

A dramatic scene featuring a castle on a cliff, lightning, a full moon, and three swords on a rack. The castle is a large, multi-towered stone structure with a prominent central spire topped with a golden flame. It sits atop a rocky cliff. The sky is dark and stormy, with several bright purple lightning bolts striking down. A large, full moon is visible on the right side of the frame. At the top, three swords are mounted on a black rack, their blades pointing outwards.

BLOOD REBELLION

CONNIE SUTTLE

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Blood Destiny #7

Connie Suttle

For Walter, Joe and Lissa's fans everywhere.

Thank you.

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Bumble

Shadow*

Target*

Forthcoming

Chapter 1

I lie inside a cage. It is bitingly cold here, and no respite from the chill will be offered. With bars all around me, there is no privacy. No place to hide. It has been thus for centuries and my captors will not change it, no matter how much I beg or the benefits I offer them in exchange. They merely laugh as I am their prisoner and subject to their whims anyway.

Have I tried to better my conditions? Many times. At first they made promises, to placate me. But no promise was ever fulfilled. My mistake, I know. They have only taken from me of late—of my strength, my flesh and what remains of my sanity. They have asked no questions. That is their mistake. The time is coming. *Soon*. I look forward to the ending of my misery.

“I didn’t do it!” Davan shouted as he was dragged by two guards past rows of prison cells. His trial was a sham; without proper representation, he’d been sentenced (as so many others before him), to death by vampirism. Accused of stealing from the state, the sentence was the same for anyone else convicted of that crime. And everyone was employed by the state; everything was owned by the state. Oh, there were managers and supervisors who thrived and prospered; nearly all of whom were corrupted by their greed upon the world of Beliphar.

Once, Beliphar had been a mighty world and a member of the Reth Alliance. No longer—a new regime had come to power, eliminating elected officials quickly. They claimed it was to reduce the amount of government in the Belepharans’ lives, but it had come to mean the opposite. Those who had risen to power had stayed in power and the world of Beliphar labored under their harsh authority.

The Reth Alliance had withdrawn membership quickly, leaving Beliphar to fend for itself. The Belepharans suffered and the small vampire population was quickly captured and condemned for trumped up crimes against the state. Vampires, like everyone else living on Beliphar, were now controlled by those in power.

Vampirism was dealt as a punishment for most crimes and vampires were held in check with special cuffs and chains. They worked in street crews at night or in the mines, did labor on state run farms or processed fuel, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. Anything that might be done at night that could prove harmful to humanoids was ultimately done with vampire labor, as environmental controls on Beliphar were all but abandoned.

Still, Davan proclaimed his innocence and his cries were truth, but he’d been sentenced anyway and was now being hauled down a long, sterile hallway toward a small, windowless room. A vampire waited there—a vampire controlled by the courts and its officers. Davan would be turned unless he died in the attempt. As a male, his chances of surviving the turn were very good. Any female convicted knew her punishment was a death sentence—perhaps one in twenty-five thousand females would turn. Every vampire on Beliphar was male.

Davan stepped up his struggles as he reached the small, sterile cube of a room. A cuffed and controlled vampire waited inside, accompanied by a supervisor with a controlling wand. “No! In the name of the light, no!” Davan shouted. A blazer stick was pressed against his neck and current shot through his body. The resulting pain forced him to his knees as he howled in agony. Davan wept and cursed as the guards jerked him to his feet.

“Name?” The supervisor demanded coldly.

“Davan Falthis,” one of Davan’s guards replied; Davan was still weeping and unable to answer.

“Davan Falthis, you have been sentenced by the state. Your punishment is vampirism, after which you will serve the state that you conspired against,” the supervisor droned in a detached voice. “Lift him onto the table.” Davan could only moan and whimper as he was hefted onto the stainless-steel table and strapped down; body, arms, legs and neck. The two guards retreated to the corners of the

room.

~~“Do your duty, vampire,” the supervisor snapped at the cuffed vampire. He nodded and pulled a steel bowl from beneath the table. It would catch the excess blood when the prisoner’s wrists were opened.~~

Tears ran down Davan’s cheeks—he had no idea how his life had come to this—he’d trained as an accountant and had done his duty for the state for thirty years. Now he was in his mid-fifties and someone, a supervisor somewhere, had taken money, laying the blame on him. Davan had been sentenced for someone else’s crime.

“You will not speak or cry out,” the vampire laid compulsion. Davan was still frightened—the vampire had no control over that. Davan watched in terror as a sharp claw appeared on the vampire’s finger, and then the claw slit his left wrist, three times—lengthwise. More tears fell as Davan heard his blood dripping into the bowl.

Can you hear me? A voice sounded inside Davan’s mind as his right wrist was opened.

Hear who? Davan was terrified, thinking he was hallucinating during his final moments.

I am the vampire, the voice came again. Do not be afraid. I will do my best to keep you alive. My blood is oldest upon Beliphar.

Keep me alive for what? Davan still thought he was hallucinating.

We still have hope, the vampire replied. Close your eyes, it is almost time.

“Something is going on with the Reldani,” Dragon sighed and settled onto a barstool at Kiarra’s kitchen island. Dragon and Devin had come for a visit—to let Kiarra know they’d gotten a whiff of strange events during a trip to Falchan to buy new leathers. Dragon’s dark eyes were narrowed in concern and his usual, enigmatic expression was missing, replaced by a few creases of worry on his forehead. Devin moved his long braid aside and rubbed Dragon’s back as she sat next to him. If the former Dragon Warlord showed signs of worry, then there was definitely something going on.

“What’s that?” Kiarra shoved white-blond hair over a shoulder and handed Dragon a cup of Falchani black tea. Devin’s cup was served next—she and Dragon both loved the dark brew.

“You know the Reldani can never agree on anything—especially when it comes to who’s in command,” Dragon sighed. “They have small principalities everywhere, commanded by whoever is strong enough to beat any contenders back. They raid across the borders constantly, when they’re not fighting among themselves, that is. Until now.” Dragon sipped his tea and nodded in appreciation to Kiarra.

“So, what has changed?” Kiarra sat next to her adopted daughter Devin and pulled her close for a hug. Devin smiled and rested her head against Kiarra’s shoulder.

“The Reldani are banding together, that’s what. Under two leaders,” Dragon grumbled. “That’s unheard of. Something is wrong, here. I feel it.”

“Something is wrong,” Belen agreed, appearing in a brilliant flash of light. “I was on my way to warn you and the others.” Belen, Chief of the Nameless Ones nodded to Dragon, First among the Sons of Thalarr. “It is something that bears investigation,” Belen went on. “And it would be prudent to send several of ours to help the Falchani army while you investigate. You have permission to join the Falchani army and act as you see fit in this,” Belen nodded as he muted the light around him.

Dragon blinked in surprise—joining the Falchani army would be seen as interference under normal circumstances. Belen’s permission merely reinforced his opinion of the unusual events of Falchan. Somehow, either an old enemy had resurfaced or a new one had come into being. Perhaps both. Dragon schooled his face as that thought crowded his mind.

“I can gather all our Falchani and sign up as a volunteer band from the hills—nobody will recognize us,” Dragon agreed.

“I’ll go, too,” Devin offered. Devin, trained by Dragon and Crane in the art of the blade, was deadly with the Falchani swords she often carried.

“That goes without saying,” Dragon smiled. “When should we go, Revered One?” he nodded respectfully to Belen.

“Soon.” Belen inclined his head. “I will let you know when. There is one other thing, too.”

“What’s that?” Kiarra asked.

“Take the Vampire Queen with you. I care not how it is accomplished; I only know that Lissa’s presence will prove essential.” Belen disappeared quickly.

“Now how the hell are we going to convince Lissa that she has to go to Falchan?” Kiarra sighed, shaking her head. Belen had left before she could ask more questions.

“Mom, she’s married to our boys,” Devin grinned, pointing to herself and Dragon.

“Well, there’s that, I suppose,” Kiarra grinned back.

“Ranos grenades.” Erland Morphis kicked the pile of formerly unbreakable transteel wall with his booted toe. Chunks of transteel littered the entry of the Sand Swept Casino, which Erland owned and operated on the gambling planet of Campiaa. Erland was so angry he hadn’t bothered with a disguise, and those brave enough to withstand his anger were allowed to see what few on Campiaa ever witnessed—the most beautiful male they’d likely gaze upon in their lifetime. Merrill and Adam, who owned the Moonstone Casino next door, stood beside Erland, examining the damage with the Karathian Warlock. Their casino had been hit as well, but not as hard as Erland’s.

“Ever since Divil San Gerxon was killed, his brother Arvil sees the need to flex his muscle, just to let everyone know he’s in charge,” Adam muttered, his gray eyes narrowed in anger. “And now, Arvil has managed to buy and smuggle in Ranos technology. If he ups his demands, we’ll be forced to pay.”

“He already gets twenty-five percent,” Merrill pointed out. “Just for the privilege of putting up this building here.”

“We still get good information,” Erland sighed. “I wish there were a way to coax the wealthy gamblers away from here, though. The information would come with them—it can’t be helped.”

Erland, Merrill and Adam all had a common purpose in owning casinos in what was touted as the gambling mecca for the worst criminals—those who lived outside the Reth Alliance and its laws. Campiaa saw its share of deals for drugs, weapons, assassins and any other illegal enterprise. Much of it, unfortunately, was aimed at the Reth Alliance. Drugs and weapons were shipped in, with the occasional criminal—all arranged and paid for through contacts that regularly visited Campiaa.

Wealthy gamblers from the Reth Alliance also found their way to Campiaa—it was a sign of the wealth that they could skirt Alliance laws and find ships to transport them. After all, anything could be had on Campiaa—for the right price. And one could get information on any illegal activity, if one knew where to listen. Adam and Merrill always listened for information that might affect the Sand Thalarr. Erland listened for other reasons.

“Follow the money, eh?” Merrill nodded at Erland.

“Precisely. Information and any illegal negotiations will always be near the funding. You can count on that. These gamblers may look legitimate—on the surface, at least. We know better.” Erland agreed.

“Lord Morphis, I’ll bring in the cleaning crew if you’re ready,” an employee approached Erland cautiously. The Warlock now seemed calm enough to speak without blasting something to bits.

“Yes. Get those walls replaced by tomorrow.”

“Of course, Lord Morphis.”

I was doing my best not to get chocolate cake crumbs on a blue silk tunic. It was embroidered around the hem and cuffs and had matching trousers. I knew Giff wouldn’t mind finding clothing to replace my outfit if I ruined it, but this was one of my favorites. I was forced at times to wear dresses

and that was something I didn't like at all. They were such a pain and bother, since most of them were long and dragged the floor. I was constantly trying to move my skirts out of the way. Drake and Dre laughed whenever I growled after nearly tripping over the damn things. Now I was sitting in the kitchen, eating cake while three comesuli cleaned up after a long day.

We'd entertained a committee from the Reth Alliance earlier—they were considering our application to join. We were jumping through the usual bureaucratic hoops, too. We had to have a working space station orbiting Le-Ath Veronis, and it was nearly finished and already operational. We didn't tell the Alliance representatives that Larentii were putting most of it together for us. We'd hired work crews and some of our newly arrived vampires had expertise in that area, so all were working away to bring us into compliance.

Membership with the Reth Alliance would bring space travelers to Le-Ath Veronis and make it easier for the vampires living on Alliance worlds to come to us and petition for citizenship if they wanted it. Kifirin, Connegar and I were in charge of the citizenship applications from Alliance worlds. Those worlds recognized vampires as citizens in their own right; they were entitled to the rights granted by the law, just as any other citizen. The Alliance worlds also had methods of tracking and controlling vampire criminals and they were treated just as any other criminal might be. Most of those worlds still had a hidden Vampire Council of some sort and they policed their own—up to a point.

We had nearly fifty thousand comesuli living on Le-Ath Veronis and many of them had become pregnant the moment they'd stepped onto the planet. Kifirin said the comesuli somehow recognized the need for more of their kind, as well as recognizing the fact that there was plenty of space and sustenance for them.

Merrill, Adam and Wlodek had (rather quickly) built a blood substitute manufacturing facility, to make up for what the comesuli couldn't provide to the resident vampires. They'd worked on the blood substitute itself, making it better—not just in taste but in nutrition. Our resident vampires were happy with what they were getting—fresh blood a couple days a month and a decent blood substitute the rest of the time.

The comesuli, too, had to be watched—they were a race that hadn't had sex before. Now they were anxious to have it (along with a vampire's bite), as often as possible. We'd been forced to give them bracelets with two numbers. The months on Le-Ath Veronis were twenty-eight days in length and the two numbers on each bracelet indicated the two days a month a comesula could be bitten—giving them a two-week interval in between. The taking of blood more often than that could weaken them. The pregnant ones were off-limits, too, both prior to the birth and for two months after. There were plenty of grumbling comesuli as a result.

Jaydevik Rath, King of Kifirin, the High Demons' planet, had brought Glindarok, his pregnant Queen, to stay at my palace. He didn't feel she was safe on Kifirin during her pregnancy. The High Demons were having quite the trial getting their former Ra'Ak, High Demons and Elemaiya—Bright and Dark—to follow commands. None were willing employees, that much was certain. Many had deserted the city of Veshtul right away and Garde and Jayd had sent out hunting parties. When the deserters were found, they didn't live long.

Seventy thousand had been left on Kifirin when I finished with them, but now that number had been whittled down to sixty thousand. I got the idea that some of the newly humanoid inhabitants of Kifirin didn't take to cooking, cleaning, herding and farming.

Glinda, on the other hand, was about to deliver any day. Karzac, my Refizani mate and healer for the Saa Thalarr, was watching her like a hawk. Jeff, Merrill's son and several other healers were doing the same.

"Is there any more of that?" Glinda waddled into the kitchen, rubbing her swollen belly with both hands. She was craving chocolate, so I'd instructed the cooks to make chocolate desserts as often as

possible.

~~"I think so," I said, waving a hand at the comesuli, letting them know I'd get the cake—I didn't~~ want to interrupt them. I pulled the keeper door open and pulled out the remaining cake and a knife. I set a plate with a generous slice of cake on it in front of Glinda as she heaved herself onto a stool on the island. She was expecting twin girls and Jayd was a wreck whenever he was around her. Two female High Demons were cause for celebration, actually; they were almost as scarce as female vampires.

"I should have known," Karzac shuffled into the kitchen, closely followed by Rolfe.

"Do you want cake before I put it away?" I handed a glass of milk to Glinda; she was busy dipping into her cake.

Karzac pulled up another chair so I set a slice of cake in front of him with another glass of milk. Rolfe grinned at me and sat on the island. He was tall enough that it was like a bench to him.

"Do you need anything, Rolfe?" I asked while I was up.

"I've fed," he waved my offer away. I sat between Karzac and Glinda to finish my cake. No—I still hadn't gained all my weight back; Karzac grumbled about it, but my workdays were sixteen hours long. I didn't see how my situation might improve in the near future.

"How was your day?" I rubbed Karzac's back. He spent a few days every month with Devin and Grace; I had a calendar inside my closet with his schedule listed. With as many mates as I had, it was better to have a calendar. Otherwise, I'd never keep them sorted out. Karzac always made sure I knew when he'd be spending the night. He was thorough about everything, I discovered. When he was with me, he was thorough about that, too. I held no doubts about his love for me. He was also running a training program for the comesuli healers and was forced them along slowly; they'd not had many improvements in their health care methods while they'd lived on Kifirin.

"The books Connegar supplied in the High Demon language are a big help," Karzac sighed. Fionn and Jeff were working their tails off getting the medical facility built and supplied while they taught and oversaw others who were teaching. Merrill's last turn, Joey Showalter, who'd worked as a healer for the Saa Thalarr, was teaching classes in anatomy and medical terminology, as well as computer technology. A few vampires were helping with that, in addition to many others who were taking the classes.

I'd even had a meeting with Griffin, Amara, Kiarra, Conner, Lynx and a few others, about building a university. Well—we had vampires here who had lived through quite a bit of history—who better to teach something like that? Gabron could give lessons on Refizani history with his eyes shut, I thought. Lynx sounded interested in putting the school for the arts together.

Jayd skipped in while we were talking and eating chocolate cake, Garde right behind him. Jayd lifted Glinda up the minute she finished her cake and took off with her. Garde sat in her vacated spot.

"I think there's one slice of cake left," I looked at him.

"I'll take it, but how about a sandwich first?" he begged. His dark hair was ruffled, as if he'd had a difficult day and hadn't stopped to worry about his appearance. I got up and put a leftover meal together for him—it was roast beef and he was eating as if he were starved as soon as I set the plate down. I put the cake out for him, too, with a glass of wine.

"Let me guess—the kitchen help isn't all that great," I said.

"It's terrible—they burn everything," Garde grumbled around a mouthful of food.

"Maybe they'll improve when they get tired of eating it themselves," I said as I sat down again. Garde just snorted and kept eating. Jayd came back in a few minutes, so he received a plate of food. Karzac and I left them in the kitchen—we were going to bed together and it was late already. Garde had a room at the palace if he wanted it, but I figured he'd go back to Kifirin when he finished eating—Jayd stayed with Glinda most nights and Garde wouldn't leave Kifirin untended.

“Karzac, do you think we should try to do something about the former Ra’Ak and Elemaiya and Kifirin?” I was yawning as I pulled pajamas out of a drawer in my closet.

“Lissa, we don’t need the pajamas,” Karzac was already undressed and putting his arms around me, nuzzling my neck.

“You look awful good,” I turned in his arms and put my hands on his chest—it was lightly covered in crisp, brown hair.

“You’d look better without clothing,” he murmured, letting a hand drop to the small of my back.

“Brenten, are you sure this is a good idea?” Amara studied Griffin’s face. He seemed grimly determined about the idea, once he’d suggested it. Amara attempted to divert his attention, but he was obsessed with the whole thing. He was now claiming that his granddaughters and daughter should know as well. “Brenten, you may not like the information, once you have it.”

“Love, I think they deserve to know, while she’s still alive.”

“But she treated you so poorly,” Amara didn’t finish her sentence.

“I know that better than anyone,” Griffin ran fingers through his thick brown hair. “I tried to tell her when she was turning me out of camp that things would end badly for her. She laughed at me.”

“There was no love in her,” Amara came to put her arms around his waist. She gazed up into her mate’s eyes. “Do you think it will do any good now, to take your daughter and granddaughters to see her?”

“At the most she has two hundred years left,” Griffin sighed and hugged Amara tightly. “And there is great unrest between the races that Lissa passed judgment over. She may not live the full two hundred years.”

“You think any of those creatures will feel anything but contempt for those not of their race? If they had any compassion at all, they would never have turned their children away.”

“I also wish to get information from her now,” Griffin replied, leaning down to kiss the top of Amara’s head.

“Do you think she will tell you, after all this time?” Amara murmured against Griffin’s chest.

“I think Lissa can force her to tell me,” Griffin murmured back.

“Lissa Beth?” Don was calling my name. He only called me Lissa Beth when he missed me.

“Huh?” I realized I was dreaming as I said it, but it didn’t alter the dream. Don was there and I was dreaming of him for the first time since he’d died. He was standing before me in our old living room, only he looked as he had when I’d first met him—with light-brown hair, brown eyes and an easy smile.

“I just wanted to see you again,” he said. “Do you still love me?”

“Oh, honey,” I said, trying to stop the sob that threatened. “I’ll always love you.”

“Lissa, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he said.

“I know,” I said, wiping tears away.

“You were always the strong one, Lissa Beth. I leaned on you for so long. I wanted to be a stronger man for you, be the one to support you, but it didn’t turn out that way, did it?”

“We don’t ever know what life is gonna hand us,” I was still crying. “I don’t regret a minute we spent together.”

“Lissa Beth, I hope I get to hold you again, someday.”

“Don’t make me cry harder,” I wept.

“I have to go,” Don said. He winked out, just like that. I was crying when I woke and Karzac was cursing under his breath and pacing while Connegar held me in his arms.

“I’m all right,” I wiped tears off my cheeks with shaking hands. “I just had a dream, that’s all.”

“Healer, go back to bed,” Connegar was attempting to soothe Karzac and me. He was trilling when he settled me in the bed and Karzac pulled me against him, shushing me softly while Connegar

sang the song that only the Larentii could sing. I was asleep again in minutes.

Drake and Drew were with me the following morning, along with three comesuli from the Queen Guard. Yeah. Queen Lissa. Some days I wondered what I'd been thinking when I'd chosen this life. Of course, the alternative always reared its ugly head so I sighed and kept walking. We were inspecting the wheat crop, which was nearly ready for harvest. Early summer had come to Le-Ath Veronis and we stood near the equator, which meant there was daylight most of the time. There was a wobble to the planet, so there were two hours of near dusk every day. The vampire cities were far enough south that they appeared to be in constant twilight—that magical hour after sunset.

The largest comesuli city was near the farms where we walked and it resembled what they'd had in Veshtul. Comesuli love color and the stones in the streets were many-colored, as were the walls of their dwellings. Two smaller cities lay to the east and west of us, where the herders and tree farmers lived. Sernus, the farm overseer, walked beside me, chattering away about the wheat crop, which would be harvested in the next three weeks.

“Do you have plenty of storage for the harvest?” I asked. The crop looked to be a good one—the rains had been good and fields covered in ripening wheat stretched endlessly around us. I wondered briefly if Kifirin had a hand in that. I was just thankful the crops looked good so far and that we wouldn't be facing shortages.

“We have enough, Raona,” Sernus smiled. “I have much experience in farming wheat. We will have more than enough to last us until next year's crop can be harvested.”

“If you need anything, you only have to let me know,” I said. Sernus was five-ten or so, one of the taller comesuli and he smiled down at me as I made the offer. The harvest would be done by hand, I knew, but I wondered if I shouldn't ask for a meeting with my Inner Circle to see if we couldn't bring in equipment—I knew many worlds had solar-powered farming equipment and vehicles—the comesuli would probably appreciate the convenience.

It was my goal to make Le-Ath Veronis as self-sufficient as possible—I didn't want to depend on imported food to feed the comesuli. The sad truth is that we had hardly any industrialization at the moment; no manufacturing other than handmade goods, tools and such, aside from the blood substitute factory. Equipment, better tools and vehicles would make things so much easier for the comesuli, who hadn't had anything like that before and therefore didn't know to ask for it. I made a mental note to send information to the comesuli overseers soon—as to what was available and how it might help them in their work.

Flavio and Gabron were also suggesting we allow tourism. I was having trouble with that—I didn't want a bunch of people on the planet looking for the thrill of the bite and I sure as hell didn't want any of them trying to get turned while they were here. I had visions of the seriously ill—those wealthy enough to come, anyway, trying to find a way past their mortality. The comesuli would become vampire if anyone would.

“The farms are beautiful,” I smiled at Sernus. He was beaming as we walked toward the barns. The plowing oxen were grazing peacefully in a field nearby; they would be used to pull the wagons when the wheat was harvested and hauled to the threshing floor. I thanked Sernus for giving us the tour before turning to my Falchani twins. Drew gave me a slight smile as we folded to the next farm. Avocado trees, fruit trees, nut trees—they grew in huge groves and many had only the bare beginnings of fruit upon them.

My comesuli guards were exhausted when we finished our inspections for the day, but their counterparts were happy to see their monarch. Those who worked the farms and weren't pregnant made their way to the vampire cities twice a month. They were already forming attachments to the vampire or that. They called the bite the rapture, since it gave them sexual release.

Drake folded us home after the inspections were over—I think I was as tired as the comesuli; I ju

didn't want to admit it. "Lissa, cara, you look worn out," Gavin and Tony were waiting when we arrived. Dinner was ready and most of my crew was there, as were Glinda and Jayd. The twins and I had to hurry and change; dinners were more formal and the only time when everyone who could would gather for a meal. It was only when I sneaked into the kitchen after hours that I could slump over the table on the huge island and have a snack.

We were halfway through dinner when I noticed that Glinda was merely picking at her food. She stood when dinner was over and her water broke. Garde arrived swiftly, attempting to calm Jayd. He was demanding the babies be born on Kifirin, so that's how I found myself upon the High Demon planet, sitting on a bench outside the royal suite and waiting for Jayd and Glinda's twins to arrive. High Demon guards patrolled the hallways and outside the palace—Garde had no desire for any humanoids on Kifirin to attempt a murder or a coup while the royal family was in such a vulnerable position.

"Lissa, staying awake and fretting won't make those babies come any quicker," Tony sat on the bench next to me and draped an arm around my shoulder. He'd traded places with Gavin—they were helping patrol the palace. Karzac, Jeff, and several Larentii were inside the royal suite, tending to the birth. I deliberately stopped myself from *Looking*—it was something that should be free from my interference.

"You're awake," I pointed out the obvious. Tony grinned. I laid my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes for a moment.

"The substitute will always nourish you, but it will never taste the same as the real thing," Jeral informed Davan as Davan drank thirstily from the offered bottle. Davan woke on the fifth day to find his vampire sire with him inside the secured cell. Davan drank two bottles of the fluid before slaking his thirst completely. Once he was finished with his meal, Jeral set about teaching Davan how he should behave around humanoids.

"Lissa, we can reschedule this meeting." Gabron had my elbow as we walked toward the library. I'd gotten two hours of sleep after Glinda's girls came—Gavin insisted we return to Le-Ath Veron and he'd put me in bed himself. Karzac stayed on Kifirin to care for Glinda and the newborns.

"Let's get this over with," I sighed. I probably looked like hell—I hadn't paid attention to my face in the mirror and Giff had dressed me—I didn't care what I wore. Flavio was coming with the Councils—all the members from Earth combined with the members from Refizan. The Council members from other cities were coming as well, to hammer out the articles of governance. Gabron was going to help and Pheligar was sending a Larentii advisor.

"He's young," Pheligar said, describing the Larentii in question. "Only two hundred fifty years of age, but he is skilled at translating languages and has a feel for intentions behind words. He wants to work as a diplomat, Lissa, and this is the only world where Ferrigar will allow it—we do not involve ourselves in politics."

"His name?" I asked.

"Reemagar," Pheligar had replied. "You may ask Grace about his mother, sometime." I didn't know what Pheligar was trying to tell me and at the time, I'd been too busy to *Look*. I remembered his words now as we found the Larentii waiting for us outside the doors to the library.

"Reemagar?" I asked. He nodded solemnly to me and opened the doors using power.

We only broke twice during the lengthy day; blood substitute was handed out both times and I drank it with the rest of them, although it didn't do a thing to help with my exhaustion. Gabron managed to order coffee brought in and he, Flavio and I had a cup while we were debating what the age of adulthood should be for the comesuli.

"The comesuli consider a child an adult at age forty," I said for perhaps the tenth time.

"But that applies to apprenticeships and employment," Hervis of Refizan pointed out. "I have

asked the comesuli that serve the City Council and they seem to think that age twenty-five is enough for the bite.” This debate, once it was over, would establish the age at which a vampire could legally drink from a comesula, so there would be no doubt when enforcing the laws regarding drinking from a child.

“I still think that’s the equivalent of a fifteen-year-old,” I grumped. I needed my physician here, to give us information on when a comesula was completely grown and past their formative years, but I was off-planet at the moment. My brain was working slowly, though, until it finally hit me.

Mom? I sent to Amara. She’d been a healer for a hundred thousand years, and she’d been involved in children’s hospitals and children’s causes for a very long time. Maybe she could help me out with this.

Lissa? Her mindspeech sounded slightly surprised. Probably because I called her Mom.

We’re having a bit of an argument over how old the comesuli are when they’re fully-grown and capable of handling blood donation, I returned. *Can you help us out with this?*

She didn’t reply, she came herself and knocked discreetly on the door. Gabron rose from his seat to let her in. Amara is so beautiful—I knew what Griffin had seen in her the minute I’d met her the first time. Every vampire in the room stopped and stared as she entered the Library. Gabron offered her the seat next to mine and then sat beside her.

“This is Amara, who has been a healer for a very long time,” I introduced her. “She is also my stepmother. She will be speaking truth to you when she answers your questions.” I was being Queen now, although I was exhausted and shaky as hell.

“In your opinion, Lady Mother, what is the age when a comesula is fully grown and capable of handling blood donation?” Hervis asked. He was the biggest proponent for the twenty-five year plan.

“Their bones and organs come to full growth around the age of twenty-nine,” Amara smiled at the gathering. We had nearly a hundred vampires in the room—Le-Ath Veronis was growing nicely and the Councils from eight cities were represented. “The comesuli are slow to come to adulthood, since their average lifespan is six hundred years, barring accidental death,” Amara continued. “If you take blood from them between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-nine, it should only be done once every two months and that may be difficult to track. It is my suggestion that you place the mandatory death penalty for drinking from a child at age twenty-three and below. Perhaps a severe punishment could be handed out if a vampire drinks from a comesula twenty-four through twenty-eight years of age, as long as it is once only. More severe punishment, up to the death penalty, might be considered if the vampire repeats the offense.” Reemagar translated Amara’s words for all present, one language at a time. It amazed me that he kept track of all of it so easily. When the last language had been delivered I saw nodding around the room. Most of the vampires spoke Alliance common, but it was considered polite and they understood it better if their own language was employed.

“I’m pleased with that suggestion,” I said, smiling at Amara.

“I am grateful for the explanation,” Hervis nodded courteously to Amara. “I think I can come to terms with this.”

“I will write up the proposal and send electronic copies to all of you,” Gabron said. “Prepare any suggestions for revisions and return them to me. I hope to have this finished by the time we meet next week.”

The meeting broke up after that and eventually only Flavio, Gabron, Amara and Reemagar remained.

“Child, you are exhausted,” Amara said, as I rose from my seat.

“We had two baby girls born last night,” I yawned as discreetly as I could. “Reemagar, I can’t thank you enough—this would have gone on until midnight if you hadn’t been here. Are you going to stay with us or fold back to the Larentii homeworld?”

Reemagar was only a bit over eight feet in height—one of the shorter Larentii I'd seen—and he smiled when I thanked him. “I wish to stay upon Le-Ath Veronis, but I will fold to the light half to feed for a while. Where shall I sleep while I am here?”

“I'll find a room for you, just send mindspeech when you get back,” I was yawning again.

“Come, you need something besides blood substitute,” Amara coaxed, so we made our way to the kitchens after Reemagar folded away.

I only ate a light meal and Reemagar was back before I finished. Flavio folded away after the meal so Gabron, Amara and I found a room in the Royal Wing—there were fourteen suites in that wing. Reemagar was perfectly happy with his suite and set about enlarging the bed right away, to accommodate his height. “I will bring in sufficient clothing, Raona. Please let me know whenever you need my services.”

“I appreciate your help,” I said. “I need a nap now, before I keel over,” I patted his arm. He nodded politely at me and we left him.

“Lissa, allow me to carry you,” Gabron murmured in my ear as he, Amara and I walked toward my own suite.

“Lissa, I should go,” Amara stopped and smiled at me.

“All right,” I was yawning again. I was afraid I was going to crack a jaw, the yawn was so wide.

“Get some rest.” Amara leaned in and kissed my cheek before folding away. Gabron lifted me up the minute she was gone and I think I was asleep before he got me to my suite.

Chapter 2

“I hate this.” Jayd paced before his oldest brother Gardevik for perhaps the fiftieth time. “She and my daughters should be enjoying adoration and pampering here on Kifirin, yet the servants we have are surly at best and murderous at worst. I cannot keep her here and our children are not safe.”

“We knew there would be problems, I just had no idea how difficult these creatures could be.” Garde agreed, keeping his voice soft. Glinda was sleeping in the bedroom of the suite—he and Jayd were in the reception area. Cleo and Shannon had come to help with the twin girls, allowing Karza, Jeff and Joey some much-needed rest after a long night.

“I can’t rule from Le-Ath Veronis and I can’t keep Glinda here. It is too dangerous,” Jayd snorted, smoke pouring from his nostrils. His Thifilathi was agitated and threatening to turn.

“Perhaps we should ask Lissa if there is something she can do,” Garde suggested, attempting to calm his brother.

“I hate to ask her for anything,” Jayd muttered. “I know that most of this is our fault, but it still angers me that things are not better on Kifirin.”

“Most of this is not our fault,” Garde replied. Jayd looked up at his brother’s words. “*All* of this is our fault,” Garde added, causing Jayd to snort again. “Granted we were younger, brother, when Lendevik sat in his throne room and pronounced the doom of the Dark Realm with his indifference and lack of caring. But we could have spoken up. Nedevik was the only one who did so and he was ridiculed for his efforts. We watched from our place of safety while all those worlds fell. And then we reaped the benefits of Le-Ath Veronis’ fall, in the form of the commons. We no longer had to do for ourselves, brother. They took all our tasks upon themselves while we wallowed in the luxury. The cost of that luxury has now come due and we barely have the skills to feed ourselves.”

“You are paying for your continued indifference,” Griffin folded in to join the conversation. He still felt animosity toward Jayd but attempted to overcome it. “You collected most of the profits from the labor of the comesuli, yet you never put any of that money toward improvements in manufacturing or anything else that might have brought this world into alignment with others. Even the cloth for clothing was still woven by hand. Nothing changed since Lendevik laid down the initial laws.”

“So I’m supposed to just go out and build factories?” Jayd snapped.

“I did not say that, but if you expect to keep your world alive, you must turn your thoughts in that direction. Do not do anything in haste—these things must be carefully considered. My daughter is doing the same thing for Le-Ath Veronis—deciding what is needed now, what will be needed in the future and then asking for ideas and suggestions from the Councils now in place before acting. Do not tell me that your High Demons don’t skip off this world for pleasure. They are aware of the amenities that other worlds enjoy.”

“Do we have funds for this?” Garde looked at his brother.

“The accounts are in total disarray, brother,” Jayd sighed. “The treasury was always in High Demon hands; none of the commons were allowed access.”

“More than likely because Lendevik and Rorevik had no desire for the comesuli to see how they were taken advantage of,” Griffin said. “That does not include the thousand years that Glinda’s elder brother held the throne and raped the planet.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Jayd asked. He was annoyed and made no attempt to hide it. A bit of smoke drifted from his nostrils.

“I suggest you go to my daughter,” Griffin gave Jayd a hard stare. “Ask her for one of two things—either to move the High Demons to Le-Ath Veronis and establish your kingdom there, or ask her to move your current humanoid population to the world once occupied by the Dark Elemaiya. They will

never gate away from it and they will live or die there by their own efforts. That choice, of course, will require that either you send your High Demons out to farm and herd and weave and cook, or you will be forced to hire new servants and pay them a fair wage. That may also be the case upon Le-A-Veronis, but the farms there could help support your population—I believe the comesuli would be happy to sell to you at a fair price.”

“We need to find a way to bring in income, instead of paying it out,” Garde suggested. “No matter what our choice is from now on, that is the way it must be.”

“I think my daughter speaks fondly of the cheeses that were made here,” a slight smile tugged at Griffin’s mouth. “And she liked the cane sugar she had to work with when making desserts. Those are two viable exports.”

“Beef is highly sought after by Reth Alliance worlds,” Garde agreed. “All their planets are highly industrialized and their beef is not organic or high quality. Ours is both.”

“All of your produce would be considered organic,” Griffin’s smile widened. “You merely have to find someone to tend the crops.”

“Can we offer citizenship, perhaps, to a world in need of it?” Jayd asked. “If we must hire, I want those who desire to come and are happy with what we can offer.”

“Perhaps. There are many worlds classified as not worth saving, though there is a small percentage of the population that is still good and decent. Perhaps you could ask Kyler, Kiarra and some of the others to bring those to you. Of course, you have to rid your planet of the ones you have now. They have not taken advantage of the opportunities they were given.”

“I like this idea,” Jayd nodded thoughtfully. Garde also agreed. “How quickly can this be accomplished?”

“I have to approach my daughter, first,” Griffin’s smile disappeared.

“She still has reservations, doesn’t she?” Garde knew what Griffin’s expression meant.

“Where I am concerned, she does.” Griffin didn’t elaborate.

“I will come with you, if you want,” Garde offered.

“So we can share in the frigid indifference?” Griffin asked.

“Something like that,” Garde nodded.

“I’ll settle for that,” Griffin agreed.

“Raona?” Roff’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Hmmm?” *I was trying to swim up from the depths of a deep sleep. I felt his fingers on my face, gently stroking, and then the kiss.*

“Roff,” *I wound my arms around his neck.*

“Raona, your meal is ready and the others are waiting.” *I let my arms drop away.*

“I don’t wannoo,” *I mumbled, trying to force my eyes open.*

“Raona, please speak clearly,” Roff teased. “You know I have difficulty understanding your slang.”

I blinked up at him. “You understand me just as well as anybody else,” I touched his mouth with my fingers.

“Come, my love. We will eat with the others and then you may sleep again. We must also discuss off-days.”

“Who wants off-days?” *I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Roff was supporting me with an arm around my shoulders.*

“We must discuss off-days for those who are not getting them,” Roff said, coaxing me off the bed.

“Who isn’t getting off-days?” *I blinked at him, confused. Every comesuli was supposed to get two off-days in every seven-day week. If somebody wasn’t getting them, their supervisor might get a personal and angry visit from the Queen.*

“Come to dinner and we will discuss this over food,” he pulled me to my feet. Giff, who’d been standing by (I just hadn’t noticed her yet), had clothing ready.

“Giff, baby, are you all right?” I asked as she and Roff proceeded to pull my nightdress over my head. Giff and Gavin must have put it on me while I was asleep after the Council meeting; I didn’t remember doing it.

“Raona, I am quite fine, as is Rolfe.” Today was one of her days for the bite and I figured that had already happened. Giff was smiling too much for it to be otherwise.

I was dressed in a comfortable tunic and loose pants. Giff wanted to put shoes on my feet but I convinced her to let me out of the bedroom wearing socks that matched my outfit. Roff escorted me to the dining room.

We had guests, I learned, the moment we walked in—Griffin, Amara, Kiarra, Adam, Merrill, Kyle and Flavio were all there, in addition to my bunch. Garde had also come, I noticed.

“How are Glinda and the babies?” I asked, first thing. I’d only gotten a brief glimpse after they were born two nights earlier. Two long days of Council meetings had happened since then and I’d managed to get a brief nap before dinner this time.

“They are very well,” Amara smiled at me. She’d gone to see them, I could tell.

Roff got me seated at the head of the table. The other end was for Kifirin, but he only showed up occasionally. Usually the seats to my right and left were for the ones who were scheduled to spend the night with me. Right was first, left for the night after that.

The soup course came and Garde spoke up. “I have a huge favor to ask, Lissa.”

“You want an apple pie?” I quirked an eyebrow.

“That too,” he smiled. “But Jayd, Griffin and I talked earlier and we came to the conclusion that the ex-Ra’Ak and the Elemaiya are not going to accept their current situation. Jayd fears for Glinda and his daughters.”

“Yeah,” I set my soup spoon down and stared into my fragile, china bowl of broth. “It’s not working, I know. I messed up. I’m sorry.”

“We have a suggestion,” Griffin said softly.

“What is it?” I looked up at him—his eyes were more hazel than brown, with gold flecks in them. I’d gotten my blue eyes and my hair color from my mother.

“The Dark Elemaiyan planet is uninhabited,” Griffin said. “I would like to send all of them there with your permission. Jayd and Garde are asking Kyler and Kiarra to bring in humanoids from a few worlds listed as not worth saving. They’ll only take the ones who still have redeeming qualities and the desire to work for their citizenship on Kifirin.”

“I know it’s not practical, but can we look for the ones who have children?” I begged.

“Kyler and I have already discussed that,” Kiarra answered my question. “Those are the ones we will select first and we’ll make sure they are prepared for the hardship and the massive changes. A few worlds are on the brink of self-destruction and we will target them first.”

“Good,” I nodded and lifted my spoon again. “When are you doing this?”

“Jayd wants what we have on Kifirin gone as quickly as possible,” Garde was tearing into the bread set at his elbow. We were served by comesuli and vampires tonight. A few vampires had experience in the culinary arts and didn’t mind cooking or serving. Some, like Adam, had owned restaurants and were looking to do so again. They were the strongest faction promoting the idea of tourism.

“I think we can get them relocated beginning tomorrow,” Griffin said. “It may take a few days to get all the transfers done. The new residents can be brought in after that. We may need to borrow some of the comesuli, though, to teach the trades needed. Glendes of Grey House is begging for oxberry wine and has offered quite a bit for twenty cases. I think that oxberry wine, cheese, cane sugar

and beef could be major exports,” Griffin smiled as he cut into the quail served to him.

“You’ll have to get Roff to teach them how to make wine,” I said. “And tell Glendes I’ll share what I have at the moment—Shadow can take it back with him when he comes for a visit.”

“Raona, we are experimenting with oxberries here, but I do not know if the soil is the same to get the proper flavor,” Roff informed me. I nodded at him—it probably wasn’t the same. We might be forced to buy oxberries from the High Demons so Roff could make wine.

“The Reth Alliance will have to inspect all facilities before allowing export,” Merrill said.

“We probably won’t be ready for that for at least a year,” Garde offered. “That may give us time to work the ash from Baetrah into the soil and plant cane crops. The barns and buildings on the cane farms will also have to be cleaned up—what still stands, anyway. It will take much work, but Weth and Foth have offered for those lands. If we put Lord Nedevik in charge, I think he will make his High Demons work just like everyone else. He knows how to plant and harvest.”

“I like him,” Roff said quietly. “He purchased oxberry wine from me many times and occasionally came to help pick berries.”

“My brothers still run the cattle herds,” Garde said. “We used to depend heavily on comesuli help, but we worked alongside them, much of the time. The beef supply has been uninterrupted.”

“The wool that the rugs were made from was really soft,” I said. “Orliff’s parent made rugs and they were beautiful. That’s something else you might be able to export.”

“I think both planets should work together,” Adam suggested. “Since Orliff’s father and the other comesuli weavers know how to make the rugs, the wool could come first to Le-Ath Veronis and then the rugs could be exported from here. The oxberry wine as well—Roff could oversee his own winery, with the berries coming from Kifirin.”

“I am in agreement with that—this would mean fewer facilities to be inspected by the Alliance,” Garde said. “That would still leave us with cheese, beef and cane sugar as major exports, with the wool and oxberries offered exclusively to Le-Ath Veronis for wine and rug making.”

“I’m good with that,” I said and tore a bit of bread off in my fingers. It was herb bread and very good. I was going to have to introduce Cheedas and the vampires to olive oil and balsamic vinegar and a dip for bread. “Roff, do you want your own winery? I think you could do very well with this. I could see exclusive restaurants offering oxberry wine as a specialty. I think you could be very wealthy in no time.”

“I might like to try this,” Roff smiled. Giff was nodding hopefully at her father. Little Toff was being cared for by another comesula, so Giff and Roff could have their evening meal.

“Adam and I would like to help put up the winery, as an investment,” Merrill said. He’d tasted Roff’s wine and thought it was exceptional. Merrill had an eye for good wines; he always kept the best cellar. If he wanted to invest, he knew it was a winner.

“Roff, you need to get with Adam and Merrill. When will the oxberries be ready for harvesting on Kifirin?” I asked.

“In two weeks on the Northern Continent,” he slumped dejectedly in his chair.

“Don’t worry about it, okay?” I rubbed his shoulders.

“We may be able to come up with something,” Adam chuckled.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Roff, you may have your winery by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Perhaps in two to three days—we’ll consult with Roff and look into other wineries to see what’s needed,” Adam said. “It’ll go up quickly after that.”

“Hear that, honey?” Roff smiled at my words and leaned in to kiss me.

“Now, about the other business,” Karzac sliced into his rack of lamb, which was the latest course. I was full after the quail and silently attempted to auction off my lamb to someone else. Drew winked at me. I kept a little for myself and passed the rest down to him and Drake. They’d been out training

the vampires and comesuli that made up our new palace guards and army, so I knew they'd be famished.

"What other business?" I asked, tasting the lamb. It was delicious, but I was about to pop and still had dessert coming. The strawberry souffle would have to wait until later.

"The off-days business," Gavin growled.

"Yeah, who isn't getting off-days? And why haven't I heard about this before? I may have words with the ones responsible," I grumped.

"Then you need to get a mirror," Tony snickered. "And I want to watch you chew yourself out." My fork was still in my hand as I gawked at Tony.

"Since when does the boss get a day off?" I said and busied myself with a forkful of lamb.

"Since the entire Inner Circle decided," Karzac said. "Lissa, you have yet to gain an ounce, you push yourself for sixteen hours or more at a stretch and are generally asleep the moment your head hits the pillow. I can't say I'm completely familiar with your power, but it isn't doing anything to keep you from exhaustion."

"When we confine ourselves to a corporeal shape, it drains us," Kifirin appeared and sat in his seat at the opposite end of the table. "I did that for a very long time and it almost drained me completely. That is why I slept, avilepha," Kifirin accepted a plate from a vampire server. "You will drive yourself into the same state if you are not careful. I have discovered that if I spend one or two hours each day in my energy state, it rests me and I can continue as you see me now."

"But I don't know how to do that," I said. Honestly, I was afraid to do it, since I was unfamiliar with the concept and afraid to go Looking.

"I know this, m'hala. I will teach you." Kifirin was devouring his quail, a satisfied smile playing about his lips.

"Back to off-days," Karzac grumbled.

"Karzac, I don't know when I could take any. And I've wanted to find a place in this palace for a pool and hot tub and I haven't even had time to go look."

Everybody at the table was staring at me, now. Gabron cleared his throat. "What?" I asked.

"You have a pool and hot tub," Tony said. "And if you'd take five minutes for yourself, you'd know that."

"I take time," I grumped, feeling embarrassed. "Where the hell is the pool and hot tub?"

"Between the Royal Wing and the Guest Wing," Gabron sighed. "I thought you had the ability to reach out for information, my darling."

"I do have that."

"She's Looking for other things," Karzac was at his grumpy best.

"I will clear your calendar for tomorrow and then we will decide on regular days off," Gabron went on.

"But what about the City Councils?" We were still hip deep in hammering out universal law. With this diverse a population from eight different planets so far, everything had to be woven together into whole cloth. We weren't anywhere close, yet.

"We need days off, too," Flavio weighed in.

"All right, what do you suggest?" I glared at the third most beautiful man I'd ever met, daring him to complain. He gave me a lovely smile. While that might make most women swoon, it wasn't doing much for me at the moment. Kifirin was smiling and ducking his head to keep from laughing at me.

"A decree from the Queen, stating that the City Councils take the week endings off from meetings," Flavio said.

"A Royal Decree," Kyler nodded enthusiastically. I was only now realizing that I'd been cutting into her time with Flavio.

“Great. What am I supposed to do, wave my arms or something?” I grumbled.

“That would work for me,” Flavio chuckled.

“You need a royal seal; you don’t have one,” Gabron offered.

“One that can balance a ball on his nose,” Tony snickered.

“I’m coming over there,” I threw my napkin down and misted toward Tony.

“Lissy, we can’t wrestle in the floor, think of the neighbors,” Tony said when I turned up right next to his chair.

“If the neighbors complain, I can put them in a headlock, too,” I tugged on Tony’s ear.

“Lissa, please be more circumspect,” Gavin was seated next to Tony and chose to hand out the usual chastisement.

“Fine. Any other complaints before I leave? No? Good.” I misted away.

“Now where the hell did she go?” Karzac demanded, standing and angry in an instant.

“She is tired. Now isn’t a good time to draw attention to what you think of as her shortcomings?” Griffin offered.

“Then there won’t be a good time,” Drake said. “And it probably wasn’t a good idea to do this in front of everybody,” he added. “She’s good if you tell her with just the Inner Circle, but she gets embarrassed with others around.”

“I should learn to hold my tongue,” Gavin muttered.

“Where’s Lissa?” Erland Morphis folded in.

“Have a seat, Warlock,” Griffin pushed an empty chair out with power. Erland sat and someone else came to serve him. “We don’t know where she went; she left a few seconds ago.”

“Warlock, when you finish eating, we will visit the Dark Elemaiyan planet,” Kifirin said. The Dark Lord was halfway through his rack of lamb. Erland was given the update on Lissa and current events while he ate.

I walked through a field on Evensun, the Dark Elemaiyan world. Twilight was falling across the section of the planet where I walked and I wondered why they’d traveled away from it. Stars were beginning to appear over the eastern horizon and they winked and twinkled over my head as I gazed about. I wouldn’t have walked away from this place, I don’t think. I did a little looking and there was no construction anywhere. Several thousand years had passed since the Dark Elemaiya had returned. Had they found that gating to other worlds held more appeal than the world they’d stood upon, or did they have the desire to travel so much that staying in one spot was unbearable? It mattered no longer; they were going to live out their days upon Evensun. I wasn’t sure they deserved such a beautiful world, but they were getting it, nonetheless.

“Avilepha, do you think we need to build some sort of shelter for them?” Kifirin had come and was now taking in the planet and what it offered. Everyone else from the dinner table followed Kifirin and they appeared in twos and threes around us.

“Kifirin, my handsome love, they have had too much handed to them already. Let them worry over their own shelter. Let them fashion their own tools and find their own meals.” I shook my head at the thought of providing them with anything other than what we had already.

“There are a few young among them,” Griffin said, wading through the grasses to my side.

“Are there any that are quarter-blood?”

“No, those were sent away with the sixteen,” Griffin replied. I’d sent sixteen to another world—the handful that hadn’t wanted to participate in the Elemaiyan attempt to grab Fox, who was a quarter-blood and the Ka’Mirai.

“Good. How old is the youngest among the others?”

“One is seven, another is fourteen and a third is sixteen.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

"I'd like to speak with them and feel them out before we cast them to the winds with the others."

"Then we'll go tomorrow," I sighed.

"I wish you to speak with one other," Griffin said.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"You will see. I will come to get you three hours after the sun is up on Kifirin."

"All right," I agreed.

"What do you think of this world?" Kifirin asked.

"I think it's beautiful," I said. "Why did they leave it? I don't understand."

"The Elemaiya were always afflicted with wanderlust," Kifirin replied. "They were never satisfied with staying in one place." It sounded as if he was withholding information but I didn't press him on the matter.

"Too bad, that's what they're getting now," I said.

"Avilepha, I have my doubts that they will ever be self-supporting as a race. They have lived with other races for so long, now. The Ra'Ak, too. They have vague memories of what they were before, but as you have likely discovered, the Copper Ra'Ak only allowed the strongest and most dominant to live. The only one who did not fit that mold was Gilfraith and I have yet to determine how he managed to slip through and become Ra'Ak."

"I'm glad he did. And I think the answer to your question is love, Kifirin. Gilfraith loved. Both in the past and in the present. All you have to do is watch him around Fox. He would die for her."

"I think you may be correct, my love." Kifirin put his arms around me and nuzzled my neck.

"This is very nice, I have never been here before," Connegar folded in and looked around. Reemagar folded in right behind him.

"Hi, honey," I went to take one of Connegar's hands in both of mine.

"Do I understand correctly that the ones upon Kifirin will be coming here?" he smiled down at me.

"Yeah. Seems like a waste, doesn't it?" I asked. The night sky over our heads was such a perfect deep blue and even more stars were winking and glittering now.

"We will see what they do with it," Connegar replied.

"If they do not recognize the gift, then I pity them," Reemagar remarked, coming to stand beside me.

"Me, too," I smiled at him. There seemed to be a sadness in him and I hadn't run into that before with a Larentii.

*Before we left, though, I wanted to place a benediction upon the planet itself. Sort of an apology, I thought, before handing it over to those who would likely curse it instead of appreciating it for what it was—a lovely, unspoiled world. I sang *How Can I Keep From Singing* while a light breeze rippled through the tall grass around my legs and the stars trembled over our heads.*

My nights with Roff were so restful—he was content to let me sleep with my head on his shoulder. Someday, though, he was going to be a winged vampire. In the meantime, he loved me and that was good enough.

Griffin was there, right on time, with Amara, Kyler and Cleo the next morning. Roff and Giff had gotten me up, showered and dressed me and then herded me off to breakfast. Gabron canceled my meetings for the day and then sent out a decree (after I signed it), declaring the two days at the end of every week as off-days for all involved in politics on Le-Ath Veronis.

Gardevik and two other High Demons came with us, once we arrived at the palace in Veshtu. Yurevik Weth and Dremevik Greth had blades strapped to their backs and were prepared to protect us, although the weapons wouldn't be needed if they went Thifilathi.

"What do you want?" Those words greeted us as we walked up to the woman. Griffin had folded me into her arms—she was sitting on a bench outside what had once been a comesuli bakery. My nose told me

that the rising bread had soured and insects had invaded the flour and other grains. The woman, however, was beautiful and would be for years to come. One day, age would find her, though, and she would die. If she didn't manage to kill herself with inaction before then. Of course, with the murderous tendencies of the former Ra' Ak, she could always fall by another's hand.

"We wish to speak with your child," Griffin said.

"Callan!" The woman shouted. A young boy came running. He looked too frightened to do otherwise. He already appeared malnourished.

"He is seven years of age?" Griffin asked. I could have answered that for him but held my tongue.

"I don't recall his exact age," the woman snapped. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Not anymore," I snapped back. The boy and I disappeared.

"Where are we?" Callan asked, as we landed on another world.

"On a world called Mendenath," I replied, taking his hand. "Some of your family is here and I'm going to leave you with them," I looked down into his cherubic face. He had his mother's dark hair and green eyes.

"Will they have food?" Callan asked. He was hungry, I knew.

"I hope so," I told him. We walked through an open field for a little way until we found a makeshift village. Someone was cooking; I could smell a simple stew boiling as we walked up.

"Callan?" A woman pushed back the flap of a tent fashioned of animal skins.

"Aunt Zela?" Callan let go of my hand and ran to her. She pulled him into an embrace.

"He's hungry," I called out.

"I know," the boy's aunt replied. "We'll feed him."

There wasn't any need for me to stay; I knew she'd take care of the boy. I folded back to Kifiri. "Sorry," I apologized. "I took him to his Aunt Zela."

"She always was soft," the woman snorted.

"Nothing wrong with that," I said. "We're done here." Griffin folded us to the next spot.

I knew right away that the fourteen-year-old was as hard as his mother. We didn't stay long. The sixteen-year-old was the same. It happened quickly with these, looked like. We left them. Griffin folded us one last time. We were outside a shop that had once sold pottery. A few items remained—things the comesula proprietor hadn't bothered to take with him. Nobody was sitting out front at the one. Briefly, I wondered what Griffin wanted with this one. The moment she walked out the door and got a whiff, I knew.

Kyler was about to go crazy and Cleo looked ill. Amara attempted to comfort both of Griffin's granddaughters. Griffin was angry, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. Garde and the two High Demon guards had no idea what was going on. They knew as soon as the woman opened her mouth.

"Well, Brenten, you brought this on us, didn't you?"

Chapter 3

I stared at my grandmother for a second or two before I let her have it. “He didn’t have anything do with this,” I spat. “You did well enough, bringing this on yourselves.”

“And who are you?” She dismissed me with a contemptuous blink of her beautiful, gold eyes. Kyler and Cleo had those eyes. It might explain the gold flecks in Griffin’s eyes, too.

“The one who put you here,” I answered her question, reining in my temper. One more step and she’d be within range of my claws. That wouldn’t do—I had a feeling my father wanted something from her. I hoped it wasn’t love or affection—she was incapable of either. She called me an extreme unkind name in the Elemaiyan language. I didn’t care. “You will answer all of Daddy’s questions honestly, from this point forward,” I laid compulsion and put power in it. I’d probably shocked the hell out of Griffin by calling him Daddy, but we needed to close ranks against this one. She blinked at me a time or two as my compulsion settled over her brain.

“You’re his daughter.” She said it flatly.

“Obviously. Daddy, she’s all yours.” I stepped back and motioned Griffin forward. Garde was at my back, suddenly, his hands on my shoulders while Griffin asked his mother questions.

“Who is my father?” That was his first question and I wanted to weep. I’d only waited forty-eight years to find out who my father was. Griffin was over a hundred thousand and he still didn’t know.

“You are fortunate that *she* placed the compulsion.” My grandmother hissed, cutting her eyes toward me. “Your father—well, he placed a spell of his own, when I refused to stay with him and he refused to bring you back to him. He told me I couldn’t tell anyone unless I brought you back. I told him to go fuck himself.” She laughed at the memory. “Brenten, your father was Karathian. Wyler Arden was his name. A powerful Warlock he was—more powerful than even I guessed. Not many could place a spell on any of us and have it hold like that,” she snorted at the thought.

“You are only half Elemaiya,” Griffin went on, as if the information regarding his father was of no consequence. I knew better—he was rattled but refused to allow his mother to see how she’d upset him. “What happened to your parents?”

“My Elemaiyan mother died. As did my sorry Traveler father. They kept me away from my people until I was nearly twenty.”

“You killed them—your parents.” I gave her a hard look.

“They kept me away from my people,” my grandmother snapped. “They deserved what they got.”

“Do I have any sisters or brothers?” Griffin asked his next question.

“All are dead except for one half-brother and he may be gone soon,” she laughed humorlessly. “I left him at an orphanage on Beliphar more than fifty years ago. Good luck on finding him.”

“You are pathetic,” Kyler growled. “I should release your particles.”

“No, sister.” Cleo stepped forward and she was shining. What I saw next even I wasn’t expecting. Cleo had wings. Beautiful wings that spread about her, their shining whiteness glowing in the morning sun upon Kifirin. Cleo reached out and touched her great-grandmother on the forehead, causing the woman to shriek in agony and then drop, weeping, to the ground.

“You will now know what you have dealt to others and you will search for the love you denied because it will not come to you. Ask not for pity from those who were once your family. It will not be granted.” Cleo’s words held Power. I had to *Look* to see where it came from. Cleo had a direct connection to something on the other side.

“What’s her name?” I almost whispered my question to Griffin.

“Narissa,” Griffin’s voice was also soft as he watched his mother weep. We left her there, folded up on the ground and rocking herself.

I think Kyler took us back to the High Demon palace; I wasn't sure Griffin was able at the moment. He was finally allowing the information his mother had given to sink in, with devastating results. His hands shook and he might have been close to hyperventilating. "Em-pah, what are you going to do?" Kyler and Amara led him to a chair once we were inside a suite at the palace. Garde sent the two High Demon guards away and stayed with us. Griffin shook with shock and I wasn't prepared to console him. I did know what I could do, however.

"I'm calling Erland," I said, and sent out mindspeech.

"Lissa, my love, dare I hope you've changed your mind?" Erland appeared in seconds after I sent mindspeech. He looked so hopeful as he took my hand and kissed it. The smile he gave me was blinding, too. Most women would have fallen to the floor in an orgasmic faint at that smile.

"Erland, I haven't, that isn't why I called you," I blew out a breath. Amara was doing what she could for her mate and Cleo and Kyler were both sitting with Griffin. They each held a hand, squeezing it tightly.

"What has happened?" Erland knew something was up, now.

"Daddy just found out who his father was from his Elemaiyan mother," I took Erland's arm and led him from the suite with Garde on our heels. When we reached the hall outside, I asked my question. "Have you ever heard of a Karathian Warlock named Wylend Arden?"

Erland stared at me in shock for seconds. "What's wrong, Erland?" I asked.

"Fuck me," Erland breathed, his beautiful face displaying shock.

"Yeah, you keep asking and I keep saying no. Who's Wylend Arden?"

"Perhaps it is better if I show you." Erland folded me away before Garde could protest.

"Where are we?" We'd landed in an entryway that reminded me of the rotunda at Grey House—the one that held all the sculpture and artwork. Only this one was six times bigger and even more obscenely opulent. The marble tiles were veined in gold and silver. Some of the sculptures were gold or appeared to be gold and depicted humanoids and animals in many poses. Some danced; some played musical instruments or leapt and ran against polished marble walls.

A uniformed man appeared quickly in the middle of a central, wide doorway. "Lord Morphis, you and your guest will follow me," he bowed slightly, seeming unsurprised that we'd appeared from nowhere without an invitation. Erland nudged me forward and I walked on feet that had suddenly gone numb. Recognition shone in our greeter's eyes—he knew Erland and knew him well. We followed our guide through a seemingly endless hall. Paintings and priceless treasures hung on walls or rested on ornately carved furniture throughout its length. We reached another doorway eventually and our guide stopped before us, causing Erland to pull me to a halt as well. Erland's arm was around my shoulder and his fingers gripped my upper arm tightly, as if he were afraid I might disappear. I was thinking about it, but the opportunity passed quickly.

"Lord Erland Morphis," our guide announced in a loud voice. "And guest," he added before moving away. Erland pulled me forward, although I was beginning to have second (and third) thoughts about all this.

The throne room (that's what it was, I discovered quickly) was magnificent. The value of the treasure alone could have fed a Third World country on Earth for several years. Who had wealth such as this? I had no idea. Small knots of men and women stood here and there inside that throne room and they gazed upon us in curiosity as Erland steered me through them, heading toward the throne and the man who sat there. Flanked by two Warlocks in uniform, the man on the throne observed us with guarded interest as we approached.

When we reached the bottom step leading to the ornate chair and the man who sat upon it, Erland bowed low. He didn't ask me to bow with him, or kneel or curtsy (not that I would have). The man on the throne lifted an eyebrow at me when Erland straightened up from his bow. I already knew from the

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