now invoke a claim on you. We have one moon-cycle to convince you to accept us as your mates.”

Her eyes widened. “What? You can’t do that.”

“It’s our way. The Pack has followed this tradition for hundreds of years.”

She glowered at Sorin, who sounded so arrogant. “You have turned your back on the Pack and their ways.”

“Not in this,” Lucian said. He crooked his finger. “Come to us, so we can complete the ceremony.”

Her feet propelled her forward. Common sense tried to reassert itself, but the force of her desire muted its sensible urgings. Starr stopped within inches of them and waited, wondering what would come next. She didn’t expect Sorin to untie the sash from her waist, nor for Lucian to hold out her arm and place his hand atop hers. When Sorin put his hand under hers, she watched with fascination as the two men worked together to bind the sash around their hands, joining them.

“At the next full moon, you will have to give us an answer, Starr.”

“I have my answer—”

Lucian put his finger to her lips. “You didn’t let Sorin finish. You can accept us before the moon-cycle ends, but you can’t reject us for the duration of the claim.”

She glowered at him. “Who makes these rules?”

“Men,” Lucian said, and then laughed. “Our ancestors, I suppose, who liked being able to claim the women they had their sights on.”

"Things were simpler once," Sorin said softly, with a gleam in his eyes. "A man saw the woman he wanted and claimed her."

She frowned at him, feeling a tad disgruntled. "How have things changed?"

He grinned a long moment before answering. "She couldn't reject him back then."

"Lucky times have changed," she said sarcastically.

They both laughed. Lucian drew her back into his arms. "They haven't changed that much, *dragostia*. You won't refuse us."

She nodded to emphasize her resolve. "I will."

A throaty chuckle escaped Sorin. "No, you won't. By the time we've finished with you, you won't want to."

She held her tongue, knowing she couldn't refute his statement. She already knew she didn't want to refuse to accept them as mates. It was only because she was duty-bound to do so that she had summoned enough willpower not to agree as soon as they presented the Mating Moon Ceremony. How would she maintain her determination for a month, with the two of them doing everything in their power to weaken her resolve?

Chapter 6

She was still in a state of bemusement when they brought her inside and led her to the bed. She stood passively as they untied the sash and dropped it on the floor. Starr let Lucian lay her back, as she stared up at Sorin, enjoying the heat of desire in his eyes. Tonight, he would be her lover too. She shivered with anticipation, but wondered at the change of scenery. She started to ask, but her voice emerged as a husky croak. She had to clear her throat before she could speak. "You told me earlier that we wouldn't be using the bed."

"We were optimistic," Sorin said. "If you had accepted us, we would have had the Consummation Ceremony. Since we had to invoke the claim, we will not make love under the light of the full moon this month."

"Instead, we'll spend the next four weeks seducing you senseless," said Lucian, before lifting her leg around the calf and bringing her foot to his mouth. He kissed her ankle gently before lowering her limb to the bed.

When they rose, Starr tried to sit up. Sorin pushed her carefully back against the pillows. "Lie here and wait for us to return."

With a long-suffering sigh, Starr slowly relaxed and watched them walk into the kitchen. What were they planning now? Her aching pussy hoped it involved something sensual and satisfying.

As Lucian filled a porcelain basin with warm water, Sorin poured oil into a small glass bowl. The scent of rose bay caused his nostrils to twitch, reminding him of nights spent running through the mountains as a wolf, in the days before responsibility weighed so heavily on all of them. Perhaps they had all been naïve, assuming the queen

would be able to easily assume Valdemeer's role in ruling Corsova. She had slowly adjusted, but not without a lot of help from those closest and most loyal to her.

Thinking of loyalty, he swallowed thickly, wondering how the Protector would feel about their blatant disregard of the tenants of Starr's position. They couldn't claim ignorance. Both he and Lucian had full knowledge of what they were doing. Would it matter to Anca if she knew love drove their desperate actions, leading them to break tradition and possibly risk all their lives?

In his optimistic moments, he assumed she would. After all, her deep love for Demi was obvious in every glance. How could she fail to understand their need for Starr, and her need for them?

In his grimmer moments, he imagined her taking a more pragmatic view if she ever found out. As the leader of the country, she would surely point out that only tradition and following the old ways had allowed their way of life to continue for centuries. She would certainly mention that the three of them were too insignificant to assume they could be allowed to change anything.

How would she deal with them if she ever found out Starr was no longer pure? Would she sentence them all to death, or order they be banished? Would she blame he and Lucian, or would Starr be punished as well?

He felt a moment of doubt at continuing with their plan, but it faded. As of last night, it was too late to restore Starr's purity, and call him a selfish bastard, but he ached to have her as Lucian had done. He felt empty inside. Damn the consequences, but he had to join with Starr. Six years of aching frustration was too much for any man to bear and still be reasonable.

Starr had grown impatient by the time they returned. She watched as Lucian set a basin on the small table near the bed. Her gaze wandered to Sorin as Lucian got onto the bed and settled on one side of her. She saw a small bowl in his large hand and wondered what it contained. When Sorin set it carefully on the bed beside her, within easy reach

for Lucian, she craned her neck to see what the liquid was. The scent of rose bay reached her nose.

“What’s that?” She tried to think of mixtures that called for rose bay, but her ability to concentrate disappeared when Lucian caressed her lips.

“Close your eyes.”

It was no trouble to comply. Her lids closed, and Starr concentrated on relaxing. She was tense with anticipation, so the first brush of Sorin’s fingers across her foot made her stiffen. He had coated his fingers with something slick and slippery. She recognized the mysterious liquid as massage oil and relaxed before either of them could chide her to.

She squirmed when Sorin pressed lightly against the sole of her foot and traced a line from heel to toe. Lucian traced his fingers across her forehead and down her nose. He had also dipped his hand into the oil, and it left a slick residue behind. An involuntary gasp escaped her when Sorin pressed two of his fingers into the ball of her foot, while Lucian’s fingers probed gently at the area behind her left ear.

Tingles ran from her head to her feet, and each little movement from them caused the sensation to intensify. They were just touching her foot and head. How would she survive when they moved on to more sensitive areas?

She opened her eyes when Sorin shifted positions to grasp her foot between his hands. As she watched with heavy lids, he massaged her foot, alternately applying pressure and light strokes. Lucian now had both hands on her, and his fingers were working the tension from her shoulders. The process was a bit awkward since he was massaging from the front, but it still served to ease her stiff muscles.

That wasn’t all their slow massage did. Starr’s pussy wept, and her nipples had beaded to hard points that begged for attention. She squirmed, but they ignored her movements.

As good as their loving touches felt, Starr wasn’t certain she could withstand the tender torture. She had the urge to scream out her frustration and demand they stop teasing her. She had spent all day in a state of arousal, responding to the slightest caress, but neither man had made an effort to go beyond casual flirtation. Her body cried out for them.

Only knowing they had put a great deal of thought into their seduction helped her bite her tongue and keep from voicing a protest. She felt a dart of hope when Sorin placed her foot on the bed, but it faded when he picked up the other one, to give it the same careful attention.

Lucian's hands moved outward from her neck, to squeeze her upper arms. Starr closed her eyes again and tried to let his touch lull her into a state of relaxation. Her body refused to cooperate as Sorin's hands slid up her calf, while Lucian's slid down her arms. Silently, she pleaded for their hands to meet in the middle and focus on her aching pussy.

Her breathing became ragged as Lucian's hands moved from her wrists and slid across her chest. She held her breath as his hands skimmed over her breasts, but released it with a harsh exhalation when he skipped over her nipples and settled his hands on her abdomen. She gave a small, disgruntled sigh when he began rotating two fingers from each hand in tiny, firm circles.

Sorin was in no more hurry than Lucian was, apparently. He had worked his way up to her thigh, but it seemed to be taking him forever to reach the crux, where her swollen clit awaited attention. Once more, she held her breath as he kneaded her thigh with steady pressure, while moving his hands higher. Yes, he was so close...now his fingers would slip inside her pussy...yes...

No. She had tensed with longing, but let her muscles relax as Sorin dropped his hands before touching the spot she really ached for him to explore. She gave a low moan of frustration when he returned to the neglected leg and began working his way up from the calf.

And how was it that Lucian found her stomach so engrossing? He had surely massaged every inch of her abs, sides, hips, and waist at least twice now, but still hadn't managed to reach her pussy. They must be coordinating their movements, to draw out her frustration as long as possible. On one level, she was annoyed with their machinations, but also heartened to know they cared so much about her pleasure, at the expense of their own. They couldn't receive much gratification from massaging her.

Lucian unexpectedly brushed his palm against her pussy, causing it to spasm, and making Starr jump with surprise. A cry tore from her, and she realized how silent the

cabin was. The only sounds were her occasional moans and sighs, and Sorin and Lucian's heavy breathing. "Please," she whispered, as more of a breath than a sound.

She tensed as Lucian's hand cupped her stomach, while Sorin's made its way up the last few inches of her thigh. She didn't doubt they would finally touch her this time. There was nothing else for them to massage, besides the areas they had carefully avoided. Her nipples screamed for consideration just as fervently as her convulsing pussy.

She opened her eyes when Sorin released his hold and climbed off the bed. She gave him a baleful glare as he walked away. She watched with a blend of anger, interest, and frustration as he lifted the basin from the table and brought it back to the bed. "What are you going to do?" Was that husky tone her voice? She sounded almost alien in her need.

"Wash you," Lucian said. "You don't want that oil on your skin, and we don't want it to seep into the bedding when we turn you over."

"I guess not..." She frowned. "What do you mean?"

Sorin laughed. "You'll see."

She subsided into silence, mentally cursing their deviousness, while reveling in the slightly rough texture of the cloths they used to wipe the oil from her skin. It was the perfect stimulus for the heightened sensitivity of her skin, and she moaned with pleasure as the warm water trickled down her skin. Maybe they were on to something, with this slow seduction of her senses.

"Sit up, Starr," Lucian whispered in her ear, as he finished wiping the oil from her face.

She briefly questioned her passivity in their lovemaking, but dismissed the thought. She would have plenty of time to take a more active role later, and it felt decadent to let them direct everything. All that she had to do at the moment was enjoy whatever was coming next.

She let them turn her onto her stomach. Starr cradled a pillow in her arms and laid her head on it, finding it a poor substitute for either man's embrace. She felt a trickle of oil down her back and sighed. Seconds later, Lucian began sliding his hands over her

flesh, working the tense muscles of her lower back. She waited for Sorin to begin massaging the backs of her legs, but he didn't.

A finger feathered down her cleft before pushing between her buttocks. Starr gasped when Lucian hit a sensitive spot with his probing fingers, while another probing finger lightly caressed her anus. She tensed when something hard probed at the opening, but Sorin's hand smoothed over her buttocks, while he shushed her.

"It's just the lube. Relax, *dragostia*."

She took a deep breath and forced her muscles to loosen. The applicator slipped easily into her sphincter, and the thick lube filled her quickly. Lucian was now focusing his attention on her shoulders, while Sorin squeezed one of her cheeks lightly in his hand. The other was apparently occupied with the lube. When he withdrew the tube, she wondered what would come next. Would it be the plug again?

Her question was answered when Sorin parted her cheeks with one hand, while his finger entered her anus to his knuckle. She squirmed when he wiggled it, surprised by the jolt of pleasure that accompanied the slight burning sensation. As Sorin entered her with another finger, she tensed. Lucian responded by decreasing the pressure he applied to her back and changing his touch to slow, soothing circles.

Before she had much of a chance to adjust to Sorin's fingers, he removed them. She arched her hips to signal she wanted more. It had felt surprisingly good, for the brief time he was inside her anus.

Either he complied with her unspoken request, or he was already planning to, because his hand continued to hold her cheeks parted, while the bulbous head of the anal plug pressed against her sphincter.

Starr closed her eyes, balled her fists, and bit down on a mouthful of pillow to stay relaxed as the plug entered her completely. There was the same burning/stretching sensation as last night, but it soon faded. For a moment, she felt neither pleasure nor pain – only pressure.

And then they were rolling her onto her back again. They hadn't even bothered to wipe off the oil. She could feel it seeping into the sheet under her, almost gluing her to the bed.

She turned her head as Lucian scooted up beside her. He was propped up on his side, with his arm across his side. He was smiling at her. "What now?" she managed to ask breathlessly.

"Now, we make love."

The whispered words served to inflame her desire further, rather than soothing her, as he had perhaps intended. A flare of pleasure radiating from her stretched anus shot through her pussy, bringing a fresh wave of moisture. She cried out as Lucian cupped her breast and finally tugged lightly on the hard nipple.

She lifted her head to see what Sorin was doing. He had moved from the bed to wash his hands, but was now back. Rather than straddling her as she had expected, he knelt between her spread legs, with his hands on her upper thighs. A sob escaped her when he moved one hand higher to touch her pussy. She almost thought she could have come just from the light brush of his palm against her swollen lips. When he pushed his palm deeper into her soft flesh and rotated it slightly, she arched upward.

The plug in her anus seemed to settle deeper inside her as she did so, causing a moment of discomfort before it changed to heated pleasure. Starr spread her legs farther, and in her impatience for Sorin to touch her properly, she had almost forgotten Lucian was playing with her breasts.

She remembered as he pinched one forcefully, as if to get her attention. She turned to look at him and the blaze of desire in his eyes swept her away. He was always the calm one, and always in control of his emotions. Sorin was the unpredictable one, with a hint of wildness that couldn't be tamed. She would have expected the expression she saw to be on Sorin's face, not Lucian's.

Out of curiosity, she lifted her head again and assessed Sorin's expression. It was difficult to concentrate when Lucian bent his head to lave one of her nipples. She groaned and lowered her head, but not before seeing deep hunger and need in Sorin's eyes. She didn't doubt she wore a similar expression, but maybe they needed to hear how much she wanted them. Maybe if they did, they would finally do more than tease her.

“If you don’t take me soon, I’m going to die.” That sounded silly, but it was how she felt. There was a pressure building inside her—and not from the anal plug—that threatened to boil over and explode. She didn’t know what would happen when it did. She only knew she had to release the pressure, and the only way to do so was by submitting to the pleasure Sorin and Lucian were creating.

That seemed to be all Sorin needed, because he stopped lightly stroking her lips. Two of his fingers surged inside her, making her cry out. There wasn’t even a hint of soreness as he finger-fucked her. The hot springs had certainly loosened her.

Lucian drew her nipple into his mouth, sucking forcefully, while his hand squeezed her other breast. His thumb ran across the rigid nipple repeatedly, applying enough pressure to make her want to scream.

Almost by sixth-sense, Starr realized Sorin had switched positions. His fingers withdrew from her pussy, and before she could utter a protest, his cock surged inside her. Her eyes widened at the fullness she felt from his cock and the anal plug. If she had ached to be filled, her wish was granted. It was almost more than she could accept. As Sorin withdrew and thrust into her for the first time, the pressure increased, and she wondered how her body would accommodate both of their cocks.

His hips driving his cock deeper into her drove the thought from her mind. Starr could hear Lucian moaning and knew she had neglected him. She reached forward, searching for his cock. When she found it, she cupped her hand around the hard shaft and gave in to instinct, which urged her to grip his cock firmly and move her hand up and down. His cries of pleasure rewarded her.

Sorin’s groans mingled with Lucian’s as he thrust faster and faster inside her. Starr’s lower body tensed as her pleasure grew, and she knew no amount of massage could relax her this time. As Sorin’s cock hardened inside her before beginning to spasm, waves of pleasure crashed over her. Her pussy convulsed around him, triggering his release. Lucian’s ejaculate dripped down her fingers as she came. The convulsions shaking her caused her anus to clench around the plug, which heightened her sense of release.

As Sorin withdrew from her pussy, Starr struggled to catch her breath. To her surprise, the pressure was still building inside her. Her orgasm hadn't been sufficient to stifle it. "More."

"Yes," Lucian said as he lifted his mouth from her tingling breast. His cock grew hard again in her hand, seconds after his orgasm. Wasn't that supposed to be impossible?

As Sorin brushed against her leg, his hard cock poked into her flesh. Starr wondered if they felt the same nameless need she did. Apparently, they hadn't been completely satisfied either.

Lucian disengaged her hold on his cock and scooted backward before turning her on her side. Sorin settled on his side beside her, pressing his chest against her breasts. Starr put her arm over his waist and squeezed his muscled buttock.

Lucian pulled the plug from her anus, and Starr knew what would happen next. She felt a flutter of alarm, remembering how Sorin and the plug had stretched her, but her longing was stronger than her fear. They were meant to fit together – three parts of the whole.

Sorin just held her as Lucian lay against her, pulling her cheeks apart with his hand. Starr met Sorin's gaze as the head of Lucian's cock pressed against her anus. She moved her head forward to kiss him as the cock pressed inside her. It was a snug fit, and she felt a moment of pain, but it faded as Lucian stayed in her without moving. Sorin's tongue darted into her mouth, mimicking the motion his hips would make soon.

She draped her thigh over Sorin's as his lower body pressed against hers. He slipped a hand between their bodies and parted her pussy. She broke the kiss and buried her face in his hairy chest as his cock probed her opening. She took a deep breath as he sheathed his cock in her pussy, and her body responded to their presence with a moment of pain. Her breathing sounded like an explosion when she exhaled, while concentrating on keeping her body relaxed.

It was almost like meditation, as she pictured their cocks surging in and out of her. Somehow, just visualizing the act helped her expand to accommodate them, although she was still tight around their cocks.

“Starr? Can we thrust?”

She nodded, and then realized Lucian probably couldn't see the motion of her head. “Yes, please.” Sorin's hair tickled her lips as she spoke, while his hard chest muffled her voice. Lucian must have heard her answer anyway, because he began to thrust in and out of her, in concert with Sorin, so that they both entered her simultaneously.

There wasn't any pain as they moved. Starr thought that was significant, while she was still able to think. Within minutes, their thrusts had driven any logical thoughts from her mind. Their movements reduced her to a creature of sensation, whose voice's only purpose was to give life to sounds of her pleasure.

The intensity was building inside her. It was a sensation washing over her, going deeper than her convulsing pussy and clenched anus, begging for release. This was something different. It felt like white heat burning her from the inside out, and colors exploded behind her eyes, like fireworks.

As Sorin surged deep inside her, with Lucian following suit, Starr's orgasm swept through her. She screamed with the pleasure, but also with the surge of heat that flooded her. The colors grew more intense, and she opened her eyes, hoping to drive them away. She could still see them and realized it wasn't something she was imagining. She was undergoing a physical reaction to their lovemaking, and it wasn't just from the pleasure she felt.

Her climax reached its zenith when Lucian and Sorin came inside her. As their cocks spasmed, filling her with their satisfaction, it was as though a vortex opened in her mind. She could feel it drawing her in, but was powerless to stop the wave of blackness that overwhelmed her, stealing consciousness from her.

The vision from the previous night consumed her immediately, and it was clearer now. She was no longer viewing it from the perspective of the person on the bed. Rather, she watched from a shadowed corner of the bedchamber as a figure that was clearly feminine lifted a silver dagger high over her head. With a harsh laugh, she plunged it down with all her might.

Starr gasped when the dagger penetrated the heart of the queen, tethered to the bed, as was Demi. This time, she could see faint bands of purple energy holding Anca and

the king in place and recognized it as true magic—not like the form practiced by their people, which relied heavily on natural herbs, tradition, and ceremony.

A cloud shadowing the moon shifted, illuminating the window near the bed. The attacker’s face almost came into view as she turned to advance on Demi, who struggled to cry out, but couldn’t get his voice to cooperate. She shouted a cry of warning when the woman raised the dagger higher, but could effect no change on the outcome of the vision. She watched helplessly as the attacker dispatched Demi with equal ruthlessness.

She jerked with surprise when someone called her name with desperation. At first, she thought it was someone entering the queen’s bedchamber, and braced herself for attack. The voices became distinguishable, and she recognized Sorin and Lucian calling to her. Immediately, she realized she was in a vision. She struggled to open her eyes, to return to reality. With one last look at the bloody dagger the woman was wiping on Anca’s white robe, she wrenched her eyelids up and returned to the cabin.

Sorin and Lucian hovered over her, both wearing identical expressions of concern. She blinked and struggled to remember what had happened. They seemed to sense her confusion, because they began speaking in a rush, talking over each other.

“You passed out—”

“—couldn’t wake you—”

“—are you all right, Starr?” Sorin asked.

Slowly, she nodded, almost surprised to find her body responded to her brain’s command. She still felt sluggish and disoriented. She attempted to sit up, and they both supported her. She touched a hand to her pounding head. “I...I passed out?” she asked in a husky voice.

“Right when you came. You scared the hell out of us,” Sorin said with anger, but with an underlying thread of concern he couldn’t mask.

“Your eyes rolled back, you started shaking, and we couldn’t rouse you,” Lucian added, sounding slightly calmer now than he had seconds ago.

“I was having a vision.” Her brow furrowed. “I was seeing the future, but I can’t say when. It could be tonight or next week.” Starr’s eyes widened. “We have to return to the castle.”

Sorin nodded. "You need a healer—"

"No," she said, cutting him off, "I must warn the queen that she is in danger. In my vision, a woman murdered Anca and Demi. I didn't see her face, but she seemed familiar...." A sense of urgency seized her. "We must go now."

"Now?" Lucian sounded doubtful. "It's only about midnight. Surely, we have time..." He trailed off at Starr's vigorous head shaking.

"I'm sorry, but we have to return to the castle. I can feel it." The sense of urgency had increased. She couldn't be certain, but Starr thought the queen was in pressing danger. Tonight felt like the night the Protector would come under attack.

Sorin sighed. "If you think it is necessary, we will return, *dragostia*."

She could see their disappointment, and it mirrored her own, but Starr couldn't remain in the cabin, indulging her every sensual whim, while their Protector's life was at risk. As she rose from the bed and washed, she tried to console herself with the thought that surely the queen or king had foreseen the danger. It brought little solace, because she knew Ylenia had often had visions long before anyone else.

She should have known about this threat weeks ago. If only her own wants hadn't so consumed her, she would have known about the assassin's plan and could have warned everyone, so they could formulate a plan. What if the queen died because she had been here with Sorin and Lucian?

Starr paused in the process of transforming to wolf-form. The realization came to her that making love with Sorin and Lucian had somehow increased her powers. If she hadn't given in to what her heart and body longed for, she wouldn't have known the queen's life was in peril. She cast a glance at Sorin and Lucian as they transformed, hoping she would have the chance to tell Anca that, in support of allowing them to mate. She couldn't hide her love for Sorin and Lucian any longer, and she refused to live a lie.

But now wasn't the time to fret about that. They had to hurry. Starr could taste danger in the air, and instinct warned her there were more foes than the one she had seen in her vision to worry about, as they left the cabin. If she had remained longer in her vision, she might know from where to expect danger. Since she hadn't, they were

running blind as they rushed through the forest, relying on their senses to warn them of jeopardy in advance.

They ran steadily for the better part of an hour, but Starr's head began buzzing. Pressure filled her ears, and her eyes scanned the forest around them constantly. The thought came to her that they weren't going to make it to the castle.

Sorin had been running slightly ahead of them, and her eyes focused on him. *Stop*, she shouted into his mind. *Stop, Sorin. There's something up ahead.*

He stopped so quickly that his paws skidded into the mossy carpet of the woods as he spun sideways to look back at her. Lucian must have heard her too, because he was now facing the other way, sniffing deeply, while his eyes slowly examined every inch of forest.

Starr closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the feeling of danger overwhelming her. There seemed to be an invisible cord pulling her attention off to her left. She turned her head and opened her eyes, howling with shock when her gaze locked with narrowed eyes of indeterminate color, looking down the stock of a crossbow. A gleam of silver on the tip of the arrow caught her eye, just as the person holding the weapon released it.

Sorin, move! While warning him, Starr shifted to human-form. Before he could move or react to her words of caution, the arrow had penetrated his side, eliciting a howl of rage and pain. In the time it took Starr to watch the arrow enter his flesh, the man or woman with the crossbow must have moved, because she couldn't see them when she looked up again.

Lucian's howl morphed into a cry of rage as he transformed to human-form and rushed to Sorin, who remained in wolf-form. Starr cautiously approached, while scanning the forest for the hunter. The sense of pressure in her head was easing, leading her to think the immediate danger had passed. The person had probably gone deeper into the forests, hoping to catch them from a different vantage point.

"What happened?" Lucian was staring with horror at the arrow sticking out from Sorin's side. "Sorin?"

"It was a man, I think, but it could have been a woman. They had their face shrouded, and I couldn't make out any other details. I saw him in the woods," Starr said. "He was using a crossbow."

Sorin's lids remained closed over his eyes, but they could see the pupils moving rapidly underneath. His furry sides heaved with each breath, and his shallow exhalations caused them to exchange worried looks. His eyes didn't so much as flicker when Lucian called his name again.

"I don't understand why he won't respond. This injury shouldn't have affected him this badly so quickly."

"I think the arrow was tipped with silver. It gleamed in the moonlight."

Lucian's eyes flashed, and he started to get to his feet.

Starr touched his arm. "Where are you going?"

"To catch the man who did this. I'll kill him." There was no mistaking the air of wild recklessness surrounding Lucian.

"We can't leave Sorin. The hunter will have to wait. We have to get Sorin to the castle." She tentatively touched the smooth shaft of the arrow. "If we pulled out the arrow and had him transform, he would heal himself, wouldn't he?"

Lucian shook his head. His brief flash of uncontrolled rage seemed to have faded, leaving him pale with concern. "Silver is poisonous to us, as you know. It requires special treatment. Having him change would only expend energy he needs right now to survive."

She bit her lip, feeling inadequate. She could deal with any of the few vampire afflictions, but had only scant knowledge of werewolf care, even after these last six years. Neither Sorin nor Lucian had ever been more than mildly ill and always recovered without the assistance of a healer. How could she help Sorin?

Her training as a vampire healer did nothing to prepare her for saving her lover. There had never been any need before to heal a vampire in wolf-form. They simply transformed back to their original state before treatment for the few ailments that might affect their race. "What do we do?"

Lucian hesitated before shrugging. "I don't know."

“We’ll get him back to the castle—”

“No.” Lucian heaved a sigh. “There’s only one place he can find the right help, and they’re closer than the castle.”

She knew what it cost him to make the suggestion, and she kept her tone carefully neutral when she asked, “Necheau?”

He nodded, but didn’t speak. There was a look of grim determination on his face as he knelt down and lifted Sorin into his arms. He grunted with the effort of carrying the large wolf, but looked as though he planned to reach the Pack by sheer strength of will.

Starr touched his shoulder. “You can’t carry him that far. You’ll have to go to them and bring them back.”

Lucian shook his head. “I won’t leave you out here with someone trying to kill us.”

“You’ll be in as much danger as I, but we have to separate. I’ll stay with Sorin until you bring back help.” She could hear an invisible clock ticking in her mind, warning her that every second was precious. She had to get to the castle to warn the queen. If only telepathy reached across vast distances, instead of requiring close proximity.

Lucian hesitated, appearing to be conjuring another argument.

“You’re wasting time with arguing. You have to go, Lucian.” Starr kept her voice firm, and tried to sound confident. “I can handle anyone who might attack. I *am* a vampire.”

He still looked dubious as he transformed into wolf-form. He cast a look at her over his shoulder as he began running, and then turned to face the trail in front of him, seemingly running as fast as he could.

Starr watched him go and fought back a feeling of vulnerability. Having Lucian with her was no guarantee they wouldn’t be attacked. No one had expected Sorin to be shot, but it had happened. She was alone, but she also knew she could handle the average foe. A human wouldn’t have much of a chance against her strength. She ignored the quiver of doubt that hit her stomach as she sank to her knees beside Sorin, assuming a protective posture. She mustn’t forget that silver could poison vampires too.

* * * * *

He knew he had made good time, but it still seemed to take forever for Necheau to come into sight. Lucian almost stumbled when he saw the warm glow of electric lights, having forgotten Rica had allowed the village that luxury after the spring thaw. He hadn't been back in two years, since the change, and it had been daytime during his last visit.

It was a vastly different community from the one he had left six years ago, also in the middle of the night. During the brief visits he had made here in Anca's service, he had made a concentrated effort to block out unpleasant memories.

Sorin had also been with him, providing silent support, although his wounds ran just as deep, or deeper, than Lucian's. At least he had only received a beating from his father when their relationship came to light. His grandmother had cared enough about him to take him into the forest and hide him while he recovered, lest Istal change his mind and decide to kill Lucian. Of course, she hadn't cared quite enough to turn her back on tradition and accept him for what he was.

For Sorin, there had been no one to assist him. After Lucian's father—Belia's lover—finished with his own son, he turned to Sorin, beating him even more savagely than he had Lucian. Lucian had thought at the time, and still did, that Istal believed Sorin had seduced him, although that wasn't the truth. They had always been drawn to one another.

When Istal finally finished with him, Belia had cut the word "Abomination" into Sorin's chest and chained him to the well in the center of the square, leaving him subject to ridicule by all who passed. It had taken weeks and several transformations for the scar to fade completely, because she had carved so deeply.

He swallowed down the memory of that incident, and the subsequent escape they made via stealth, when Lucian was recovered enough to leave the forest three nights later and free Sorin from the chains, so they could flee together, knowing there was no future left for them in Necheau. He didn't have time to think about that now. He had come to Necheau to save his lover's life, not to win the approval of these people. That was something he knew they could never do. The Pack was too old-fashioned in their views.

He ran into the square and searched for signs of anyone awake. It was after midnight, but many werewolves were nocturnal by nature. To his misfortune, none were loitering in the square.

He scanned the street, seeking out the leader's house. He spotted the one he thought it was, and then saw the workshop in the back. It wasn't the same house the leader used to occupy, but he knew there had been a fire that destroyed Rica's home two winters ago. This house still had an almost-new look about the wood and fence surrounding it, and it must be the one that was under construction the last time he came to Necheau.

He didn't hesitate to turn in that direction and run to the house. He felt a pressing sense of urgency, knowing Sorin and Starr were alone in the woods and vulnerable to attack.

He had reached the porch before remembering he was still in wolf-form. The Necheans weren't telepathic, so he would have no way to communicate with them in his present form. He took time to assume his human appearance again before slamming the mouth of the howling wolf knocker against the wood of the door. He didn't spare a thought for what the person answering the door would think when they saw him standing there naked. Nudity was an everyday fact-of-life among the Pack.

But the woman answering the door obviously hadn't become accustomed to it. Or perhaps she wasn't used to seeing strangers standing nude on her doorstep. The anthropologist, who was now Rica's mate, wore an expression of disbelief.

Lucian didn't wait for her to speak. He forgot about his discomfort in regards to approaching the Pack for assistance. All he could think of was Starr and Sorin, alone together and vulnerable. It didn't matter any longer what the Pack thought of him, as long as he could persuade them to help. The words flew from his tongue as Rica appeared in the doorway behind his mate, looking stern and unwelcoming. "I need your help. Sorin has been shot, and the queen's life is in danger."

* * * * *

Starr divided her attention between the woods around her and Sorin. He had grown progressively paler, and he was losing more blood than he should be from the wound.

Out of desperation, she ripped open her wrist and pressed it against his mouth, letting her blood flow into him. His ability to swallow encouraged her, but she couldn't help wondering if it was more of an automatic response than a conscious act on his part.

The wound continued to weep rivulets, and Starr began alternating applying pressure with her hands, careful not to press the arrowhead deeper into his flesh, while still scanning the forest. When she looked down again to check on Sorin and the gash, she saw the bleeding around the protruding arrow had slowed just a bit. She realized blood from her wrist was trickling into the injury. Were the healing agents in her blood slowing down the loss of blood?

Starr opened her wrist anew, to allow more blood to dribble into Sorin's wound. She watched, starting to feel light-headed, as the blood flowing slowed to a trickle. She withdrew her wrist and pressed it against her robes until the slash closed.

The sound of someone approaching tore her attention from Sorin. She turned in the direction from where she'd heard the sound emanate and knelt stiffly on the ground, in a semi-crouch, preparing to pounce on whomever emerged from the underbrush.

She could have wept with relief when Lucian came into sight, rather than the individual with the crossbow. Her eyes widened with surprise when she saw ten werewolves emerging behind him. She was surprised to see the group included the Alpha and Lupina when they resumed human-form. She had been afraid they would turn their backs on Lucian. She had dared to hope maybe a few—including Sorin's sister—would come to their aid, but she hadn't imagined the leaders of the Pack would lend them aid.

Lucian rushed to her side, dropping onto his knees beside Sorin. "How is he?"

"I'm not sure. The wound continues to bleed. My blood seemed to help a little, but he's still unconscious."

Starr looked up from Sorin as two muscular men knelt beside them. When they made to lift Sorin, she put out a hand to stop them.

Lucian touched her hand. "It's all right. They're going to carry Sorin back to the village."

She bit her lip when Sorin whimpered as they lifted his large form. "Can they help?" she whispered to Lucian.

He hesitated, and there was a haunted look in his eyes when he finally answered. "I don't know, but they're going to try."

She nodded and rose to her feet, suddenly conscious of her nudity in front of the Pack. She crossed her arms over her breasts before realizing the gesture betrayed her unease. She dropped her arms at her side and tried to pretend she didn't feel vulnerable before them. "Are we returning to Necheau?"

To her surprise, the Lupina stepped forward. "No. Rica and I will take you on to the castle. Lucian tells us the queen is in danger."

Her eyes widened. They were going to help her? She looked at Lucian, allowing her confusion to show. His shrug didn't reassure her. "Will you come with us?" she asked in low tones.

He shook his head. "I'll accompany Sorin." He embraced her quickly, whispering in her ear, "I believe we can trust them, but watch yourself. I hate to leave you, but he is in a weakened state. He needs someone with him."

She knew he was right, but couldn't deny the dart of fear she felt at proceeding with only the company of werewolves she didn't know, except by sight. Lucian's presence at her side would have reassured her, but she knew Sorin needed him more than she did.

She pressed a quick kiss to Lucian's mouth and brushed her hand against Sorin's muzzle as the men holding him passed. She hoped Sorin would be healed the next time she saw him, and she hoped she made it to the castle in time to warn Anca. The pressure that had propelled her earlier was returning with greater force, now that she could concentrate on something besides Sorin's safety, and she had to resist the urge to tell Rica and Ellie to hurry as she transformed into wolf-form. They must have sensed her urgency, because they transformed and kept pace with her as she plunged into the forest.

Behind them, three other wolves ran, while scanning the forest around them. They must be looking for the hunter. Starr allowed her focus to shift from the danger in the forest to the jeopardy in the castle. They had to hurry. She knew that instinctively.

Chapter 7

Lucian watched anxiously as Golatia bent over Sorin, still in wolf-form, to examine his wound. He was barely aware of the presence of the others in the room. The Lupae hovered near the doorway of the cabin where they had brought Sorin, alongside Sorin's sister, Lia. Her mates had accompanied Starr to the castle to warn Anca, and he wondered why she hadn't gone with them. Did she still harbor some sort of familial emotion for her estranged sibling?

He tensed when the old woman picked up a straight razor and waved it at a girl he didn't recognize, but appeared to be assisting her. His hackles rose, and he braced himself to intercept any attempts to cut Sorin. To his surprise, the woman handed the razor to the girl and looked up at him, as if reading his thoughts.

She gave him a small smile. "We must be able to see the wound, so the fur around it has to be removed. My eyesight is not what it once was. I don't want to nick the boy while shaving around the area."

He relaxed slightly, but remained alert as the girl scraped away the thick fur obscuring the wound. He tensed with Sorin when she worked some of the matted pelt out of the bloody mess. That must have hurt, as evidenced by his lover's brief bout of thrashing, which quickly subsided once the girl moved away.

Sorin groaned as Golatia probed the wound, making Lucian tense. He battled with the urge to protect Sorin from those gathered around him, knowing they wouldn't have come to their aid if the Pack meant to do them harm.

Still, old habits and emotions were difficult to overcome, and he remained rigid as Golatia took a bowl from the girl and dipped a clean cloth in it, before cleansing the wound. Sorin flinched, and Lucian bit down the reflex to gag when the smell of the thick green mixture wafted to his nose.

"Should you remove the arrow?" he asked gruffly.

The old woman shook her head. "Not yet. The bleeding must finish before I take the arrow, because it will surely begin again, when the silver comes out. I want to heal as much of the surrounding area as possible first."

Lucian stood sentry as Golatia continued to daub the wound with the foul-smelling brew, continuously turning the cloth to reveal a clean section as Sorin's blood stained the rest of the cloth. Halfway through the process, she took another cloth from her assistant to begin the procedure anew. Sorin's groans subsided to occasional grunts of pain, allowing Lucian to slowly relax.

Golatia nodded her head and folded the white cloth before placing it in the mixture. "The wound has healed, except for the area around the silver arrowhead. I am surprised the mixture worked so quickly, as silver poisoning generally requires many hours of tending...with mixed results." A hint of sadness flashed across her wrinkled face, and she gently patted Sorin's slack paw.

"The vampire with them put some of her blood in the wound," Lia said, as she stepped closer.

"Clever," Golatia said. She looked up at Lucian. "You will have to remove the arrow. My hands aren't strong or nimble enough to pull it out quickly, and I do not want to cause Sorin unnecessary pain."

He nodded, feeling nauseated at the prospect, as he grasped the broken shaft of the arrow and waited for Golatia's signal. He swallowed down his queasiness and tried not to think about the pain Sorin would feel when the arrow came out. His hands felt slippery, and he tightened his grasp. The old woman lifted the cloth and placed it under the wound. When he saw her nod, he wrenched the arrow free from Sorin's side with one tug.

The amount of blood pouring from the wound horrified him, and he turned away under the auspices of disposing of the silver arrowhead safely, so that none in the Pack would accidentally be injured by it. By the time he turned back, after wrapping the silver in a soiled cloth and placing it in a wooden box it would be burned in, Golatia had covered the wound with a new cloth, soaked in the healing potion.

He could read her apprehension by the set of her shoulders and the expression on her face. It was obvious she was worried, and he didn't miss her sound of distress when she replaced the cloth with another from the stack held by the girl. She didn't look at Lucian as Sorin's wound soaked two more cloths in five minutes, but finally met his eyes when her assistant handed her the last cloth before going to fetch more.

"He's losing a lot of blood, Lucian."

He swallowed and struggled to sound calm, but his voice broke. "Can you save him?" The fear in the old woman's eyes shook him.

"I do not know. Sorin's mother was the healer, not I." Golatia turned her gaze to Lia, beckoning her forward. There was no hesitation in the younger woman as she hurried forward. "Lia, did you ever learn anything of healing? What would your mother have done?"

Lia's mouth twisted. "My mother would have let Sorin die."

Lucian flinched. He prepared himself to force Sorin's sister to assist him, but she spoke again before he could move.

"Mother was a fool and let her stupid pride cost her many things." Lia's tone changed from bitter to confident. "I believe she would have used an infusion of rose bay, knapweed, and Echinacea. To that, she would add the blood of a family member." She spoke matter-of-factly, but there was an expression of doubt on her face. "I can try to make it."

Lucian's eyes widened. "You would do that for him?"

She frowned at him. "He is my brother." She blinked. "I do not know if I can make this mixture correctly. Mother did not write down her potions, so all I have is vague memories of her treatments."

The girl assisting Golatia returned with a fresh stack of cloths. The older woman looked up from replacing the soaked cloth to say, "You must try, Lia. It is better to attempt to save him than do nothing."

Lia nodded and hurried from the cabin, appearing as anxious as Lucian felt while he watched the blood soaking through the cloth once again.

He began to pace around the confines of the small room, avoiding eye contact with Davinia, Golatia, and the girl he heard them call Clara. From time to time, he paused in his pacing to check Sorin's wound. It still bled freely. He was certain he was going quietly mad as the time passed without Lia reappearing.

His thoughts turned to Starr and how she needed him with her, but he found those thoughts distressing too. In truth, he felt useless. He couldn't do anything to help Sorin, but he didn't want to leave him alone in Necheau. He could offer no assistance to Starr, being so far away from her. He had to place trust in her safety with members of the Pack. It was a bitter pill to swallow, as he had spent the last six years hating the Pack and everything to do with it.

His morose thoughts scattered when Lia finally returned carrying a large wooden bowl. When she placed it on the small table beside the bed where Sorin lay, Lucian saw a cloth wrapped around her wrist. Some of her blood had stained the bright white strip. When she dipped a fresh cloth in the infusion she had brought, he saw it was a scarlet color, indicating a generous amount of her blood was in the mix.

Golatia removed the soiled cloth soaked with Sorin's blood, and Lia pressed the one she held against the wound. To Lucian's surprise, Sorin's body relaxed. He felt a moment of fear as his eyes closed, thinking his lover had died, but was reassured when Sorin twitched. Lia removed the cloth to dip it back into the mixture, and Lucian's eyes widened when he saw the wound had begun healing already.

It didn't take long for the wound to stop weeping blood and scab over with the infusion Lia dabbed on it continuously. He felt almost lightheaded with relief when she wrung out the cloth over the wound, replaced it in the wooden bowl, and said, "The potion is working. The wound won't completely disappear until he is able to transform a few times, but he will live."

Lucian didn't doubt it. Already, Sorin's ragged breathing had eased, suggesting peaceful sleep, rather than unconsciousness. As relief filled him, Lucian's thoughts turned from concern for Sorin to revenge. Whoever had injured Sorin would pay for what they had done. He would not stand by uselessly even a moment longer.

No one tried to talk him out of leaving Necheau to investigate the forest for signs of whoever had been tracking them. Lucian didn't know if it was because they thought he

should search, or if perhaps his air of raw rage made them shy away from trying to reason with him. He didn't care which it was right then. All he could focus on was punishing the hunter who had injured his lover and forced Starr to face unknown danger without her mates by her side.

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Starr and the werewolves accompanying her reached the castle a little more than an hour after setting off together. The werewolves had set a frantic pace that left her breathless, though they seemed barely affected.

She kept her eyes focused on the tower where Anca and Demi slept as they rushed across the courtyard. They encountered no one as they entered the castle, but it was the middle of the night. She tried not to worry about the lack of activity as she led the others up the winding staircases, through the wings of the castle, and up to the tower room of the queen and king.

Starr hesitated at the doorway of their room, wondering how she should proceed. If her sense of timing were off, she would be bursting in and needlessly putting them in a panic. One didn't simply push open the door to the queen's chamber and rush inside, shouting dire warnings.

Undecided, Starr transformed to human-form, barely aware of her lack of clothing, and knocked on the door. Her senses urged her to dispense with politeness, but she knocked again, waiting a few seconds for a response. She knocked louder, but again, no one answered the door.

She closed her eyes and placed her palm flat against the wood worn smooth with the passage of time. Starr tuned out the presence of the wolves behind her, who were in various states of assuming their human forms. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on what was happening behind the door.

She searched with her mind, seeking the reassuring presence of either the Protector or her lifemate. Any sort of response—even anger at an unwarranted probing of their minds—would have been a relief.

She strained mentally, but couldn't receive a vision, nor connect with either Anca or Demi. She struggled to relax and allowed her thoughts to turn to the erotic moments she had spent in Sorin and Lucian's arms, hoping the rush of sexual energy would increase her mental abilities, as it had done exponentially earlier that night.

Her lips parted with a soft gasp as she imagined Lucian cupping her breast in his hand, while thumbing the hardened nipple. Sorin's phantom fingers toyed with her swollen clit, causing moisture to leak down her thighs. Her breathing grew ragged, and her eyes moved rapidly under her lids.

As she remembered the sensation of having both cocks penetrate her simultaneously, an image formed in her mind. It was dark, and someone stood over a bed. At first, she thought it was a memory of being at the cabin, but as her body recalled the way Lucian and Sorin had made love to her, the vision crystallized.

A woman stood over the bed of Anca and Demi, who were bound by some invisible force. It was the same image Starr had seen earlier, but now clarified. She gasped when she realized who the assailant was, as she opened her eyes to look at the door. It couldn't be, but it was. How had she escaped the little-known prison in the Ukraine and made her way back to Corsova? How had she entered the country? More importantly, was Nikia with her? Was that who had shot Sorin in the forest?

Sian held a dagger in her hand and wore an expression of concern as she eyed the door. She must know Starr was on the other side, and her hand suddenly shot up, grasping the dagger firmly, and preparing to plunge it into Anca's heart.

Starr cried out as the dagger started to lower, and she began to push frantically against the locked door. Rica and the other two men pushed her aside and threw their weight against the wooden door. Even as it splintered against the force and formed a hole large enough to allow Rica to reach inside to unbolt the door, Starr knew they wouldn't make it in time to prevent Sian from stabbing Anca.

* * * * *

The pain in his side awakened Sorin. It radiated up into his chest with a hot, pulsing rhythm that had him gritting his teeth. At least his head was clear, and he immediately

recognized where he was when he opened his eyes. A rush of conflicting emotion assailed him when he saw the familiar interior of his mother's home. No, not Belia's home now, because she was dead, killed with her lover during their bid to seize power.

He turned his head when he caught the scent of another in the room with him. His eyes widened when he recognized his sister. He had seen her briefly during his return to Necheau to warn the Pack about the anthropologist, but had not truly looked at her. He was amazed how mature she looked, but her eyes were the same ones he remembered from her childhood. Only now, they held concern and weariness that hadn't been reflected there the last time he saw them, right before his relationship with Lucian was discovered.

She smiled at him, and some of the grimness left her expression. "You are awake. How do you feel?"

He grunted a response, uncertain how he should respond. "What am I doing here?"

"The Pack brought you. Lucian came to ask for help." Lia frowned. "At first, Rica seemed like he would refuse, but the Lupina didn't let him. She insisted we help, and those of us willing to do so accompanied Lucian through the forest, to where your mate waited with you."

The knowledge they had come to his aid was unsettling. Even more so was knowing he would probably be dead by now if the anthropologist he and Lucian had tried to keep out of Corsova hadn't forced the issue. He cleared his throat and attempted to dismiss the foreign emotion of gratitude to anyone in the Pack. "Where are Lucian and Starr?"

"Starr has gone on to the castle to warn your queen of danger." Lia grimaced. "Lucian has left to find the hunter lurking in our forests. Shortly after he left, other members realized we could all be in danger if there is a hunter using silver, and many left to aid in the search."

Sorin sat up, wincing at the fiery sensation in his side. "I must get to Starr. She'll need me."

Lia touched his arm, trying to ease him back to a prone position. "A werewolf escort accompanied her. Your mate will be fine."

He shook his head. He wasn't the kind of man to lie around while others faced danger. When his sister again tried to ease him down, he shoved her away. "Get out of my way."

Her eyes sparkled with a hint of anger. "Stop being so stubborn. You can't help anyone in your current state. You need to rest, to gain your strength for transforming, to speed healing."

Sorin ignored Lia's words and tried to stand up. He grunted when her weight hit him from the side, and he fell back into the bed. He stared up at her with wide eyes, recognizing the glint of determination in her eyes. It was one he often saw in his own, when glancing in a mirror. He was startled to note other similarities in their facial shape, and something indefinable that instantly pointed to them being related.

With an almost vicious jab, she touched his wound, causing him to draw in a breath. "How far do you think you could get, brother? You're staying right here. You will cause those who care about you needless worry if you go traipsing off into the forest in your weakened state."

He allowed his tense muscles to relax. An unbidden question escaped him, before he could call it back. "Are you among those who would care, sister?"

She frowned. "Of course. You are my brother."

He felt a lump forming in his throat and tried to ignore it. "Do you still consider me so?"

Her eyes softened, and she brushed back his hair with a motherly gesture. "There is no way to undo the last six years, Sorin. I followed Mother's lead when she ostracized you. The Pack made no attempt to intercede, and when you went to the vampires, you were considered dead to many." Her voice broke. "I shouldn't have been one. If I had been older and wiser—"

"It doesn't matter." It truly didn't. A void inside him had already begun to fill with her words, and he realized his anger had never been with her for not acknowledging him as her brother or defying their mother. His anger was more general, aimed at all members of the Pack who had allowed his mother's lover to beat him, and then hadn't

said a word when his mother left him naked and bleeding, with the word *Abomination* carved on his chest. None had come to his assistance, causing the anger to increase.

Six years had turned the rage to a dull, bitter emotion he carried around without thought. He could feel it fading away as he met the teary eyes of his sister. His own eyes blurred, and he closed them, pretending he was close to sleep in an attempt to hide his sudden vulnerability. The process of forgiveness might have begun, but he wasn't ready to announce it to anyone else, even the sister who seemed to want to know him.

* * * * *

Lucian's wolf eyes scanned the forest in front of him when he lifted his head from sniffing a footprint. The man—and he knew it was a man from the smell he left—was probably a skilled hunter. It had taken Lucian almost an hour to find any trace of him, but a mile back, his prey had grown careless and left a footprint. Now, a mile later, there was a partial imprint of the heel of his boot. The man's scent lingered heavier in the air, letting Lucian know he was close.

He increased his pace, allowing his nose and instincts to guide him. He sent his mental powers out ahead of him, searching for the presence of another. During the hunt, he had occasionally sensed the essence of other wolves and assumed they must have joined the hunt. His focus remained on the man who had tried to kill Sorin, and he filtered out the odor of any other werewolf in the vicinity.

He jerked when his mental tentacles collided with a human presence. He was pleased to note the underlying scent of fear in the man's stink when he breathed in deeply. He could sense the other's flagging energy and once more increased his pace, knowing his prey would tire much sooner than he would.

His extra burst of speed brought him to the top of a hill, where there was a partial clearing, ringed by fallen logs. A form crouched low near an overturned tree. Lucian saw the glint of silver as the man shot his crossbow. Instinct made him twist away, and the arrow whistled by him with several inches to spare. He didn't allow the hunter to make another shot as he jumped from an awkward angle.

Lucian righted his gait in mid-leap and landed on the back of the hunter, knocking the man to the ground and pinning him there. He transformed into human-form and resisted the urge to tear out the man's throat without getting answers to the questions he should ask. "Who are you?" There was still a heavy growl in his tone, making the question animalistic in sound. The man seemed disinclined to answer, so Lucian cupped his throat and tightened his grip. "Answer me."

"A-abel Schneider," the man managed to push out breathlessly, with a thick German accent. He had little volume, because Lucian hadn't eased his grip.

"What are you doing in our forest, human?" Schneider's blue eyes looked close to popping onto his cheeks. The stench of urine filled the air, and Lucian growled with disgust. He did loosen his grip slightly, in case the man's wide eyes were caused by strangulation, rather than fear.

"I am a hunter." The answer was a thin squeak.

Lucian roared, "Who were you hunting when you shot my mate?"

Schneider seemed reluctant to answer, but apparently, the rage in Lucian's eyes convinced him remaining silent would be even worse for him than imparting the truth. "I came to Corsova to hunt werewolves."

He had already guessed that, from where the man had been hunting, his choice of targets, and the weapon he was using. "How did you find out about werewolves in Corsova?" He shook the man, finding a bit of his rage lessened when the man squealed with pain.

"I met a woman in Belarus. After time in her company, I admitted to her that I had come to Belarus to kill a wolf."

"Why?"

"This wolf is legend. His pack terrorizes small villages, preying on livestock and fools who stray across their path." Schneider paused to swallow, and Lucian tightened his grip again. When he spoke once more, his voice was thin with the struggle to speak and breathe at the same time. "No hunter has been able to slaughter the alpha wolf, and I was determined to do so."

Lucian curled his lip. "And did you?"

"No. The woman persuaded me to pursue bigger game. She showed me something amazing...transformed into a wolf. Told me about this country...told me about the Alpha of the Pack." A glint of excitement gleamed in Schneider's eyes. "I knew I had to kill the one called Rica."

"How did you get into the country?"

"The woman acted as my guide. She said she couldn't openly enter the country and had me hide her in a trunk, after she drank something she said would keep anyone from detecting her presence. She needed my essence to shield her own, and I needed her to show me where to find the Pack."

Unease stirred in Lucian. "Who is this woman?"

"Her name is Sian."

Lucian jumped when he heard the name, inadvertently tightening his grip. Schneider's gasping made him realize what he was doing, and he looked down dispassionately. The hunter's eyes bulged again, and his skin had taken on a blue cast.

He was debating about whether to tighten his grip or just render the hunter unconscious when he heard a movement. Lucian looked up and saw at least a dozen wolves emerging from the forest. As they formed a ring around him and the hunter, Schneider's eyes shone with fear.

He released his grip and stood up. He met the eyes of a midnight-black wolf and nodded. "He came here to kill Rica. I'll leave him to you, shall I?" He had business at the castle, if only it weren't too late. Lucian didn't spare another glance for the hunter as he morphed into wolf-form and set off at a run, hoping to reach the castle in time to assist Starr. Warning her had taken precedence over avenging his mate, but Lucian knew Sorin would have made the same decision.

Besides, what did it matter? Whether by his hand or not, the hunter would be just as dead by morning.

Chapter 8

A soundless cry escaped Anca as the dagger tore into her shoulder, just inches away from her heart, which surely had been Sian's target. Starr froze for a second when she realized they had been granted an extra moment to act due to Sian's careless aim. Sian's howl of rage as she wrenched the dagger free and raised it again broke Starr's paralysis.

Somehow, though Rica was the closest, Starr reached Sian first. She gave no thought to transforming to wolf-form as she rushed the other woman and knocked her to the stone floor. Sian's head connected with a dull thud, and her fingers loosened their hold on the dagger.

Starr held her down as one of the men—either Lasile or Jan—wrested the knife from Sian and tossed it across the room. She kept her full weight on the woman until each man took one of Sian's wrists and lifted her to her feet, holding her straining body between them.

Starr turned away from them, but couldn't block out the sound of Sian's vile insults. She rushed to Anca and bent to examine the wound. It was already healing, thanks to Anca's heritage, but she reached out to push back the section of pajama, to see how deeply the dagger had plunged, to rule out any damage that wasn't obvious. An inch from Anca, she hissed with pain when she encountered what felt like a field of electricity and withdrew her hand. She whirled back to Sian. "What magic is this?"

Sian's eyes glittered. "A binding spell I learned from Nikia's mother's people, while I was in Belarus. Only I can penetrate or release the spell."

"Then release it."

The other woman laughed, but gave no other answer.

Starr's anger built inside her as the mad laugh echoed around the chamber. "Undo the spell, and you might live through this."

A strange expression crossed Sian's face, but it wasn't one of fear. Rather, it was joy. "That enticement holds no promise for me. A death is necessary to complete the spell." Her mouth twisted as she glared at Anca, who was attempting to break free from the nearly invisible light-purple bands binding her, but having no luck. "Now that the original sacrifice is thwarted, I know what must be done."

Starr eyed her with confusion. "What are you talking about? What spell? The binding spell?"

It happened in seconds, even before Starr finished questioning her. Sian slammed her booted foot onto one of the men's bare feet. He howled with pain and released his hold on her at the unexpected assault. Before the other man holding her could get a better grasp, Sian raked her nails down his cheek and kicked his knee. She broke free in the process and ran to the window.

Starr saw it all happening and tried to stop her, as did Rica and Ellie. None reached Sian in time, and she paused for only a second to look directly at Anca. "Nikia will avenge me." Then she plunged through the stain-glass window and seemed to hang suspended in mid-air for a long second, before gravity re-exerted its control, and she fell from sight. She uttered no sound, and there was a stunned silence in the room, making it impossible to miss the sickening thud of Sian's body against the cobblestone several stories below.

Colors whirled behind Starr's eyes, and she felt light-headed. The room spun around her, and she barely noticed Anca and Demi were free from the binding spell as she fell to the floor and the vision consumed her.

A cinnamon-haired woman—once voluptuous, but now gaunt—lay in a hospital bed. Her eyes blinked under her lids, and the monitors measuring her heart and brain activity beeped rapidly. Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up in bed, seeming to be looking straight at Starr, although Starr couldn't see where her body was in the vision.

Before she could learn anything else, consciousness returned to her in the form of smelling salts. She gasped for air and sat up so quickly her head spun again. The Protector was crouched before her, holding a vial. The words formed of their own accord, as though put into her mind. She couldn't seem to hold them in, to find a way to prepare Anca for the news. "Nikia is awake. Somehow, Sian found a way to revive her."

* * * * *

Lucian had made good time, but not so much so that he arrived in time to assist. By the time he made it to the royal chambers, the excitement had passed. Servants had already removed Sian's body from the courtyard and hidden it away. It was destined for a funeral pyre without ceremony in an undisclosed location.

Starr was in the sitting room of the queen and king's chamber, sipping tea, when he came in, and she was so relieved to see him that she nearly got up and ran to him. She appeared outwardly calm, but her heart still raced. Although nearly an hour had passed since Sian plunged through the window, she still felt shaky. Having Lucian hold her would take away the last of her anxiety, but that was impossible, with the Protector in the room.

The queen and king were in pajamas. The werewolves who had accompanied Starr sat on a large couch, and all wore robes bearing the symbol of Corsova—two cupped hands around a red orb. It represented the Protector guarding the life source of the people, which was blood. They had grudgingly accepted the garments pressed on them by Helena, personal maid to Anca.

He seemed to have no thought of restraint for convention's sake. Lucian went to Starr without even greeting the king and queen. He dropped to his knees beside the chair she occupied and leaned forward to kiss her. At the last moment, she turned her head, and it became an awkward hug. She hated the flash of pain in his eyes, but knew they couldn't reveal their betrayal of Corsovan tradition in so blunt a way.

He cleared his throat and regained his feet, pausing to bow to Anca and Demi, before turning back to Starr. "When I left Sorin, his sister assured me he would recover."

Starr breathed a sigh of relief. She stared down into the cup of tea she held and tried to make out a pattern in the tea leaves, but saw none. She had never been able to see the future from reading the dregs, and apparently, her new surge in power didn't make her any more adept with the skill.

Anca cleared her throat, and every eye shifted in her direction. She wore a soft smile. "I am pleased to hear of Sorin's recovery and thankful to have such loyal

subjects." She looked at Rica and Ellie, dipping her head. "I also extend my gratitude to the Pack. I hope this will lead to a new...understanding between our people."

Rica made a non-committal sound, but there was no missing Ellie's quick nod and the look of censure she threw her mate when he didn't elaborate on his grunt.

"I'd like to speak privately with Starr for a moment," Anca said.

As though she had waved a magic wand, the others seemed to disappear, they left the room so quickly. Only the swish of the door closing revealed they had left by less-than-supernatural means. Starr tried to hide her apprehension when she looked at the queen, fearful of the gleam of knowledge in her brown eyes.

Anca wasn't intimidating on the surface, but there was a quiet strength in her demeanor, and Starr knew she cared deeply for the homeland she had come to just two years ago. No matter if it might hurt her, Anca would do what was best for the people. That was programmed into her by thousands of ancestors. It had become habit. No, more than habit. It had become instinct.

Starr knew the queen could order their deaths—and would do so—if she decided that was the best way to protect Corsova. She didn't know why she was so certain Anca knew about them, but she could sense it. She waited for the queen to begin, determined not to betray herself by inadvertently saying the wrong thing, if she was mistaken about the queen's perception.

"Have you mated with them?" Anca posed the question in a soft voice, with just a hint of curiosity.

Starr couldn't detect an underlying thread of anger, but the muscles she had thought were completely tense tautened further. She couldn't bring herself to meet the Protector's eyes. "Not in an official ceremony."

Anca waved her hand. "That's paper. You know what I mean."

Starr nodded, feeling sick. "Yes. I've betrayed my position and the people of Corsova. I've betrayed you." When the queen remained silent, Starr dared to look up. She hadn't known what to expect, but the amusement she saw in Anca's expression shocked her.

"I don't feel betrayed. I have done some research and spoke with Demi. Neither of us could find a reason why the spiritual leader is required to remain chaste. Nor could we find any hint of dire consequences associated with her taking a lover...or two, in this case." She grinned.

Starr frowned, puzzled by the queen's jocularly. "I don't understand..."

Anca grinned. "You aren't the first spiritual leader to give in to desire, Starr. There have been a few others, all documented in our records."

She shook her head. "That can't be. I would know –"

"These records are viewed only by the Protectors. They document everything that has ever happened in our country, and some pre-date even the gathering of all the groups of vampires to form a society together."

"What happened to the others?"

Anca paused to sip tea before answering. "A few were executed. One retired early, and her acolyte assumed her position. Three were granted dispensation by their Protectors to have mates." She gave Starr an assessing look. "It's interesting to note that those who were allowed the pleasures of a mate were among the most powerful spiritual leaders of our people."

Starr's eyes widened at the information. Remembering how her power had swelled when she finally joined with Sorin and Lucian as one made her realize that was how it was supposed to be. Just as the Protector was destined to have a lifemate, so was the spiritual leader of the people destined to have one who was complementary – or sometimes two, she thought with a small smile – who would augment her powers.

"It's an archaic tradition, and I can find no practical reason to enforce it," Anca said casually. "I suspect Sian's assassination would have succeeded if you *hadn't* been with Lucian and Sorin, and had an increase to your power."

Starr nodded, and then met Anca's eyes directly. It was uncomfortable to do so, because she held the other woman in such high esteem. "There is one thing I do not understand. Why would you research this, Highness?"

Anca winked. "It was obvious what was happening between the three of you, and I was determined to find a way to allow it. At times, life is lonely enough, even with a

mate. It's ridiculous to require one to be alone, especially when there is such great love waiting."

A lump formed in Starr's throat, and she found it difficult to speak. "We have your permission to mate?"

"I expect to be in attendance at the Pledging Ceremony," Anca said, as answer. She set aside her teacup and cleared her throat. "I believe you have Lucian waiting to take you back to Sorin, and I want to seize this chance to speak with Rica, to see if we can amend the original treaty between our people, to allow our groups to function more cooperatively." She looked down at her pajamas, glancing at the hole where the dagger had passed through. The wound had healed. "But first, maybe I'd better change."

Starr got to her feet and walked to the doorway, pausing to turn back when she reached for the knob. "Highness?"

"Yes?"

"What will you do about Nikia?"

Anca sighed, and it was a long moment before she answered. "What I must."

Chapter 9

Starr glanced up at the moon that was still nearly full, but had waned somewhat from the way it had been last night, when she had stood under it while Sorin and Lucian tried to convince her to officially accept them as mates. Had it been just last night? So much had happened in such a short time that it felt like weeks had passed since they registered a moon-cycle claim.

It was strange to have members of the Pack standing around her, watching her. She felt self-conscious in her nudity, with so many unfamiliar eyes upon her, but tried to hide her unease. She knew how important it was to Lucian and Sorin, who had begun the long task of reconciling with the Pack, to have the Mating Moon Ceremony concluded in the tradition accepted by the Pack.

Sorin had arranged it, before asking either she or Lucian. Rica had agreed to allow them to have a Consummation Ceremony, to end the moon-cycle claim. All that was left now was to go through with it, with everyone watching.

She took a deep breath as Rica stepped forward to ask if she would accept these men. "Yes," she said in a clear voice. She had no one to act as Guardian, because there had been no time to contact her parents, and she knew they would have refused her request anyway. The ceremony wouldn't quite be official without all the steps completed, but it was only "paper," as Anca had said.

Besides, this ceremony was for Sorin and Lucian, to acknowledge their culture. The Pledging Ceremony happening tomorrow at moonrise would be for Starr, and would have the added bonus of making their union official to the people of Corsova.

Rica turned to Lucian, repeating the question. After Lucian's acceptance, and then Sorin's, he removed the sash they had tied on their hands before the ceremony. "The match is approved. Consummation will commence." Then he stepped back into the circle of Pack members around them.

Starr knew it was time to begin, and she tried to quell her nerves when Sorin put his arms around her. She made a conscious effort to relax as he drew her against him. She held out her arms as Lucian stepped in front of her. He dipped his head to brush his lips against hers, while Sorin bent his head to nibble on her neck.

Her nervousness faded as their lips played on her skin. When Sorin cupped one of her breasts and drew his thumb across the nipple, it hardened immediately. She groaned and closed her eyes when Lucian took possession of her other breast and caressed the hardened peak. He parted her lips and slid his tongue inside to duel languorously with hers.

The last remnants of tension left her, and she forgot about the members of the Pack surrounding them. Sorin and Lucian must have picked up on her relaxation, because they chose that moment to lower her to the ground. Sorin lay underneath her with her legs spread on either side of his, and Lucian knelt in front of her. Starr's eyes fluttered open when Lucian's mouth once again claimed her flesh, this time concentrating on her breasts rather than her lips.

Sorin held her around the waist, balancing her atop him. His cock pushed against her buttocks, and she squirmed, anxious to feel him inside her. She gasped when he moved one hand from her hips and cupped her buttocks. He parted the cheeks and slid his fingers down the cleft, probing at her sphincter with one thick finger.

Her eyes flew open when Lucian's tongue sought out the heat of her pussy. His tongue twirled circles around her swollen clit, and she drenched his mouth. A cry escaped her when his tongue swept lower, to probe her opening. She stiffened when it darted inside her, and her hips had a mind of their own as they thrust upwards to encourage him to go deeper.

He responded to her unspoken invitation by going lower. He trailed his tongue down her pussy and parted her with one hand. Sorin's finger slid aside to allow room for Lucian's tongue, and he dipped inside, exploring the puckered opening. Starr cried out at the invasion, from mingled shock and pleasure.

As Lucian's tongue swirled inside her tight anus, he brought a hand between her thighs and stroked her clit. A new wave of moisture greeted him when he brought his

hand lower and entered her pussy with two fingers. Starr writhed helplessly against the stimulation, still not certain if she wanted to avoid his tongue or urge it deeper.

Lucian made the decision for her. He withdrew his fingers and tongue before leaning back on his knees. Starr watched him through heavy lids as he grasped her hips and shifted her slightly. Sorin's cock pressed against her anus in the new position, and she took a deep breath to prepare herself as he slowly thrust into her. She forced her lower body to relax and accept all of him.

When Sorin's cock was finally nestled in her anus, she barely had time to catch her breath before Lucian's cock probed the entrance of her pussy. She wasn't frightened, because they had done this before, but her muscles still felt stiff. She wondered if she could take them both as he sank into her. She gasped at the twinge of pain, but it faded quickly to pleasure.

Starr wrapped her arms around Lucian's neck when he lay down carefully on top of her. As he thrust into her, Sorin thrust into her, forcing her hips upward to meet Lucian's cock.

"Oh, my loves," she said softly, for their ears only. They stretched her to her limits, but it felt so wonderful to share her body with them, at the same time. Even the occasional protesting muscle or section of throbbing flesh didn't detract from her pleasure. She surrendered to the pace of their thrusts, closed her eyes, and savored the sensations coursing through her.

Their rhythm and the harmony of their movements were so perfect that Starr could feel Sorin and Lucian's cocks spasm with approaching release at the same time. Her pussy contracted in response, and the orgasm came quickly, coinciding with the hot spurts Sorin and Lucian spilled inside her. The climaxes sealed their union by tradition of the Pack. Only the Pledging Ceremony remained before she would belong completely to them, and they to her.

* * * * *

The solemn formality of the Pledging Ceremony was a direct contrast to the Mating Moon Ceremony of the Pack. Starr wore a black velvet robe and stood between Sorin

and Lucian, who wore white robes, below a dais where the queen stood. The tight knot holding her hair was giving her a headache, and she mentally urged Anca through the words she needed to say.

Because Starr couldn't officiate her own Pledging, the Protector had stepped into the role. If only Starr had selected an acolyte already, the ceremony probably would have been finished by now. She made a note to begin the search once the Isolation Phase of the Pledging passed in two weeks. Until then, all she had to focus on was time spent in the company of her mates, with no duties.

The tradition had begun a long time ago, in the days of arranged marriages, to allow the newly pledged pair time for acquaintance. Since she was already intimately familiar with her mates, they would put their time to more erotic use.

She blinked when she realized Anca had just said her name. She had been so impatient, and the process seemed to be going so slowly, that she was surprised to find them nearing the end. She knelt on one knee as Sorin and Lucian did the same. Starr held her hand in front of her, and they both covered it with theirs.

Anca asked, "Do you accept a union with this man..." She cleared her throat and appeared flustered when she looked up briefly from the scroll from which she was reading. "...these men? Will you embrace them with your body and soul? Will you share your mind and heart with Sorin and Lucian until death parts you?"

Starr raised her head and looked at Sorin, then Lucian. The careful visual measuring was part of the ceremony, giving the bride a last chance to refuse. She did it by rote, having no heart to reevaluate her decision. "I will."

Anca nodded, and then turned to Sorin, asking, "Do you accept a union with this man and woman? Will you embrace them with your body and soul? Will you share your mind and heart with Starr and Lucian until death parts you?"

Sorin's voice was husky when he said, "I will."

She turned to Lucian, asking, "Do you accept a union with this man and woman? Will you embrace them with your body and soul? Will you share your mind and heart with Starr and Sorin until death parts you?"

There wasn't any hesitation in Lucian's answer. "I will."

Anca stepped off the dais after lifting a knife with an ornately carved ivory handle from the altar beside her. She knelt in front of the three of them, and her blood-red robes spread out around her. She touched their joined hands, and each released their hold, allowing their palms to show.

She began with Starr, making a deep gash with the sharp blade across Starr's heart line on her palm. Starr's breath hissed through her teeth, but she held her hand steady as blood flowed down her palm and into the sleeve of her robe. She watched as Sorin stoically endured the same cut, followed by Lucian, who didn't flinch.

She didn't resist when Anca lifted her hand and Sorin's, pressing the palms together so that the blood mingled. She then joined Starr and Lucian the same way, before pressing Sorin and Lucian's palms together, sealing their union.

"Three lives made one. Bless the union of Starr, Lucian, and Sorin." As she spoke, Anca got to her feet and returned the knife to the altar.

As soon as the Protector stood, the reverent silence in the tower room dissipated. Starr accepted the cloth Helena handed her as she turned to greet the guests in attendance. She pressed it against the wound that was already coagulating and curtsied to their guests.

Still between Sorin and Lucian, Starr walked with them to the silver bowl resting beside another knife on a crisp white tablecloth. The low table holding the items required each guest to bend slightly at the waist as they approached.

The end of the ceremony commenced as the newlyweds watched with solemn expressions. Each guest approached the bowl, lifted the knife, and nicked the vein on the side of their wrist. They stood with their hands over the bowl until a few drops of blood dripped inside. Then, with a formal bow from Sorin and Lucian, and a curtsy from Starr, each guest moved aside to allow the next in line to repeat the process.

Once everyone attending the small wedding had made an offering, Anca brought forth a silver chalice, which she dipped into the bowl of blood. She then held the chalice for Starr, who took the first drink. Lucian sipped next, and Sorin took the last drink before the chalice made its way to each of the guests, who sipped in turn.

When the chalice had been refilled twice, to allow everyone a drink, Anca poured the remaining blood back into the bowl and rested the chalice rim down on the previously pristine cloth. A pool of crimson formed under it in seconds. "By the blood of the people and the Protector, this union is sealed. Bound in blood, live by the life source."

With those final words, the air of formality seemed to melt away. Sorin and Lucian's arms came around her waist, and they turned toward her. She kissed first Sorin, and then Lucian, tasting the tang of blood on their lips.

For a moment, she had the sensation it was all a dream. She would awaken and find her lonely brain, drunk on longing, had conjured the ceremony and preceding events. Discreetly, she pinched herself and winced at the flash of pain. It was real, just as her union with Sorin and Lucian must be.

A heady sense of freedom filled her. She hadn't been the first spiritual leader to be led astray, and she definitely wouldn't be the last, but she wondered if any had been so well loved as she. Looking into the eyes of her mates, she knew she had received a treasure greater than even the life source of Corsova.

Their love was priceless, but even more precious was the ability to openly acknowledge their union, to show their love for each other to the world. No longer would they have to hide from their emotions or deny their desires. No one would ever ask them to deny their love for each other again.

About the author:

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband, near family and friends. In addition to books available through Ellora's Cave, she is the author of *365 Days of Lara Branson* (available late October, 2002), and *Undercover Mother* (available by September, 2003). Her shorter works have appeared in more than a dozen markets, including *Sex on the Edge*, *Boise Weekly*, *Epiphany Magazine*, *BloodLust-UK*, and *Bridges Magazine*.

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